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Valley leaders glad Accenture contract to end

By ELIZABETH PIERSON
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AUSTIN - They said it wasn't working, now they say it's about time. Leaders from the Rio Grande Valley praised the announcement last week that the state would phase out its contract with Accenture, the company hired to help the state process eligibility applications for human-service benefits and oversee the Children's Health Insurance Program.

In 2005 the state entered into an \$899 million contract with a group of companies led by Accenture LLP. State leaders wanted to privatize the eligibility system for Medicaid and food stamps, and let Accenture process CHIP applications. The contract came after lawmakers in 2003 made cuts to the human-services budget.

The Accenture contract encountered problems, and advocates of the working poor said families who applied for CHIP found that the company lost and mishandled applications. CHIP enrollment dropped below 300,000 for the first time since the program started, but has since rebounded.

"The continuous mishandling of documents has resulted in thousands of children being dropped from CHIP, Medicaid and other services," said Rev. John Lasseigne, pastor of St. John parish in San Juan and a leader of Valley Interfaith. "This has not only produced a loss of federal funding, but more importantly has jeopardized the health of our children."

Responsibility for handling CHIP applications will be gradually returned to employees of the state.

But the move toward modernizing the state's eligibility centers continues. State leaders heard for several years from angry clients that closing local offices in favor of phone and Internet eligibility was a burden on people in poor and remote areas. "Our goal hasn't changed," said Albert Hawkins, Health and Human Services Commissioner. "We want to make it easier for Texans to apply for services by modernizing technology and letting citizens choose how they want to submit an application, whether that's in person or by phone, mail, fax or Internet."

Some Valley lawmakers praised the news the contract would be phased out.

"Unfortunately, decisions made in 2003 devalued some of our most loyal state employees by jeopardizing 2,500 positions, and the result has been disastrous," said Sen. Eddie Lucio, D-Brownsville.

Lucio and Sen. Juan "Chuy" Hinojosa, D-McAllen, both said the end of the contract was overdue and that state employees have the expertise to handle benefits that private companies don't.

"Ya era tiempo," Hinojosa said. "I called on state leaders last summer to cancel this contract because the private company was simply not getting the job done."

Now that it's not spending the money on the Accenture contract, the state may have more money in the long run to bring more children on the CHIP program, said state Rep. Veronica Gonzales, D-McAllen, who sits on the House Committee on Public Health.

"When you spend \$900 million, you better get your money's worth, and we definitely didn't get our money's worth with Accenture," Gonzales said.

Others argue the end of the contract only shows that privatization works because government can stop dealing with companies that don't meet expectations.

"If a private vendor fails to meet the agency's expectations, the state can hold that vendor accountable," Mary Katherine Stout, vice president of policy for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said in a statement. "Government employees never face such scrutiny for similar failures."

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