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Stacy Hernandez
 a Sacramento County caseworker

New welfare system not computing



Jane Rasmussen, Sacramento County's human assistance director, says she expected the transition to be difficult.

Help is slowing to a crawl for many in Sacramento, Placer.

By Cameron Jahn
 BEESTAFF WRITER

Officials in Sacramento and Placer counties expected some problems when they agreed to be

the first of an 18-county consortium to launch a \$744 million computer system for their welfare departments.

But they didn't expect this:

- People in Sacramento County are waiting longer for their benefit checks — weeks instead of days in some cases — as employees get up to speed.

- Sacramento County officials are teaching their employees to circumvent the new computer system's rules in order to speed benefits to clients.

- Placer County has issued benefit checks for February and March with few delays, but employees are still working through paperwork errors in 5,000 old cas-

es. Sacramento County employees are manually double-checking 79,000 cases for data errors that can cause overpayments.

- In both counties, workers have suffered health problems during the change in computer systems. A Sacramento County trainer died from a heart attack

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during a training session, and an employee was wheeled out on a stretcher after suffering a panic attack during Placer County's January launch, according to union and county officials. At least four other employees working with the new system have gone out on stress leave, two each in Placer and Sacramento counties, officials say.

Jane Rasmussen, Sacramento County's director of human assistance, expected the conversion of the two county's 170,000 cases into the new system to be difficult, but she disputes union claims that the new computer system is causing widespread ailments.

"Staff has worked really, really hard to learn the system, but there's just a huge learning curve," Rasmussen said. "They're frustrated at how long it is taking them to do their job, and that's really to be expected."

Placer County's human services director, Cindy Woodyard, said some initial hiccups are being worked out.

"I think we're getting a little faster, but certainly in the first couple of months there were a few bumps," she said.

To comply with a 1995 state law, all counties must automate their welfare computer systems to make eligibility standards the same statewide. The old system has been used since the 1970s.

Using mainly state and federal funds, Sacramento, Placer and 16 other counties bought CalWIN to reduce paperwork, speed up services and automate welfare systems for 40 percent of the state's caseload. Sacramento and Placer counties spent a total of \$675,000 in local money. (The rest of the state's counties will use various systems, including CalWIN.)

system, but client advocates and representatives of United Public Employees Local 1 contend the counties have failed to train workers sufficiently or provide enough extra staff for the launch.

Employees in both counties were given at least three weeks of classroom instruction and online training, county officials said.

"When banks change computer systems, it goes seamlessly because they train their people," said Kevin Aslanian, executive director of the California Coalition of Welfare Rights Organizations, a legal services group for recipients of public benefits. "That's the real problem, that these counties refused to expend the resources to train people properly."

Gina Wolverton did not realize it was CalWIN's first day in business when she applied for benefits at Sacramento County's Q Street welfare office March 3. Wolverton, 20 and homeless, was approved to receive \$305 in food stamps and cash, but she did not receive her benefits until two weeks later due to a computer glitch — more than double the normal wait time, according to her caseworker.

"I stay pretty positive or else I

couldn't do it," said Wolverton, who has been sleeping beneath an Interstate 80 underpass in east Sacramento. "But this is absolutely ridiculous."

In addition to the training issues, some employees in Sacramento County are beginning to question the CalWIN computer system itself.

"We're worried that it's coming across that workers are incompetent and slow and untrained, but it's not us, it's the system," said caseworker Stacy Hernandez. "The system won't let me get my people their benefits, and it's killing me. I have people who are hungry, and I give them money from my pocket, like, 'Here's five bucks, get something to eat.'"

Last week, Nancy Gant, bureau chief at the Q Street welfare office, arranged what she called an "act of God" to sidestep the CalWIN system to secure a \$123 stipend so that a woman could buy a uniform for her new job and move toward a life without public assistance. No

one could figure out how to make the system approve the money. And to complete applications faster, other employees were taught shortcuts on how to sidestep the system's strict informa-

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Placer and the other 16 counties.

State law requires emergency food stamps to be issued to the truly destitute within three days, but the county's work force is not processing those applications fast enough, and the county has given up on meeting that requirement, Gant said.

"We're just hunkering down and waiting for the lawsuit," she said.

The new system is full of holes that will be fixed on the backs of Sacramento and Placer county employees, charged James Starr, chair of the board of directors for United Public Employees Local 1, which represents 4,200 Sacramento County employees.

"I can say at this point that the system just does not work," said Starr, who is also a caseworker. "It's got more bugs than Joe's apartment."

Sacramento County workers anticipate even more problems Friday, the first day CalWIN issues benefits for its 136,000 cases.

"On April 1 we are going to have so many overpayments," Hernandez predicted.

Placer and Sacramento county officials say they hope to avoid a repeat of the problems Colorado has faced with its new \$200 million welfare computer system — also built by CalWIN's vendor, Texas-based EDS — which caused benefit overpayments resulting in a lawsuit and state intervention after it was launched last year.

EDS spokesman William Ritz said the company sold a top-notch system to Sacramento,

"Your county leaders deserve a lot of credit for their vision and foresight in trying to bring a business solution to benefits eligibility," he said. "They took a risk, and I think that's good government."

The CalWIN system is designed to automatically determine how much a client is entitled to receive in benefits and to present the computer's calculations for the case worker's signature. The old system required workers to do their own math with a hand-held calculator.

The new system also asks for much more information from clients, making tasks that took minutes in the old system last hours as employees master CalWIN.

Rather than simplifying things, the system has created more work, say caseworkers like Trang Nguyen. Instead of five new applications per day, Nguyen said, she and her colleagues can process only two in the new system. Like hundreds of others, Nguyen's ongoing caseload has jumped 55 percent to 700 since September, in part because of the computer changeover.

"We're not having enough staff to handle all the people asking for aid," said Nguyen, adding that her voice-mail box is constantly full and getting back to her clients takes days. "I'm wearing three hats right now."

Anticipating a rough adjustment period, officials in Sacramento and Placer counties reduced daily workloads and brought in more than 400 volunteers from other counties to trou-

bleshoot computer problems, help with data entry and do other clerical tasks.

But so far, it's been slow going.

January's changeover was so chaotic in Placer County that staff ditched the new computer system the first day and reverted to the old one.

New cases are slowing things down in Sacramento County as well. Early last week, county data showed that, on average, bureaus were seeing about one new client per day, down from as many as five.

After three weeks of clients enduring long waits and productivity slipping, Sacramento County officials are moving to fill at least 40 vacant positions. Those new employees could be working as soon as July. Placer County officials do not plan to hire additional staff.

"I don't have enough staff; I just don't have enough staff," said Gant, the Q Street bureau chief.

Santa Cruz and Yolo counties will start up CalWIN in May, and officials there are trying to learn from the experience of Placer and Sacramento counties. Santa Cruz officials said they plan to hire 10 part-timers for the changeover.

"I applaud Sacramento County (and Placer County), having been a pilot county, because CalWIN is huge," said Dana Johnson, Yolo County's assistant director of employment and social services.

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