

The state's attempt to change the way Texans in need get health care, food, and temporary cash assistance has been a disaster.

Last June, the state outsourced the enrollment process. As a result, over the last six months, more than 100,000 kids have lost their health insurance. And as of May 9, nearly 7,000 Food Stamp applications were backlogged, leaving thousands of families without food.

Lured by the private sector's promise of saving money, the state signed a five-year, \$899 million contract with a private company, prepared to lay off 2,000 state employees, and launched the new system in Travis and Hays counties.

It all sounded so good. Clients would benefit from state-of-the-art technology and no wait times at overcrowded offices, and taxpayers would save hundreds of millions of dollars.

Unfortunately, this was not the case.

The problems began almost as soon as the contractor took over. Technical difficulties and staff problems arose, and the promised savings never materialized.

Last month, the state postponed extending the new system to more counties and asked 1,000 state workers to stay on the job.

The outsourcing model was flawed from the start. It promised savings not from more effective or efficient ways to help clients, but by replacing trained state employees with fewer, lower-paid, and less-skilled staff.

Admittedly, the old way of doing things had its own problems. For years, state offices have been understaffed and run with outdated technology. But things have gotten worse with the new system.

The rush to outsource misses the point. No matter who runs the enrollment process or how it is structured, the only way to ensure that vulnerable Texans aren't slipping through the cracks is to hire sufficient staff to run the program.

For years Texas has skimmed on an adequate workforce to enroll people in services. Despite growing numbers of Texans in need, the state actually cut eligibility staff by 40 percent between 1997 and 2004. This almost doubled staff workload and compromised client services. Disruptions in benefits were common, often resulting in lawsuits.

Instead of making enrolling for benefits easier for people, the outsourcing experiment has made it more difficult. As a result, Texas' poorest families won't get health care, food, or temporary cash assistance they rely on.

Gambling with the well-being of the 4 million Texans who are depending on public services is financially and morally reckless. It's time for Texas to hire enough staff to do the job right and focus on helping low-income families for a change.

Hagert is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Center for Public Policy Priorities in Austin.