

## **The Journal Gazette, Fort Wayne, IN**

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### **Editorial**

# **Delaying aid when it's most needed**

Numbers confirm what advocates for the poor have argued ever since Indiana began privatizing its welfare eligibility system: Low-income Hoosiers trying to be approved for food stamps and other public assistance programs face long delays. The numbers should erase any question whether the so-called modernization effort is working – it's not – and should persuade lawmakers to demand immediate changes.

For her Page 1A story, The Journal Gazette's Angela Mapes Turner examined food stamp application figures. She found that Indiana falls far short of the federal government's goal of processing food stamp applications in 30 days or less. Indiana's own goal is within 60 days, but it still failed to meet that 68 percent of the time in the last quarter of 2008, according to figures provided by the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration.

The drop in Indiana's timeliness rate corresponds almost exactly to the roll-out of the privatization plan, from better than 77 percent of statewide food stamps applications authorized on time in the third quarter of 2007, to 68.1 percent in the final quarter of 2008. It couldn't have come at a worse time, as the recession struck and increasing numbers of Hoosiers who have never before asked for help suddenly needed it from a system they've supported financially for years.

Food stamps are just one program affected. Applicants for Medicaid and Temporary Assistance to Needy Families face the same challenge of negotiating a system that has mostly traded trained caseworkers for computer applications and call center employees. A spokesman for FSSA attributes the food stamp delays to increased volume and, astonishingly, to client errors in submitting paperwork. If all else fails, blame the poor, single mother trying to feed her children.

The paperwork was just one hurdle raised when FSSA awarded the largest contract in state history – \$1.16 billion – to IBM Corp. and Affiliated Computer Services Inc., the former employer of Mitch Roob, then the FSSA secretary.

The 10-year deal was made over objections from advocates familiar with the failed welfare-privatization scheme in Texas. Gov. Rick Perry had slashed funding for Texas welfare offices and shifted eligibility screening for most public assistance programs to four privately run call centers.

Texas had signed an \$899 million contract with Accenture, a competitor of IBM and ACS. Soon, there were reports of missed communication with call center workers, of paperwork mishandled or lost. In one case, the Houston Chronicle found dozens of applications, including confidential information, were erroneously faxed to a Seattle storage warehouse.

“We didn’t draw the line between vendor work and state work in the right place,” said Albert Hawkins, the state’s Health and Human Services Commissioner. Texas cut the privatization deal with Accenture by \$356 million and ended it last year, two years earlier than planned.

“The lesson of the Accenture debacle is that some state services, particularly those that provide a social safety net for the most vulnerable of Texans, should not be contracted out to companies more interested in amassing profits than serving needy citizens,” the Chronicle editorial page declared two years ago.

It’s a lesson Indiana officials should have heeded then. It’s a lesson lawmakers should heed *now* in demanding a better system for Indiana’s most vulnerable citizens.