



## Want welfare?

Plan on waiting in a long line - if the state doesn't move forward with technology, says MARY KATHERINE STOUT

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Six months ago, the state launched an ambitious plan to overhaul the way applications for government assistance are handled. The plan has taken a pummeling from the state employees union and advocates for bigger government; they have relished the missteps dominating news reports of the new system.

Like the blacksmiths of a previous age facing the advent of the automobile, critics are calling for it to end before it can begin.

By making use of modern tools – such as the Internet and phone – the new system is designed to control costs, increase efficiency and improve client accessibility. Rather than relying on in-person interviews in a field office with limited hours of operation, the new system allows applicants extended hours by phone and 24-hour access online.

On July 10, 30 House members sent Health and Human Services Commissioner Albert Hawkins a letter expressing support for the 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 Texas House sent a letter urging Mr. Hawkins to cancel the state contract for the system, asking 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."

Of course, the old system – this "best in the country" system – still serves most recipients of health and human services programs, since the new system isn't available statewide. And as critics pan the new system, they seem to hold a romanticized notion of the "old" ways.

I drove to a field office outside the pilot area to see the old system in action. I sat for two hours in a room with dozens of people, many of whom arrived long before I did and would remain long after I left. One man had been in the same office the day before, only to be told his application couldn't be finished before the end of the workday, requiring him to return the next.

As one woman waited more than three hours for her appointment, she said the rule of thumb is to "pack a lunch." Not long after, she learned her name had been called while she stepped outside. She was instructed to return the next day.

We sat in a waiting room with no reading materials no information on finding a job, getting a degree, community resources, parenting guidance or child care.

Perhaps I went to the one office in the state on the one day of the year when things were just terribly wrong, but I doubt it. 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 with so much technology now available. A system that treats people with such lack of dignity and no respect for their time is simply indefensible.

Reports of problems in the new system cannot be taken lightly, and taxpayers should demand efficiency for

every tax dollar. But calls to end the rollout and return to the old way are insufficient. The state must move forward using established technologies that deliver better efficiency for taxpayers, along with greater convenience for the recipients of state benefits.

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