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Advocates wary of timetable in proposed FSSA contract

KEN KUSMER
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS - Some advocates raised concerns Thursday that the state could rush its proposed transition to private vendors handling food stamp, Medicaid and Welfare cases and leave needy and vulnerable Hoosiers without the public benefits they need.

A timeline published with the state's proposed \$1.16 billion contract with IBM Corp. to take over some benefit-processing duties shows a pilot program covering 10 percent of the state lasting roughly three months before a phased rollout begins expanding to other sections of the state.

Aides to Gov. Mitch Daniels have emphasized the rollout of the privatization must be "completely transitioned" from the Family and Social Services Administration in one area, no matter how long that takes, before expanding to another. However, some advocates said the timeline published and posted online Thursday renewed fears that the state might rush the changes and hurt some of the 1.1 million children and elderly, disabled and needy Hoosiers who rely on food stamps and other benefits.

"They're just trying to do it too fast," said Patti O'Callaghan of Lafayette, who president of the Indiana Coalition for Human Services, an umbrella group of private agencies across the state that provide social services.

The timeline with the proposed contract - which still awaits approval from federal officials - calls for the pilot program to begin next Aug. 20 in about 10 counties surrounding Marion and to last about three months. It would expand to southern Indiana in November 2007, to northwest Indiana in January 2008 and finally to central Indiana during March 2008.

FSSA spokesman Dennis Rosebrough said the timeline in the contract was tentative and represented targets for IBM and its coalition of partners.

"We are not going to be held to some artificial timeline - bottom line," he said. "Progress on the timeline will be based on our successful implementation in one region before we move on to the next."

On Tuesday, a day before Gov. Mitch Daniels announced the IBM contract, O'Callaghan

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sent letters to him and to U.S. Department of Agriculture administrators requesting a pilot program lasting at least six months. The USDA, which administers the food stamp program, must approve the state's plan so Indiana gains full compensation of its share of program costs.

The letters asked that the state collect data and have it independently analyzed to determine the privatization's effect on benefit recipients and township trustees, as well as community-based organizations such as food pantries and soup kitchens, which might be pressured to give out more meals and groceries if problems with the transition deny people food stamps.

"It's difficult to get enough food to meet the demand we have now," said O'Callaghan, director of social justice at Lafayette Urban Ministry, a nonprofit that helps needy children and families.

Michael Reinke, executive director of the Indiana Coalition of Housing and Homeless Issues, questioned whether benefit applicants and recipients would be able to master new ways of accessing their cases - by e-mail, the Internet, call centers and faxes - as quickly as the state and IBM anticipate. Most cases now are updated during office visits.

FSSA risks a logistical disaster similar to that of the rollout this year of the Bureau of Motor Vehicles' new computer system, Reinke said. The BMV's troubles created long lines at license branches and problems for police agencies.

"When you have system change, there's an opportunity for things to happen that you didn't think of," Reinke said.

Beryl Cohen, an advocate who has worked with several organizations, said a trial period of at least six months is needed to collect data and performance measurements in areas such as error rates, client satisfaction and delivering services quickly.

"What you are talking about is a whole system change, of multiple people," Cohen said. "It doesn't happen overnight," Cohen said.

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Proposed IBM contract: <http://www.in.gov/fssa/transformations/edp/edp/index.html>

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