

conversations

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances. THE FIRST AMENDMENT

OUR OPINION

Finally facing welfare reality

What do state Sen. Vaneta Becker, activist John Cardwell, senior advocate Kenneth Adkins and other elected officials, township trustees, hospital and nursing home staffs and United Way service providers in Indiana have in common?

They never expected to be welfare caseworkers, but they've been just that during the two years that the state has been shifting to a privatized aid eligibility determination system.

"It's been chaos," Becker says of the changeover initiated by her fellow Republican, Gov. Mitch Daniels. "They have refused," the Evansville lawmaker adds, "to see the population they're dealing with."

Because so many elderly, disabled, sick, hungry, impoverished Hoosiers have met with denial and delay in their quest for food stamps, Medicaid and aid to children

under the new operation, elected officials, advocates and social institutions have found themselves cutting into their regular work to help them.

That's because state caseworkers in local communities, who traditionally played that role, have been de-emphasized in favor of a computer- and phone-based mode that has often proved frustrating even to savvy persons. It can be downright prohibitive to those with deficiencies in hearing, vision, education, mental capacity and transportation — that is, many of the 1 million Hoosiers needing help. Lost and erroneous records are a frequent complaint.

In contrast to her predecessor, Mitch Roob, state Family and Social Services Administration Secretary Anne Murphy has acknowledged that the program isn't working. She partially halted the modernization in February, and last week put lead contractor IBM Corp. on notice to

fix things by October or face possible cancellation of a 10-year, \$1.16 billion contract, \$315 million of which has been paid.

Training, accuracy and speed need improvement, Murphy asserts. At the same time, she says it's untrue that caseworkers are fewer or less available or that an inordinate number of eligible people go unserved. Yet scores of Hoosiers, some as prominent as state legislators, say they've succored many such people.

Adkins, president of the Indiana Association of Area Agencies on Aging, gives thanks the state is finally facing reality and hopes the officials get it right. "People deserve better than what they've gotten," he says.

Unless the administration lends a hearty amen, an intolerable situation will persist for Indiana's most vulnerable citizens.