

Most of us have never had to think about how families in need sign up for public help such as health care and food stamps. Right now, however, an important debate is brewing in the Capitol over the question—how should we sign people up for help?

The reason for the debate is the performance of the state's new system for determining eligibility. Since the state launched the new system six months ago, more than 100,000 kids have lost their health insurance and the state has left thousands of families without food.

Two years ago, the legislature told the Health and Human Services Commission to find a way to deliver help with less money. Lured by the private sector's promise of saving money, the commission signed a five-year, \$899 million contract with the Texas Access Alliance, a consortium of private companies anchored by Accenture, LLP. Under the contract, the private sector promised to “modernize” the system by using call centers and the Internet. The state told 2,000 state employees they were losing their jobs and launched the new system in Travis and Hays counties.

The commission claimed that a modernized system run by private companies would reduce workload for staff and improve services to clients. Clients would benefit from state-of-the-art technology, and taxpayers would save hundreds of millions of dollars. This sounds good in theory, but the reality has been a disaster.

Help has gotten harder to get and claimed savings never materialized. In May, the state postponed extending the new system to more counties and begged 1,000 state workers to stay on the job. Now the question is where we go from here.

Our own perspective is that we certainly shouldn't go forward with the same plan, but we probably shouldn't go back. We need to go a different direction altogether.

It turns out that signing up for public help is not like buying movie tickets on Fandango. For many different reasons, including a desire to hold down costs, the state has a very complicated set of rules about who is entitled to what. In addition, the system must verify eligibility. Compounding this complexity is that the people who need help live in struggling low-income families, and are often elderly or with disabilities.

No one opposes the vision of a state-of-the-art system that increases access to services while saving taxpayers money. Both are worthy goals. But the state erroneously assumed that poorly trained, low-wage workers could do the job currently done by highly trained, higher-paid state employees. In fact, the savings promised by the plan's backers came not from more effective or efficient ways to help clients, but by cutting some staff and paying others less. While technology can help, the state must have adequate numbers of trained staff for any system to work.

The state's old way of doing things also required running this complicated system with too few people. For years, Texas has skimped on an adequate workforce to enroll people in services. Despite growing numbers of Texans in need, the legislature actually cut eligibility staff by 40 percent between 1997 and 2004. This doubled staff workload and compromised client services. Disruptions in benefits were common, often resulting in lawsuits. And, no one was satisfied with the old way of doing things, which only looks good by comparison.

Right now, whether you get help might just as well be determined by rolling dice. It is morally reckless, however, to gamble with the well-being of the four million Texans who depend on public services, mostly children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. We need a new direction. No matter how the state divides the duties between the public and private sector, both need enough properly-trained staff. As citizens who want to ensure that those who need help get help, we have to be willing to pay for it.

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Hagert is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities in Austin.