



Comment: Long waits, disrespect taint government assistance system

Mary Katherine Stout

Six months ago, the state launched an ambitious plan to overhaul the way applications for government assistance are handled. But the plan has taken a pummeling at the hands of the state employees union and advocates for bigger government; they have relished the bad news and 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, which have become standard conveniences today — the new system is designed to control costs, increase efficiency and greatly 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 Texas 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 Texas House sent an entirely different letter to Hawkins urging him to cancel the state's contract for this new system. 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."

Of course, the old system is still largely intact and serves most recipients of the state's 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. Perhaps they should consider what the "old" system looks like.

I drove to a field office outside the "pilot" area to see this 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 and he would need to return the next day. On day two, he arrived 50 minutes early for an 11 o'clock appointment, but was not seen until after 4 p.m.

As one woman waited for more than three hours for her appointment, she said the rule of thumb for these appointments was to "pack a lunch." Not long after, she 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.

Waiting clients were called for their appointments by name, without regard to privacy.

We sat in a waiting room with white walls and no reading material — no information on finding a job, getting a degree, locating community resources, getting parenting guidance or child care. Some of those waiting attended their children. Many talked on their cellular phones.

Most people spent hours just waiting — unproductively.

While many would argue this is the result of short-staffed offices, 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 were quoted in newspapers pointing to the inconvenience of going to a field office for an in-person interview, highlighting the virtues of one-stop shopping and demanding change based on reports of dissatisfaction — dissatisfaction with the system they now claim is superior.

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 rollout 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.

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