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## Official: Texas has worst-ranked food stamp program

By GARY SCHARRER AUSTIN BUREAU

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AUSTIN — Texas has the worst performing food stamp program in the nation, the federal director for food assistance told state officials here Tuesday.

It ranks last among the 50 states and U.S. territories in processing food stamp applications and also does a poor job getting eligible low-income people to apply, said Kevin Concannon, a U.S. Department of Agriculture undersecretary, in an earlier meeting with reporters.

And because Texas does not even come close to the national average in enrolling those eligible, grocery retailers like H-E-B and Randalls are missing out on nearly \$1 billion a year in food sales, he said.

"If I were a native son sitting down here, I would be very upset that my state was not the leader that it is capable of being," Concannon said.

Texas does not have enough workers to process food stamp applications and is one of only three states that fingerprints applicants for food assistance. The state also imposes a time-consuming and complicated assets test that impedes the effort to help desperate and hungry people, Concannon said.

"It bars Texans who deserve to get help from getting that help," he said.

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Getting state lawmakers to eliminate the fingerprinting requirement and assets test will require Texas Health and Human Services Commissioner Tom Suehs "to persuade, cajole and convince a whole bunch of people," Concannon said before meeting with Suehs. "And we are very much in his corner."

### Fraud deterrent

Gov. Rick Perry, however, has no intention of backing down on the fingerprinting and assets test requirements.

"The governor supports the continued use of fingerprinting and assets tests to protect the integrity of the program. It's shocking the Obama administration would even suggest weakening the fraud protections we have in state law," Perry spokeswoman Katherine Cesinger said.

Fingerprinting, or finger imaging, requirements should not be relaxed, agreed former state Rep. Arlene Wohlgemuth, now executive director of the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

It only takes two to four minutes to collect a finger image, which would deter people from trying to sign up at multiple food stamp eligibility offices, she said.

"I'm mystified that people would not be in favor of deterring fraud," Wohlgemuth said. "I hardly

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think that that's burdensome on anybody, and it protects the taxpayer."

She blamed a faulty computer system for contributing to the lengthy processing time for food stamp applications.

**Delays discouraging**

Texas, which for months has lagged far behind a federal requirement that applications for food stamps be processed within 30 days, or seven days in emergency cases, hired more than 600 people last fall to help determine eligibility for food stamp benefits and other federal programs.

Some 43 percent of the applications were not processed on time in November, the most recent reporting period.

The long delay dissuades other eligible people from applying, Concannon said.

Suehs took over the job at the Texas Health and Human Services Commission last year.

"I am encouraged that you have new leadership that gets it and that wants to bring Texas into the 21st century," Concannon said.

Federal officials are hopeful that food banks in Houston, San Antonio and Dallas soon will be able to initiate food stamp applications, which will catch needy Texans in a convenient location and reduce processing time for state employees when they get the applications.

The government provided Texans with about \$4 billion in food assistance last year, but the state only enrolls 55 percent of those eligible to receive it, based on census income data. The

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average among the 50 states is 66 percent.

About 3.1 million Texans qualified for food stamps last month, including 387,764 in Harris County. It would take another 600,000 people to meet the national average enrollment rate, Concannon said.

"This is a proven way to get food into the hands of hungry people. It also would have an impact on the state economy," he said.

H-E-B is working with the Texas Health and Human Service Commission and with non-profit groups and food banks to improve access to the program, company spokeswoman Dya Campos said.

"H-E-B is aware of the urgent situation that many Texans face with food insecurity," she said.

**Federal funds at stake**

The government pays for the food. States pick up half of the administrative costs, including employee expenses.

The government could cut funding to Texas if it does not improve the program, but Concannon said he is hesitant to do that because hungry Texans would get hurt.

Pending litigation should influence state leaders to fix things, Concannon said, because Texas

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"flat out is not meeting our federal law."

"The most hopeful, expeditious way to solve this is for the state to act in good faith and good will to get the resources they need," he said.

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