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Local

Posted on Thu, Nov. 30, 2006

IBM wins welfare overhaul

Advocates for poor hopeful, but await details today

By Ken Kusmer
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS – Advocates for more than 1 million Indiana residents who receive food stamps, Medicaid and welfare welcomed Gov. Mitch Daniels' plan Wednesday to improve access to and management of benefits but remained wary until they can learn more details of the plan.

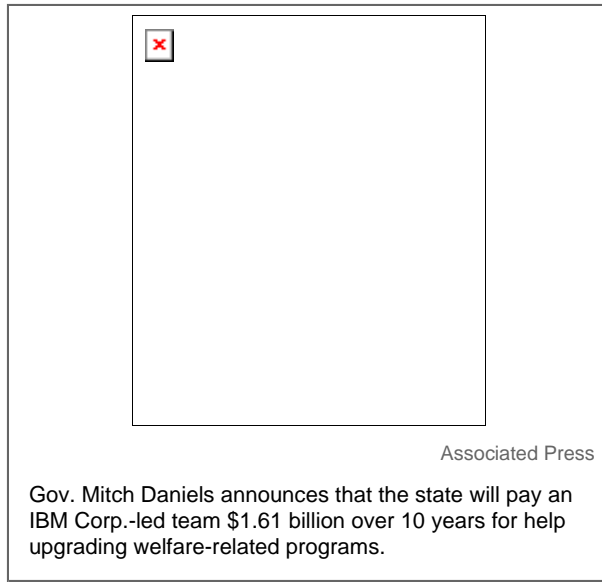
Some answers are expected today, when the state plans to release copies of its tentative contract to pay \$1.16 billion over 10 years to a team of vendors led by IBM Corp. to process applications for government benefits and lend technical support.

The proposal aims to improve service to clients, reduce waste and fraud, and move people more quickly off welfare rolls and into jobs.

"There isn't going to be a perfect system, but this can only be dramatically better than what's going on," Daniels said before his announcement.

But advocates question whether the state is allowing enough input on the plan, which still requires approval from federal officials who administer food stamps and the other benefits. A public hearing is set for Dec. 8 in Indianapolis.

"I think it has to have more public input than just one public meeting with just a week's notice," said Patti O'Callaghan, president of the Indiana Coalition for Human Services, a group of non-profits that serve needy and vulnerable Hoosiers.



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O'Callaghan and other advocates said they worry some residents could lose their aid, even if only temporarily, under the changes Daniels and the Family and Social Services Administration have in mind.

But advocates invited to attend the governor's news conference agreed the current system needs improvement.

"It requires multiple trips. It requires duplicate paperwork. It's extremely frustrating," said one of the invitees, Melissa Durr, chief executive of the Indiana Association of Area Agencies on Aging.

The plan has changed since it was originally conceived, in part because of concerns raised by advocates and recipients.

Daniels agreed with a review team's recommendations to scale back the state's plan to outsource some of the FSSA functions and phase in the changes over 18 months beginning next spring.

The revised plan calls for state employees to retain decision-making over eligibility for food stamps and Medicaid, welfare benefits, subsidized child care and non-Medicaid-related Hoosier Healthwise insurance benefits for needy families.

It also doubles the number of current FSSA employees who would be retained by the agency to about 700. The remaining 1,500 employees were essentially guaranteed jobs with the consortium for two years at no less than equal pay and benefits.

Each of Indiana's 92 counties would retain an office where people could apply in person for benefits under the plan. The Internet, e-mail, fax transmissions and telephone call centers would create greater access for benefit applicants and recipients.

Daniels said his plan does not need legislative approval, but incoming Speaker Pat Bauer, D-South Bend, promised the Indiana House would conduct public hearings.

"We want to make sure that the interests of the people of Indiana are best served by these efforts. We want to make sure that the care of thousands of Hoosiers is made a higher priority than the profit margins of a private company," Bauer said.

Michael Reinke, executive director of the Indiana Coalition of Housing and Homeless Issues, said he hopes the plan integrates welfare-to-work initiatives with training that prepares Hoosiers for jobs that pay far more than the minimum wage.

"We know 75 percent of the people who are unable to pay their bills are working," Reinke said. "The problem is, they're working and still unable to pay their bills."

The public hearing scheduled for Dec. 8 will be in the auditorium of Ivy Tech at 50 West Fall Creek Parkway, North Drive, in Indianapolis.

Plan summary

Gov. Mitch Daniels on Wednesday proposed the state pay an IBM Corp.-led team \$1.16 billion over 10 years for help upgrading programs for food stamps, Medicaid and welfare. The Family and Social Services Administration would still control eligibility decisions.

Here's a look at what the Daniels administration says would and would not change under the plan as currently proposed:

Stays the same:

- Each county still would have at least one office where people can apply in person for aid.
- The state would continue to determine final eligibility for benefits.

What changes:

- Under the new plan, the state would reduce that number of employees who perform benefits work from 2,200 to 682, with the rest of the work being handled by IBM-team employees. The remaining state employees would be guaranteed work with the new consortium for two years at no less than equal pay or benefits.
- Caseworkers would be able to devote time to social service activities instead of handling paperwork.
- Applicants would be able to request benefits by phone, mail, fax, e-mail and Web-based systems, instead of only at their local county offices.
- Self-surveys will replace in-person interviews.
- Income verification would be cross-referenced with other systems, such as credit bureaus.
- Eligibility standards would be applied consistently.

– Associated Press – Associated Press

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