

Is the state's new eligibility system working?

Despite some problems and critics' objections, the program is on track, contractor says.

By [Corrie MacLaggan](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Monday, March 13, 2006

When residents of Travis and Hays counties need to sign up for food stamps, Medicaid or other public assistance, their calls to 211 are routed almost 300 miles away to the West Texas city of Midland, where customer service representatives such as Yvonne Bodayo await.

Before landing the call center job in November, Bodayo, a 24-year-old mother of five, found herself in straits similar to those of the people she now helps: applying for Medicaid after her husband was laid off.

"I know what it's like to be on the other side," she said. "We always try to answer every call with a smile on our face."

The state is paying \$899 million to Bodayo's employer, Texas Access Alliance, for a new call-in system to enroll Texans in public benefits programs.

Some who have used the new system say the customer service representatives they speak with — when they get through — often can't resolve their cases and don't sound as if they have a smile on their faces. Critics have called for halting the system's statewide rollout.

But state officials and Texas Access Alliance executives say bumps are to be expected, given the project's mammoth task of modernizing the benefits application system. Overall, they say, the new system is working well, giving people the option to apply for services via phone, Internet, mail or fax, though they can still

apply in person.

In many cases, those complaining aren't eligible for services or don't know they live in counties the new system has not yet reached, said Dave McCurley, executive director of the alliance. He is also a senior executive with the group's lead partner, Accenture LLP, a global consulting and technology firm.

The alliance does not take lightly its mission: "No client harmed," McCurley said. "We recognize the fact that thousands — millions — of Texans rely on these services every day to provide for their families."

About 3 million Texans receive public assistance.

State officials say that by closing some eligibility offices and replacing them with call centers, the new system will save \$646 million over five years. The system debuted in Travis and Hays in late January and is to expand statewide later this year, starting with more than 20 Hill Country counties in April.

The transition hasn't been without problems, McCurley acknowledges. About 6,000 children in the Children's Health Insurance Program had to be reinstated last month after being dropped because families weren't told about a new enrollment fee. And so many state employees quit after finding out they would soon be out of work that about 6,000 Travis and Hays residents got caught in a processing backlog.

"No rollout of this nature is ever going to be perfect. We're going to have issues; we're going to have problems; it's a complicated program to train people on," McCurley said. "But we really are trying to get it right."

More than 300 customer service representatives work in the alliance's two Texas centers. Bordayo and other Midland staffers help people apply for aid, and an Austin office helps recipients find doctors. The alliance plans to fully open centers in San Antonio and Athens, in East Texas, later this year.

State officials could not say this week how many applications have been processed since the new system began or how long they took to process.

At the state public benefits office on Eberhart Lane in South Austin, where residents can still apply in person or use computers and phones, frustrations boiled among some applicants Wednesday.

Two days after applying for emergency food stamps, LaToya Derrick, 20 years old and five months pregnant, said repeated calls to 211 had still not yielded an appointment to finalize the paperwork. When she went to the state office seeking help, staff members directed her to a phone to call 211.

By 11 a.m., she'd been on hold with the Midland call center for two hours, she said.

"I don't know if anyone answers," she said.

State officials said that in February, the average wait time was 6 minutes and 18 seconds.

State Rep. Elliott Naishtat, D-Austin, says he thinks officials should hold off rolling out the system statewide because anecdotal evidence shows it "piling problematic situations upon problematic situations for low-income people."

The Texas State Employees Union, some of whose members are among the 2,900 losing their jobs, also wants the rollout stopped.

Mary Katherine Stout, health policy analyst at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a think tank that favors limited government, disagrees.

"I don't think we can reverse course based on anecdotal evidence that is spotty," she said. "For every person who says they're having trouble, we'll find another who says that this is a welcome change."

Tyshona Swain, 31, who recently used the mail-in option for her two kids' Medicaid applications, said she prefers the new system to waiting in line for two to three hours at an eligibility office.

And Anita Hill, 56, said she successfully applied for food stamps through the mail.

"I'm pretty well shut in, and it's pretty hard for me to get out and go places," said Hill, who had a stroke four years ago.

cmaclaggan@statesman.com; 445-3548

Find this article at:

<http://www.statesman.com/news/content/news/stories/local/03/13callcenter.html>