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INDIANA NEWS

Software snags prompt FSSA to postpone welfare automation rollout

By Ken Kusmer
Associated Press Writer
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The state's human services agency decided Thursday to postpone the initial rollout of its automated welfare eligibility system by at least a week to Oct. 29 because of software problems.

The Family and Social Services Administration had been anticipating a Monday launch of the automated system for a 12-county swath of northern Indiana centered around Marion.

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However, software problems prompted the decision to push back the launch by a week, FSSA Secretary Mitch Roob told The Associated Press.

"There wasn't the comfort level that we wanted to have, so we'll delay it a week," Roob said. "I think there are a half dozen rather technical issues."

One problem typical of those issues involved printing of welfare benefit applications completed online. Printing the completed applications was taking as long as seven minutes, or more time than some home computers will allow.

Such time-outs likely would create frustration among some applicants or those who help them apply for benefits online, Roob said.

"We're gonna get this done right and not fast," Roob said. "We're going to be governed by prudence here."

The automation is being provided by a team of contractors led by IBM Corp. and Affiliated Computer Services Inc. under a 10-year, \$1.16 billion contract, one of the richest in the state's history.

The privatization of food stamps, Medicaid and other benefits relied upon by 1.1 million children, seniors, and needy and disabled Indiana residents is being watched closely in Indiana and across the nation after a similar venture failed in Texas last year.

Advocates who work with welfare clients welcomed the postponement.

"We have seen what has happened in other places where those software issues have not been worked out," said Patti O'Callaghan of Lafayette, president of the Indiana Coalition for Human Services, a group of nonprofits that work with needy and vulnerable Hoosiers.

John Cardwell, who represents senior citizens as chairman of the Indiana Home Care Task Force, said some welfare clients already have fallen through the public safety net and lost benefits after about 1,500 state case workers went to work for ACS in March.

"Those (automated) systems are not set up to deal with humans in terms of senior citizens, persons with disabilities and other low-income persons who need services to meet their basic needs. You've got to have real people working with folks," Cardwell said.

The 12-county area where the automation will be rolled out first stretches from White County north of Lafayette to Randolph County east of Muncie. It's home to about 10 percent of the state's welfare population.

Gov. Mitch Daniels and Roob have said the state needs the IBM contract to bring necessary, cost-efficient technology to the process of applying and maintaining welfare benefits. By privatizing the work, the state is saving \$500 million over the 10-year life of the contract, they say.

However, the changes are being watched closely by federal officials who oversee the welfare programs, by anti-hunger activists who worry food stamp recipients might lose benefits, and by Congress. A provision in the new farm bill passed by the House in July would roll back food stamp outsourcing by Indiana and other states. That bill awaits action in the Senate.

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