



Fran Quigley

They won't quiet down yet

Private suffering, especially by the poor and the sick, does not often become a political issue. Usually, our powers-that-be are transfixed by property taxes, corporate concerns and electoral power struggles, where well-connected folks with a few dollars in their pockets can make their voices heard.

But in the spring of 2008, the pain of Hoosiers hurt by the privatization of Indiana's welfare program slowly transformed into a hot topic. Gov. Mitch Daniels' \$1.34 billion contract with IBM had led to a rash of incorrect denials of food stamps and health-care assistance. In many Indiana communities, emergency food pantries began running out of stock and private charities found themselves under siege.

In response, simple handbills were circulated to announce a public meeting in Anderson about the privatization, and a handful of people were expected to exchange views. To the surprise of the organizers, a crowd of 200 packed a union hall. Five hundred more went to a subsequent meeting in Muncie, many lining up for hours afterward to get a few minutes to share their problems with a state agency representative.

"The Muncie hearing was a game-changer," says John Cardwell, a longtime Indiana health-care activist and lobbyist. "After that, I had legislators coming up to me and saying, 'This is the real thing, isn't it?'"

Cardwell is chair of an ad hoc group of service providers, advocates, and welfare consumers called the Committee on Welfare Privatization Issues. The acronym "COWPI" was at first whimsical and temporary. But it endured as commentary on the funk emanating from the deal cut by the governor and then-Family and Social Services Administration secretary Mitch Roob, formerly a vice president of Affiliated Computer Services Inc., a major subcontractor in the privatization.

Three weeks ago, Daniels canceled the IBM contract, and thanked the privatization scheme's critics for pushing the issue. Although Cardwell and others emphasize the problems are not solved yet, Daniels and Roob's successor, Anne Murphy, deserve credit for making what the governor called "a major mid-course correction."

It took a lot of pushing to correct that course. Legislators from both parties, notably the hard-hit Evansville area, heard horror stories from their constituents, and then pressed the governor directly.

Cardwell gives significant credit to the Indiana print media, including the Associated Press, the Fort Wayne Journal-Gazette and Anderson Herald-Bulletin. Doing what the medium does best, reporters simultaneously told human stories and uncovered the details showing sky-high cost and basement-low performance by the contractors.

But Cardwell reserves special praise for the system's clients, who responded to being denied much-needed medicine for their spouses and food for their children not with self-pity but by raising their voices and sharing their stories with legislators, the media and the governor himself.

"People are still fired up to fight on this issue," Cardwell says. "And they don't want a halfway solution."

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