

*July 29, 2006, 9:37PM*

## **BENEFITS OF REFORM**

### **Wait taken out of welfare, so why aren't critics happy?**

**A visit to an 'old' state field office reveals why more of same changes are desperately needed**

**By MARY KATHERINE STOUT**

TEXAS has undertaken an ambitious plan to overhaul the way applications for government assistance are handled. But over the last six months the plan has taken a pummeling at the hands of state employees unions and advocates for bigger government; they have relished the bad news and missteps dominating news reports of the new system.

Like blacksmiths facing the advent of the automobile, critics hope to forestall progress.

In 2003, lawmakers directed the Health and Human Services Commission to establish and outsource call centers for all assistance programs, "if cost-effective." The commission contracted with a coalition of firms, led by Accenture, which began work late last year. The new system, allowing one-stop access to all assistance programs, was to be gradually implemented.

By using modern tools that have become standard conveniences — such as the Internet and phone — the new system is designed to control costs, increase efficiency and improve client accessibility. Rather than relying primarily on in-person interviews in a field office with limited hours of operation, the new system also allows applicants extended hours by phone, and 24-hour online access.

Real and perceived problems have stalled implementation. Meanwhile, critics have promoted stories of miscues, such as claims applications were inappropriately faxed to a warehouse in Seattle. The commission found that incident resulted from accidental misdialing by applicants, yet those opposing the new system wrongly cling to it as evidence of malfeasance.

Critics claim the old way is best and should be rebuilt, while others believe privatization will modernize the system.

In early July, 30 Texas House members sent Health and Human Services Commissioner Albert Hawkins a letter, expressing support for the new system and its promise to "bring administration of human services programs in Texas into the 21st century."

Two days later, 60 other members of the House sent a different letter to Hawkins, urging him to cancel the contract. They asked him to "commit the remaining resources to rebuild the human services eligibility system that, as little as two years ago, was among the best in the country."

The contrast in positions could not be more stark.

Of course, the old system — "the best in the country" — still serves most recipients of state assistance, since the new system isn't available statewide. Critics pan the new system, holding a seemingly romanticized notion of

the old ways. Perhaps they should consider what the "old" system was like.

In a recent visit to a field office outside the "pilot" area, I sat for two hours in a room with dozens of people, many of whom arrived long before me, and would remain long after I left. One man was in the same office the day before, only to be told that his application couldn't be finished that day and he would need to return the next. On day two he arrived 50 minutes early for an 11 o'clock appointment, but wasn't seen until after 4 p.m.

As one woman waited more than three hours for her appointment, she said the rule of thumb was to "pack a lunch." She later learned her name had been called while stepping outside, missing her "appointment." She was instructed to return the next day, despite protests she had other state-required appointments to keep and difficulty in finding transportation.

Considering her instructions to return the next day, perhaps she will also begin taking a sleeping bag.

The waiting room had no reading material, no information on finding a job, getting a degree, locating community resources, getting parenting guidance or child care. While waiting, some attended to their children; others talked on their cellular phones.

Most people spent hours just waiting — unproductively.

While many would argue this is the result of short-staffed offices, the reality is that there is no excuse for a horse-and-buggy system when considering the technology now available. A system that treats people with such lack of dignity, and with no respect for their time, is simply indefensible.

At one time many of the new system's critics would have agreed. For years they pointed to the inconvenience of going to a field office for in-person interviews, highlighting the virtues of one-stop shopping and demanding change based on client dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with the system they now claim is superior to all others.

Reports of real problems in the new system cannot be taken lightly, and taxpayers should demand efficiency for every tax dollar. But calls to end the project and return to the old way are simply insufficient. To ignore the opportunity to deliver services more efficiently for taxpayers and more conveniently for the recipients, despite having the resources to do so, is unacceptable.

The state must move forward using well-established technologies that deliver better efficiency for taxpayers, along with greater convenience for the recipients of state benefits.

*Mary Katherine Stout is the director of the Center for Health Care Policy Studies at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit research institute based in Austin.*

---

[HoustonChronicle.com](http://www.HoustonChronicle.com) -- <http://www.HoustonChronicle.com> | [Section: Viewpoints, Outlook](#)  
[This article is: http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/editorial/outlook/4081568.html](http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/editorial/outlook/4081568.html)