

Worker tells of training problems with state contractor

Accenture group failed to give her knowledge she needed

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Friday, August 11, 2006

When Amanda Morris started working at a private office that enrolls Texans in public assistance, she was trained to enter information into a computer about people who want to apply for benefits.

But she immediately found that most cases didn't involve signups. Clients needed to renew benefits, make changes to their accounts or update their address.

And she didn't know how to do that.

"I trained for three weeks and was put onto the floor with about 2 percent knowledge of how to do my job," said Morris, 21, who works for a temp agency and has been on assignment since March with the San Antonio office of state contractor Texas Access Alliance.

Problems with worker training are one of the reasons the state has indefinitely delayed statewide rollout of that contractor's new call-in system to enroll Texans in food stamps, Medicaid and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

Morris' account sheds more light on the problems. A former Texas Access Alliance employee in San Antonio, who asked that her name not be used because it might affect her current job, said Morris' story matches her experience.

The state is paying more than \$800 million over five years to the Texas Access Alliance, a consortium of private companies led by Accenture LLP, for the system, which has been in a pilot stage in Travis and Hays counties since January. The privatization was intended to save the state money.

Since the contractor took over, benefits recipients have reported getting inexplicably dropped from public assistance, talking to customer service representatives who couldn't answer their questions and being asked for information they'd already provided.

In response, the private group has retrained its call center employees and overhauled training for new hires, spokeswoman Mindy Brown said this week. Texas Access Alliance "has turned a major corner," she said.

"Our training is intensive and depends on each employee's role," Brown said. "If an employee feels they need additional training to do their job correctly, all they need to do is to speak with their supervisor and additional instruction can be arranged."

Stephanie Goodman, a spokeswoman for the Texas Health and Human Services Commission, said the reports of improved quality is a positive sign but that the state has not yet evaluated that. "We'll measure the success of the training by how well the call-center representatives respond to client questions and concerns," she said.

Morris, for one, said training sessions she's attended recently were just as ineffective as the original.

She admits she's bitter about her job: her boyfriend was one of several dozen people laid off from the San Antonio office earlier this summer, and she wishes she earned more than her \$12-per-hour salary. But she says that as a former recipient of food stamps and Medicaid, she's concerned about the experiences of the 3 million Texans who receive public assistance.

"You have no idea how (messed) up this is getting," said Morris, who works with applications and renewals but does not take calls. "There's misorganization regarding documents. Information gets linked incorrectly or lost altogether."

For example, Morris said she recently found that a public assistance recipient had submitted an address change. But an employee flagged the file to indicate a change of state residency, instead. And another employee who handled the case didn't catch the error. So the family was sent a letter asking about their Texas residency, Morris said.

Morris attributes problems like this to a lack of training and co-workers who are "purposely lazy." In May, Health and Human Services Executive Commissioner Albert Hawkins announced that no new applications will be processed in the privately run San Antonio call center until the contractor improves.

Alton Martin, CEO of Customer Operations Performance Center, Inc., a New York-based call-center consultant, said the training problems aren't surprising.

When he asks call-center representatives at various sites whether they felt ready for their job, "about half the time they'll say training was really bad or nonexistent or not appropriate to the task."

Martin, whose company is not working with the Texas contract but has worked with Accenture on other projects, said that call center quality issues often stem from the contract.

"Maybe the state wasn't rigorous enough," said Martin, who works in Austin. "Lots of times people want to throw the vendor under the bus . . . (But) if you want a fast car, ask for a fast car."

Goodman, though, said the state has set a high bar and is doing its own quality checks.

The private call centers — located in San Antonio, Austin, Midland and Athens — are expected to replace some state offices where Texans sign up for public assistance. The new system gives Texans more ways to apply for public assistance — mail, fax, Internet and phone — as well as in person.

Mary Katherine Stout of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which advocates for limited government, said those who argue for the state to resume public assistance enrollment overlook problems with the outdated state system.

She recently visited a state benefits office in Fort Worth and found that despite having appointments, Texans were waiting hours. One public assistance recipient told Stout she has a rule of thumb for visiting the state office: pack a lunch.

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