

CCWRO Welfare News

Coalition of California Welfare Rights Organizations, Inc. CCWRO.ORG
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Applying for Welfare on-Line

INTRODUCTION

Nationally, welfare offices have been developing on-line application portals for Food Stamps and other public benefits programs. The new Health Care law mandates that each state have a statewide on-line application portal so Americans can access the new Health Care program.

Last year the State legislature enacted legislation starting the process for a single application system for public benefits.

CONSORTIUM ACTIVITIES

Meanwhile the C-IV Consortium (www.c-iv.org) received \$1 million from USDA, FNS to develop the www.c4yourself.com/c4yourself system for 39 counties.

At the same time USDA also gifted San Francisco County \$1 million to do an on-line application system similar to what C-4 is doing. In fact, a careful review will show a lot of similarities of both systems.

The San Francisco Model was used to launch "Benefits CalWIN" for the 18 CalWIN counties.

LEADER is currently in the process of developing their system with the C-4 computer language.

All 39 counties of the C-4 consortium have an on-line application system for CalWORKS, Food Stamps and Medi-Cal. <https://www.c4yourself.com/c4yourself/>

CONSORTIUM SECRECY

C-4 and CalWIN Consortiums have developed these on-line application portals with zero input from advocates or other stakeholders. The California Computer Consortiums operated by county welfare departments have never been transparent in the development and improvements of the C-4 or CalWIN systems. The only exception is LEADER that has recently been willing to involve advocates in the development of LEADER II from the start. That is commendable and we hope other Consortiums would follow the fine example of LEADER.

CONSUMER VIEW OF WHAT'S BEEN DONE SO FAR

If you go to <http://www.co.fresno.ca.us/Departments.aspx?id=162> which is the web page for Fresno County Employment and Temporary Assistance, there is a nice sign alerting folks that "Access and Benefits CalWIN has arrived, but, double clicking takes one to a pdf document rather than the portal to make an application. It states that one can go to "Benefits CalWIN", but that is not even a link. However, if you click on www.benefitscalwin.org it will take the person to the portal to apply for benefits. Why can't Fresno County connect the person to the on-line application immediately? Why not make it "user friendly?"

Unlike C-4, CalWIN does not yet include CalWORKS applications. None of these systems take General Assistance applications. Counties have admitted that they want to make it as hard as possible for persons in deepest poverty to have the hardest time accessing benefits to which they are entitled.

CalWIN Implementation Schedule

Release Number	Counties Deployment	Production Release Date
Phase I	Tulare & Santa Clara	May 24, 2010 (COMPLETE)
Phase II	Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Santa Barbara, Santa Cruz	July 26, 2010 (COMPLETE)
Phase III	Yolo, Orange, Placer, Sacramento, San Diego, San Francisco, Solano, Sonoma, Ventura and San Mateo (Source: CWDA)	Nov. 22, 2010

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CalWIN benefits only allows the applicant to submit the application only after the applicant has provided information about all members of the household in lieu of name and address only as required by 7 CFR §273.2(c).

The Authorized Representative (AR) is limited to picking up the food stamps. In the 21st century people do not pick up their food stamps. Food Stamp recipients can get an EBT card for an AR. There is another function for an AR, which is provided for in MPP § 19-000. A food stamp applicant can designate an application assister to be her or his authorized representative and assist the applicant in the processing of the application. To accommodate this, CalWIN can have one box for "pick up your food stamps" and another box for "represent me for food stamp purposes". Finally <https://www.c4yourself.com/c4yourself/> does not allow the applicant to designate an authorized representative at all. We hope that LEADER will.

When we tested Benefits CalWIN, it refused to proceed when we told it that we had no income. Once we lied and said we had income we were able to move on. Appears people without income need not apply.

C-4 1 million dollar system does not let a person file an application by putting down her/his name and address and electronically signing the application. It appears that FNS paid a million dollars for a system that violates basic federal laws.

ON-LINE APPLICATION SYSTEM VIOLATES FEDERAL LAW

Before anybody can apply for food stamps they must come up with a user name, password and a couple of secret questions.

The person would have to go through the entire application process before being allowed to file the application, in violation of 7 CFR §273.2(c) that provides in part:

"... may file an incomplete application form as long as the form contains the applicant's name and address, and is signed by a responsible member of the household or the household's authorized representative. State agencies shall doc-

ument the date the application was filed by recording on the application the date it was received by the food stamp office."

THE SYSTEMS ARE NOT USER FRIENDLY

We reviewed over a dozen County Welfare Department web pages from the listings of Human Services Agencies on CWDA's web-page. <http://www.cwda.org/links/chsa.php>. None of these web pages had an easily viewed spot how to apply for welfare on-line.

If this system is going to work it has to be designed for the users - not the designers. As usual, when the "welfare system" does something, they always put their needs above the needs of the users.

None of these systems with the exception for LEADER II were developed with any input from recipient representatives and advocates.

Recently CWDA convened a call with the urging of Jessica Bartholow of Western Center on Law & Poverty that was the first time advocates were briefed mostly on what was public knowledge.

There needs to be more oversight of this new technology.

For the federal government to spend \$2 million and not even make sure that it is consistent with federal law is malpractice. Moreover, \$2 million for this system that is simply designed for food stamps and Medi-Cal and CalWORKS to some extent is mindboggling - it is like paying \$700 for a toilet seat.

CONCLUSION

Electronic applications are the future. It is important that all stakeholders work together from the get-go to assure that it is "user friendly" and consistent with the laws and regulations governing the public benefit programs.