



State gives Vermonters seeking aid waiting times exceeding 1,000 minutes

By [Nancy Remsen, Free Press Staff Writer](#) • Sunday, November 21, 2010

When Brenda Barsalou saw her aunt's monthly fuel payments jump by \$50 a month this fall, she persuaded her 86-year-old relative to seek [financial](#) assistance for the first time.

The application was daunting enough at 18 pages, Barsalou said, but not nearly as frustrating as what followed. She spent hours on hold trying to make a required contact for her aunt with a state interviewer. She couldn't get through before the deadline for the interview passed.

Barsalou and her aunt — and many other Vermonters — got snagged in the bumpy rollout of a modernization initiative at the Department for Children and Families that at its worst saddled some clients with estimated telephone wait times of hundreds of minutes.

Using electronic technology and centralized management, the department's \$3 million modernization project is intended to improve service to Vermonters who are seeking financial assistance with food, fuel and health care. It would eliminate the need for many trips to regional offices by allowing automated telephone inquiries, telephone interviews and Internet [applications](#).

For a host of reasons — glitches in [software](#), delays in system development, shrunken staffing and an avalanche of applications — this modernization effort so far has created almost as many problems as it has solved.

Vermonters who have been stuck on hold so long they give up or who sit weeks in limbo awaiting action on their applications all are people who are struggling financially. They come to the Department for Children and Families for help to meet basic needs such as putting food on the table or fuel in a furnace.

Advocates don't know how many people have been affected by snags when they apply for benefits, but they do know that nearly one-in-seven Vermonters is short of food. A recent U.S. Department of Agriculture survey found the percentage of Vermont households without sufficient food had risen from 12.1 percent to 13.6 percent since last year; Vermont's increase during the past decade is one of the biggest in the country.

Angela Smith-Dieng at the Vermont Campaign Against Childhood Hunger hears plenty of complaints from people trying to get help.

“Many are waiting two months or more for benefits,” Smith-Dieng said. “I’ve heard of people giving up completely. They feel the system is set up for them to give up.”

Responded Steve Dale, commissioner of the Department for Children and Families, “We are aware. We have taken all kinds of steps.”

Despite the problems, Dale said the modernization program was critical to improving service while reducing expenses. “It is a tough situation,” he said, “but we have to stay the course.”

Barsalou’s experience on behalf of her aunt illustrates some of the challenges the state must remedy.

The Department for Children and Families informed Barsalou’s aunt by letter earlier this month that she didn’t qualify for assistance to pay her fuel bills but suggested she might be eligible for 3SquaresVT, a food aid program formerly known as food stamps. The aunt was supposed to call for an interview before Nov. 14.

“I stayed on the phone for two days, hours each day,” Barsalou said. “I had to be at her house.” She put the phone on speaker so she could do other things. She got disconnected and had to start her wait again. She never got through for an interview. Barsalou said she tried another option, leaving a telephone number for a call back, but no one called.

“The cut-off date they gave was Sunday, and they aren’t even open on Sunday,” Barsalou said. Last week, she gave up trying to call.

“I’m going to the local Middlebury office,” she said. “I’m hoping just because we are past the deadline it is not over and done.”

Catherine Collins, director of case [management](#) at the Champlain Valley Area Agency on Aging, reports similar complaints come to her office every day.

“There is no real process, if you can’t complete the interview at this time, what you do next,” Collins said.

At one point a week ago, when advocates for the elderly tried calling the state’s interview line for themselves, they found wait times of 2,400 minutes, 1,400 minutes and 1,100 minutes, said John Barbour, the agency’s executive director. He noted there are 1,440 minutes in a day.

“I doubt any of these are true times,” Barbour said, “but the message, realistically, is you might as well hang up.”

The Free Press called the interview line, too, on Nov. 12. The stated wait time was 1,424 minutes.

“We don’t know what to tell people,” Barbour said. “We don’t know how they can get an interview.”

It was caused by a software glitch, Commissioner Dale explained.

“It is very troubling that this could happen. Although a 2,200-minute wait is absurd and not really possible, if someone is struggling with a system to have their interview for 3SquaresVT, it would be very upsetting to get that kind of information from the phone,” Dale wrote in an e-mail. “There is no way to say exactly what the actual wait time would have been at that moment. It could have been 10-20 minutes, but it clearly was not 2,200 minutes.”

State Rep. Ann Pugh, D-South Burlington, heard so many complaints in recent weeks that she’s scheduled a daylong hearing of the House Human Services Committee for Dec. 13.

“I don’t have any agenda more than understanding what is going on,” said Pugh, committee chairwoman. “I understand the employees are doing the best they can.” Still, the problems should have been anticipated, she added: “The roll-out has been atrocious, and the planning hasn’t been well-done.”

The Department for Children and Families set out three years ago to reconfigure the way Vermonters applied for aid to help them meet basic needs. This was before the Legislature and Gov. Jim Douglas adopted the Challenges for Change process that calls for redesigning government to improve service and save money — but it is a perfect fit with that program.

The plan, developed by staff in the department, not by consultants, called for consolidating some functions rather than replicating them in regional offices across the state. It also relied on telecommunications to distribute the workload among employees, said Dale, the commissioner.

It was created “on a shoestring,” Dale said. The department allocated \$3 million for the project, all federal dollars and much of that from bonuses for expanding the 3SquaresVT food assistance program.

Key features of the new system include:

- Centralized document processing: Applicants send paper documents to Waterbury to be scanned and stored electronically. Paper copies are maintained only for 45 days. Electronic records gives clients and staff access to files regardless of location.
- Telephone client service center: Automated system allows callers to check the status of their applications or get other information, or consult directly with benefits specialists who can pull up their records as they talk.
- On-demand interview service: Callers phone a toll-free number at their convenience for interviews. The unit is centrally managed, but interviewers work in regional offices. The state has a federal waiver that allows food aid interviews to be conducted by phone rather than face-to-face.

- Online services: People can apply for benefits online and also access their personal records.

“Conceptually, there isn’t anything horrible about it,” said Barbour at the agency on aging. “Just how it played out hasn’t been good.”

Dale concedes there have been problems. So does the governor.

“When you change a system, there are growing pains,” Douglas spokesman David Coriell said.

For example, an online application was supposed to be available in late June, but it wasn’t ready until Oct. 4. That meant a lot more paper applications had to be scanned and sorted at the central document-processing center.

Another challenge turned out to be the number of staff compared with caseload.

The department had 16 extra staff when changes in the eligibility for 3SquaresVt bumped up caseload in 2009. Those positions disappeared July 1 when the efficiency from the reorganization was supposed to make them unnecessary. However, the commissioner noted, “the number of cases has absolutely soared.”

The number of individuals on 3SquaresVT grew from 66,506 to 87,010 in the past three years, because of eligibility changes and the downturn in the economy. Fuel assistance jumped significantly, too. As of Nov. 10, 2009, benefits had been approved for 15,887 households. As of the same date this year, 19,775 households qualified for benefits.

“The staff has performed amazingly,” Commissioner Dale said. From August through October, the staff processed 13 percent more applications than in the same period a year ago, he said.

Even with a [more efficient](#) configuration, the staff was unable to keep up. Processing started taking longer than the 30-day target. Calls backed up in the call center and interview queues.

In the call center on a recent afternoon, Director Paul Madden followed the ebb and flow of calls on his computer. Between 7:45 a.m. and 1:30 p.m., the staff spoke with 726 clients. Callers waited an average of 6.5 minutes to speak to a worker, according to his records.

He explained that if callers choose the call-back option rather than holding, “we try to get to people in the same day.” If that’s not possible, Madden said the call-back list is the first priority the following morning.

As pressures mounted on the new system, Dale began making short-term adjustments — with Gov. Douglas’ blessing.

The governor remains committed to the change, said Coriell, his spokesman: “Over time, we will be able to reduce the burden on taxpayers by having a more modern system.”

In the meantime, however, Coriell said the governor “has told the department to take whatever means necessary to make sure people get served.”

During the summer, Commissioner Dale said he recognized the potential for a significant slowdown in the processing of applications because of the annual fall flood of fuel aid applications. He reconstituted a special fuel-assistance unit and diverted fuel applications there.

This fall, Dale received permission from the governor to hire 15 temporary employees to bolster staff in the call center, fuel program and application processing. They have been in training for six weeks, he said: “We are seeing more value from them each day.”

This past week, average waiting times at the call center were down to an average of three minutes. “But the jury is out before we can [feel confident](#),” Dale said.

Also this fall, the department contracted on a short-term basis with community action agencies across the state to handle the “front door” conversations with clients seeking general assistance. That’s a benefit for people who are homeless and without any financial resources.

“That frees up staff time from the lengthy conversations about the crisis,” Dale said.

This fix came with its own challenges, Dale said.

“It didn’t work well in Burlington,” he said, because the number of clients overwhelmed the agency. So the local DCF office took back the work. Dale said the plan is for the Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity to assume the work again in December — “when they are ready.”

Jan Demers, executive director of Champlain Valley Office of Economic Opportunity, said no one was prepared for the switch when it happened in early October, but lack of waiting-room space was the biggest obstacle to providing the “front door” screening service at the Burlington office. The agency is providing the temporary in its Franklin, Grand Isle and Addison county offices.

“We are working on that,” Demers said of the space problem.

Nov. 29, the department will take another step to address clients’ service problems, Dale said Friday. “We will have an economic benefits ombudsman.” People will be able to call and receive a response within one working day, he said. “There will be someone who will work with them to solve their problem.”

Details were still being finalized, but Dale said there would be criteria set for who should make use of the ombudsman service. He doesn’t want it to duplicate what the call center is doing. “It is a default. We can’t have a situation where people don’t have a door into the system.”

Finally, the department has hired a consultant, Blake Shaw, a senior partner with the [Change and Innovation](#) Agency based in Kansas City, Mo., to evaluate the reorganization and “tell us what

we need to do,” Dale said. The consultant will spend a week at the department beginning Dec. 13.

“We think the plan is a good one. We think it can and should work,” Dale said. “We have to be able to work out these bugs.”

His goal is to resolve all the service issues in the next six weeks — by the time a new governor takes office in January and Dale departs for a new position outside state government.

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