

Group wants to restore personal touch to welfare

Modernized system is failing people it's meant to help, advocates say

By Mary Beth Schneider

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With a state decision expected this week on whether to continue a \$1.34 billion contract to modernize welfare, a coalition of advocates for people who use those services say it's a costly failure that needs to be scrapped.

The Indiana Home Care Task Force

said Tuesday it will seek legislation in the 2010 General Assembly to keep modern technology but restore the personal touch with a statewide network of caseworkers who meet with clients.

Indiana turned over its welfare-eligibility system for people seeking Medicaid, food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families to an IBM-led group in 2006. The system was supposed to be statewide by now, but the rollout was halted in January because of frequent errors and mounting complaints.

So far, 59 of Indiana's 92 counties are using the modernized system, which pushes people to apply for aid by phone or computer. About a third of the state's population is covered, as the system doesn't yet include the most populous counties, including Marion and Lake.

"That experiment is now a \$1.34 billion failure," said Jim Wallihan, president of United Senior Action.

He likened the system to Humpty Dumpty and called on Gov. Mitch Dan-

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els and the legislature to rebuild it. That, he said, "must begin with legislation based on competence, the restoration of full caseworker services, user-friendly technology and procedures, obeying long-standing Medicaid and food stamp laws and on treating people with dignity."

Nancy Griffin, state director of AARP, said that "solutions will take time, and unfortunately they

will be expensive."

But, she and others on the task force said, Indiana already is paying too much for a system that doesn't work.

"Hoosiers are still at risk," she said. "Our message is clear: The crisis is now, solutions are at hand, the work to implement these must begin."

John Cardwell, chairman of the task force, said the group is working with about two dozen lawmakers, including Sen. Vaneta Becker, R-Evansville, to craft legislation that would revamp the welfare services.

The group's proposed legislation would restore the caseworker

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Marcus Barlow, Family and Social Services Administration

system, with one caseworker assigned to each client and with at least one initial face-to-face meeting as a person applies for assistance, either at a county office or at the client's home. The proposal would include "quality assurance" to deter fraud, Cardwell said, adding that Indiana's current call-center system is "a fraud accident waiting to happen."

The proposal also would re-

quire state employees to run any call center, with private companies providing technology support only if they can do so competently and cheaper than state employees can.

Marcus Barlow, a spokesman for the Family and Social Services Administration, said that Anne Murphy, the head of that agency, likely will release a report on the IBM-led modernization later this

week, along with a decision on whether to keep the contract.

In September, Murphy acknowledged to a legislative committee studying the modernization that problems persist despite efforts by IBM and the state to fix them.

But Barlow said that returning to a network of caseworkers meeting in person with clients, as the task force wants, is not the answer.

"Although there are problems with the modernization, what they're suggesting would take us in the wrong direction," he said.

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