



## Food stamp food fight

### Low staffing, flawed computer system at center of benefit delays

By Staff Reports

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We imagine one of the last things Gov. Bill Ritter wants to hear about is more trouble with the Colorado Benefits Management System - the much-maligned \$223 million computer system that was supposed to streamline public benefit programs when it was introduced by the Owens administration in 2004.

Unfortunately, the bad news keeps coming. CBMS remains a headache for county welfare officials who say that its complicated data-entry requirements needlessly delay benefits to qualified recipients.

As the *Rocky's* Myung Oak Kim reported Saturday, some food-stamp applicants have been denied services altogether because their applications weren't processed quickly enough.

On any given week, from 1,200 to 2,400 applicants for food stamps in the state's 10 largest counties had waited more than 30 days to get their applications filed. Applicants at the back of the line can wait weeks longer to collect benefits they're entitled to receive.

Moreover, the state computer system has erroneously sent letters to scores of food-stamp applicants saying they had been rejected even though their applications were still active.

State human services officials say that delays are improving but that counties need to staff up so they can process applications more rapidly.

Unfortunately for low-income Coloradans, it's easy for government officials to point fingers at one another and overlook those in need.

Yes, accountability for the food-stamp program can be muddled. Counties handle food-stamp applications and administer case loads, but they're required to use a computer system that's operated by the state.

And yet, whenever a problem arises, CBMS always seems to play a role. As recently as two months ago, Ritter said that CBMS could be salvaged when all the state's computer operations are eventually consolidated in a single Office of Information Technology.

Given the incessant problems the system has caused government officials, program recipients and taxpayers, we're no longer confident that CBMS is worth resuscitating.

And as delays mount, taxpayer costs could rise. Federal guidelines state that it shouldn't take more than 30 days to process a food-stamp application. Because Colorado isn't meeting that standard, Washington could sanction the state.

In addition, legal-aid groups claim that the state has wrongfully denied or cut benefits to hundreds of residents. Some 549 appeals protesting benefit cutoffs or reductions were filed in state court between Dec. 1, 2006 and Dec. 1 this year; that's 134 more appeals than were filed during the same period a year ago.

When the state loses those appeals, the costs to the public rise further.

One way counties can ease delays is by interviewing more applicants - especially those renewing their benefits - by phone rather than in person. Officials in El Paso and Jefferson counties also deserve credit for bringing in temp workers and using nonprofit social service agencies to help screen applicants.

As for CBMS, well, poker players warn against "throwing good money after bad." CBMS may be beyond redemption, and further attempts to rehabilitate it could simply divert resources and energy from the low-income Coloradans that public welfare programs are designed to serve.