



NEWS RELEASE

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CPPP STATEMENT ON TEXAS HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICE COMMISSION'S NEW STRATEGY FOR ENROLLMENT IN PUBLIC BENEFITS

Austin, TX—Today, the Texas Health and Human Services Commission announced a new strategy for enrolling needy Texans in public benefits, including Medicaid, Children's Health Insurance (CHIP), Food Stamps, and temporary cash assistance (TANF). Over four million low-income Texans rely on these services to meet their basic needs.

F. Scott McCown, Executive Director of the Center for Public Policy Priorities, said:

"We applaud this new strategy. HHSC is moving in the right direction. Commissioner Hawkins and his team worked hard to learn from the pilot and make needed changes. We are particularly encouraged that HHSC will increase the number of permanent state staff and resume the integrated-eligibility pilot only when the necessary technology is in place. Still, the workload is growing, and the legislature needs to add more state staff."

Celia Hagert, Senior Policy Analyst, who studies this issue for the center, added:

"We especially support the modified division of labor between state employees and private contractor staff. In the modified business plan, the private contractor will gather and process information, forwarding any problems to skilled state staff for review and action. This new division of labor means the system should process applications more quickly and accurately.

While we see today's announcement as all good news, HHSC still needs more staff. The new plan increases permanent staff from 4210 to 5110, and continues to use an additional 1,300 to 1,500 temporary staff, but this is not enough staff to ensure timely and accurate decisions. The total number of staff—permanent and temporary—will only be about 6,610, which is roughly 15% fewer staff than the state had in 2004. Since 2004, the number of clients has increased, and staff workload has gone up 30%. The lack of timeliness in application processing across Texas (about 80% timely across programs; federal standards require 95%) and the increase in Food stamp error rates in FY 2006 (above the national average for the first time since 1998) suggests that workload is too high.

The effectiveness of the new computer system—TIERS—will have to be closely monitored because everything depends upon it working."

The center is a research organization working on issues affecting low-income Texans. CPPP's relevant research on this issue is at <http://www.cppp.org/subcategory.php?cid=3&scid=7>.