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**Special report**

## **Indiana slow in approving food stamps**

### **Misses its own deadline nearly 33% of the time**

**Angela Mapes Turner**

**The Journal Gazette**

During the final quarter of 2008, Indiana's welfare agency failed to process almost a third of food stamp applications within its goal of two months, falling short of federal guidelines and leaving thousands of Hoosiers waiting for help.

The Family and Social Services Administration blamed its slow processing times on growing pains, an increased volume of food stamp applications and possible client errors.

But advocates for an overhaul of the welfare system say the delays extend beyond food stamps to other benefits and show modernization isn't working.

"When you run out of medicine and run out of food, that's a crisis," said John Cardwell, chairman of the Indiana Home Care Task Force, which has lobbied for changes.

The state awarded a \$1.16 billion, 10-year contract to private vendors IBM Corp. and Affiliated Computer Services Inc. to process Medicaid, food stamps and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, part of a massive modernization and reorganization effort.

The changes involved doing away with county caseworkers and shifting to a system that mainly provides service by computers and telephones.

The FSSA's Division of Family Resources rolled out the changes in a pilot region in late 2007 and has since expanded to all but 33 counties in northern and central Indiana. Most area counties, including Allen, switched to the new system in May 2008.

**Waits get longer**

The U.S. Food and Nutrition Service expects 90 percent of food stamp applications to be processed within 30 days. If a state can't meet that goal, it must have a corrective action plan.

Indiana, though, follows a 60-day authorization period. But the state met its own goal only 68 percent of the time in the last three months of 2008, the lowest-performing quarter in the past two years.

The figures, provided to The Journal Gazette by the FSSA, also show that timeliness in 11 northeast Indiana counties worsened in the last three months of 2008, with seven counties seeing declines of about 10 percentage points.

Nearly 78 percent of applications in Allen County were processed within two months from April to June 2008. But that rate fell to 66 percent during the last three months of the year, according to the data, which were obtained through a request under the state's open records law.

In Noble County during the last three months of 2008, almost half of food stamp applications took longer than 60 days to process. Noble County had Indiana's third-worst unemployment rate in March.

At the beginning of last year, Kosciusko County processed 594 of the 718 applications it received in time, or about 83 percent. By the end of the year, its rate fell to about 51 percent. About half of the 1,162 people who applied waited more than two months for approval.

The FSSA said turnover times were slower at the end of 2008 because more people applied for benefits.

During the first three months of 2007, more than 98,000 applicants were processed. In contrast, during the last three months of 2008, more than 133,000 applicants were processed.

"I think that what you're seeing is the system adjusting to the increased volume," said Marcus Barlow, the FSSA's communications and media director. "That's not saying it's an excuse."

Barlow acknowledged the system has its kinks but said the agency has made improvements, such as better instructions for less-literate clients, and streamlined online content.

Cases are sometimes delayed because clients do not turn in paperwork on time, not because of agency tardiness. Barlow said that's one reason why the state sticks with its 60-day authorization period, to allow clients more time.

"We're doing, overall, about as good as we've always done," Barlow said. "But we're hoping to do better."

'Frustrating'

"Better" would please Tina Gill. In early fall, anticipating huge winter heating bills, Gill and her husband applied for food stamps.

They had been through the process before, but this time was different, she said.

“I’ve faxed things to them that they’re requesting. I know I’ve turned it in, but they’re saying that I didn’t,” she said. “It’s just thoroughly frustrating.”

Gill, 38, received one denial letter saying she had missed a phone appointment. She was told she was denied because she missed paperwork deadlines. Then she received another denial, saying she and her husband earned slightly more than the allowable maximum income.

Meanwhile, she was burning through minutes on her pay-as-you-go cell phone with the state’s welfare call center.

“It was such a process. I didn’t feel like an individual,” she said.

The weather has warmed, and she and her husband are stretching their dollars, but Gill said she worries more about friends with children who depend on the assistance.

“Those who truly do need the help are the ones being punished,” she said.

#### Demanding action

A vocal group of detractors argues the state’s promise to do better is not good enough and says the problems extend to Medicaid benefits and welfare.

The Indiana Home Care Task Force called Monday for the General Assembly to act before its adjournment this week to address welfare problems. The task force, whose member organizations include Indiana Alliance for Retired Americans, United Senior Action and Hoosiers First, wants a return to public employees as county caseworkers.

“Everything we can gather, whether it’s food stamps or Medicaid, suggests this system doesn’t have the capacity to do the things it’s supposed to do under federal law,” chairman Cardwell said.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana and the National Center for Law and Economic Justice have filed lawsuits challenging the state’s handling of welfare benefits.

All the fuss is good news to Val Hague, director of Noble House Ministries Inc., a homeless shelter in Albion.

Hague called working with the new system one of the biggest frustrations her staff has ever had. The state has continually told clients their files are missing information, so the shelter’s case manager now keeps hard copies of every document sent and tracks phone calls, Hague said.

Lately, clients have received letters telling them of appointment dates in the welfare office, but the letters often are postmarked after the appointment date, she said.

Hague said the food stamp situation has improved so far this year but not nearly as much as it should, and clients still face long waits for Medicaid. She, too, would like to see the state return

to a caseworker system and believes more eligible people would sign up if the process were improved.

“When they get the kind of runaround that happens these days with food stamps, Medicaid and TANF, they give up,” Hague said.

Katherine Rybak, a staff attorney with Indiana Legal Services in Evansville, sees potential with some of the FSSA’s modernization steps.

An online signature service will cut back on faxes; the status of cases can now be checked online.

And staff within the agency have been diligent in trying to fix problems with individual cases, Rybak said.

But she worries most about elderly or hard-of-hearing clients who can’t navigate the phone system, others who don’t understand computers and clients with pay-as-you-go phone plans.

Without caseworkers, no one in the new system can identify clients who need accommodation. And those people, Rybak said, fall through the cracks.

“You just don’t know what’s happening with people you don’t see,” she said.

[turner@jg.net](mailto:turner@jg.net)

*Niki Kelly of The Journal Gazette contributed to this story.*