OFFICE OF PROGRAM POLICY ANALYSIS & GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY

March 2008 Report No. 08-13

ACCESS Improved Productivity; Additional Refinements Would Better Manage Workload

at a glance

The 2003 Legislature directed the Department of Children and Families to significantly redesign the state's public assistance program and reduce staffing and funding. In response, the department established the ACCESS electronic application, which makes it easier for many clients to apply for benefits. The department also made other program changes that increased staff productivity.

However, an unexpected increase in the volume of applications has outpaced productivity gains. The workload increase proved hard to manage and slowed processing times because planned technology enhancements are not yet in place. Splitting responsibilities for helping clients made it difficult for clients who need assistance from department staff to navigate the system. While planned technology changes are expected to decrease client confusion and reduce staff workload, the department needs to further improve technology and reorganize staff duties to fully address this situation.

Scope

At the request of the Legislature, OPPAGA examined how the development of the Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency (ACCESS) system modernized the Economic Self-Sufficiency Program. Specifically, OPPAGA evaluated how ACCESS streamlined the application process for Food Stamps, Medicaid and other assistance programs and how program changes affected applicants' access to services.

Background

The Department of Children and Families Economic Self-Sufficiency Program assists low-income individuals and their families to become and remain self-sufficient. The program helps citizens by determining their eligibility for a variety of services, including Food Stamps, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, and Medicaid health and long-term care services. [1] In Fiscal Year 2006-07, as a result of the program's eligibility determination efforts, the program provided food stamps to an average of 1.2 million clients, Temporary Assistance to Needy Families to 78,800 clients, and Medicaid coverage for 1.7 million clients each month.

The Department of Children and Families plans, administers, and delivers most program services through 20 circuits and six regions. Circuit and region offices are responsible for ensuring that the department delivers services in accordance with state and federal laws and for coordinating services with other public or private agencies that serve clients.

The 2003 Legislature mandated that the department redesign the program and began a series of funding and staffing reductions. The Fiscal Year 2003-04 General Appropriations Act required

[1] Food Stamps provide funds to qualifying low-income individuals for essential food items. Temporary Assistance for Needy Families provides cash benefits to certain low-income individuals including adults with dependent children and children residing in foster care. Medicaid provides health and long-term care services to certain individuals who meet established income and assets criteria, including children and families, pregnant women, and aged and disabled individuals.

the department to achieve significant savings in the Economic Self-Sufficiency Program, including eliminating at least 375 full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. The Legislature also required the department to develop a plan to eliminate additional positions in subsequent fiscal years. As shown in Exhibit 1, from Fiscal Years 2003-04 to 2007-08, the Legislature decreased program funding by $83 million (a 28% reduction) and eliminated 3,099 program FTEs (a 43% reduction).

Exhibit 1
Economic Self-Sufficiency Staffing Decreased 43% From Fiscal Year 2003-04 to Fiscal Year 2007-08

	Funding		Staffing	
Fiscal Year	Amount in Millions	Cumulative Percentage Decrease	FTEs	Cumulative Percentage Decrease
2003-04	$296		7,208	
2004-05	281	-5%	6,447	-11%
2005-06	246	-17%	4,680	-35%
2006-07	211	-29%	4,109	-43%
2007-08	213	-28%	4,109	-43%
Net Reduction	$ 83	-28%	3,099	-43%

Source: OPPAGA analysis.

In 2003, the department created ACCESS (Automated Community Connection to Economic Self-Sufficiency) to substantially redesign the eligibility determination process. The goal of ACCESS was to make it easier for clients to apply for assistance and to achieve operational efficiencies. Through ACCESS, the department

- simplified eligibility requirements and administrative policies,
- launched an online application for assistance and changed how it interacts with clients to help them complete the application process,
- closed customer service centers and opened smaller application offices,
- recruited a network of community partners to help clients submit applications,
- changed staff functions for processing applications and maintaining cases, and
- developed several technologies to support the program redesign.

The department simplified some eligibility requirements and administrative policies. Program staff received federal waivers in 2003 to simplify policies and procedures. For example, certain clients no longer need to have face-to-face interviews and do not need to produce original documents to verify expenses such as utilities. The department also rewrote its policy manuals to incorporate streamlined procedures, eliminate redundancy, and simplify language.

The department launched an online application and changed how it interacts with clients to complete the application process. Prior to the program redesign, clients had to visit a department office to fill out paper applications and then return to the office to complete in-person interviews and submit required documentation to prove eligibility. This could involve up to three office visits.

The department began to offer its primary application online in April 2005. [2, 3] Most clients can submit applications 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The ACCESS website also contains an online screening tool that clients can use to determine the likelihood they will be eligible for assistance. The department does not require clients to use the screening tool; clients can simply select the benefits for which they wish to apply and complete the application. [4] After the department receives and processes an application, the system generates and mails letters listing the documents clients must submit.

The department also changed how it works with clients to complete the application by moving from a social work to an eligibility determination model. Department administrators considered this change as being more consistent with the program's core mission. Formerly, clients would visit a customer service center to fill out a request for assistance and then make an appointment to complete an application and be interviewed by an eligibility worker. During this interview, the eligibility worker would make sure the application was complete and explain additional documentation the client needed to bring to the service center. The eligibility worker may have also referred the client to other services or

[2] Applications for Medicaid for pregnant women and presumptively eligible newborns, KidCare medical insurance, and food stamps for individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income can only be submitted using a paper application.

[3] The ACCESS application is available at www.myflorida.com/accessflorida/.

[4] Clients currently submit the same information for any combination of requested benefits. The department has plans to change the application so that clients will only complete the information necessary for the specific type(s) of assistance requested.

suggested additional benefits for which the client could apply. Department staff now interview most clients by telephone. During these interviews, staff ask about identity, all sources of income, and household and other expenses. Clients fax or mail required documents to the department. Clients can use a secure website to update case information and view basic information about the status of their applications and the benefits they are receiving. As a result of these changes, many clients do not need to visit a department office for any part of the application process.

The department eliminated customer service centers and opened smaller application offices. After changing the application process, the department discontinued its 145 full-service customer service centers. Instead, to provide applicants with a place to apply online, the department restructured some of its old service center sites and opened new self-service offices known as "storefronts." As of January 2008, the department operates 81 storefront offices where clients can use computers to complete the online application, telephones to call the department, and fax and copy machines to submit required documents. Department policy also requires storefront offices to have paper applications available upon request. Storefronts have staff available to help clients complete the online application; however, these staff do not determine eligibility for assistance.

The department recruited a network of community partners. In addition to its storefront offices, the department recruited community partners to ensure that clients could submit an application from a number of different community locations. Community partners include organizations that provide other social services that clients are likely to use, including workforce centers, food banks, health care providers, and other public entities such as libraries. Most partners volunteer their services.[5] As of November 2007, the department had signed agreements with 3,478 community partners.

Community partners offer varying degrees of assistance. For example, some let anyone from the general public come into their facilities and submit an application, while others prefer that only their current customers apply from their sites.[6] Community partners may also vary the assistance offered due to staff resources and the types of equipment they have available for clients to use, such as computers and telephones.

The department has developed different categories for community partners to reflect the amount and type of assistance clients can expect at each site (see Exhibit 2). The majority of community partners (2,028) have agreed to provide services at the "gold" level. These partners commit to having a computer, telephone, printer, fax, and copy machine available for clients. Gold partners also agree to verify the client's identity and explain the application process.

The department changed staff functions to streamline how it processes applications and manages cases. Previously, one staff person managed an entire case by completing the interview,

[5] Each circuit has limited funding to support its community partners. Most circuits grant funds to three to five community partners, such as workforce centers, so that the partners can hire dedicated staff to assist clients with their applications.

[6] Many community partners who serve only their own clients will assist other individuals if necessary. But to limit their workload, they do not advertise themselves as open to the public and do not encourage the general public to visit them solely for this service.

Exhibit 2
Community Partners Provide Varying Levels of Assistance

Level		Percentage Serving the General Public	Available Technology and Information						Assistance Provided by Partner Staff				
			Paper application	Computer	Telephone	Printer	Fax machine	Copy machine	None	Verify client identity	Explain application process	Assist with completing application	View application status
Partner	(513)	24%	✓						✓				
Bronze	(455)	33%	✓	✓	✓				✓				
Silver	(95)	48%	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓			
Gold	(2,028)	40%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓		
Platinum	(387)	27%	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: Department of Children and Families.

determining eligibility, answering client questions, and processing changes or renewals. To achieve operational efficiencies, the department substantially redesigned staff duties and divided staff duties into five discrete functions: greeters, scanners, processors, call center staff, and case maintenance unit staff. Exhibit 3 describes the five functions.

Appendix A compares the original and redesigned eligibility determination processes.

The department developed several technologies to support the program redesign. Using existing staff and funds, the department developed a secure online application, data system to maintain these applications, and website that allows clients to view basic information about their cases. The department also developed a computer program to electronically transfer the online application information into the program's eligibility determination data system. The department also expanded automated access to state and federal databases used to update case information. In addition, it implemented systems to support call center operations.

Findings

ACCESS has improved the application process for many clients and increased staff productivity. However, the program's productivity gains have been outpaced by an unexpected increase in the volume of applications for public assistance, due in part to the more user-friendly application process. Additional technology enhancements are planned to better manage workload and assist clients. The department also split responsibilities for helping clients in a manner that further increased workload by making the application process difficult to navigate for clients who have questions or complex applications. The combination of these factors has caused processing delays. The department should address these challenges by implementing additional technology and organizational changes to further improve the application process for clients and help the program better manage its workload.

Exhibit 3
Redesigned Staff Functions Align With Discreet Components of the Eligibility Process

Position	Function
Greeter	Help clients complete the online application and submit needed documentation. Greeters are based in the department's storefront offices and some community partner sites. Greeters are not trained to answer policy-related questions and cannot determine a client's eligibility for assistance.
Scanner	Scan applicants' documentation into the electronic case file after clients complete the application and mail or fax supporting documents. Scanning staff generally are located in the processing units in each circuit.
Processor	Determine applicants' eligibility for assistance by ▪ transferring the online application into the department's eligibility determination data system, ▪ adding supporting information to applications from other state and federal databases, ▪ conducting telephone interviews, [1] ▪ reviewing all information to determine eligibility for the requested types of assistance, and ▪ scheduling telephone interviews, identifying additional documents that must be submitted, and informing clients when the department has approved or denied each type of requested assistance. The department locates most processors in centralized offices called processing units. A small number of processors are co-located in offices that are adjacent to the storefront settings and are available to conduct face-to-face interviews if needed. [2]
Call Center	Answer clients' questions about their applications, required documents, letters from the department, or their case status. Call center staff also process changes that occur after clients begin to receive assistance. These include changes in the client's address, household composition, income, and assets.
Case Maintenance Unit	Receive automatic data updates from other state and national databases about clients' ongoing eligibility. Updates include information that may affect client's eligibility or payment amounts, such as electronic notices from the Department of Labor informing them whether or not cash assistance recipients are meeting their work requirements. After receiving this information, staff adjust client payments. These staff also track incurred medical bills to determine monthly eligibility for certain Medicaid programs.

[1] In some circuits, an interview clerk completes the telephone interview rather than the processor.

[2] Staff may conduct face-to face interviews with clients requesting emergency food stamps, which the department must approve or deny within seven days, and with homeless clients who have difficulty scheduling phone interviews. Staff must conduct face-to-face interviews with clients who have previously committed benefit fraud or who have particularly complex error-prone applications.

Source: Department of Children and Families.

ACCESS made the application process easier for many clients and increased staff productivity

Creating an online application and reducing documentation requirements made the application process easier for many clients. Changing the processes that staff use to evaluate initial applications, update case information on existing cases, and manage case files has increased staff productivity.

The new application process is easier for many clients. Because most clients can submit an application 24 hours a day, seven days a week, the online application is more convenient for clients who can use a computer or have a caregiver or other support to help them submit an application.[7] From August to November 2007, clients submitted 81% of applications electronically.[8] Most clients also complete the required interview by telephone, eliminating the need to visit a department office.[9] Clients can also report changes in address, income, or household membership online or by telephone, thus avoiding office visits.

The department also developed agreements to obtain information electronically from state and federal databases, which gives staff access to a wide range of information. Consequently, clients do not need to collect and submit as much documentation to prove eligibility.

Separating duties for new applications and existing cases, simplifying policies, and improving automation has increased staff productivity. The department divided duties for processing initial applications and updating information for existing cases. Case processing staff evaluate the initial application by verifying the information the client submitted and conducting the interview. Because these staff concentrate on new applications and can apply policies the department simplified during the early stages of ACCESS, program field staff were able to process over 2.5 times as many new applications per employee in August 2007 as in August 2003.[10]

For existing cases, the department implemented case maintenance units in 2005 to update information in case files using automatic electronic alerts and feeds from state and federal databases. These staff adjust payments and eligibility when clients experience changes in income, expenses, or household membership. These staff are also more productive because they can maintain and manage a case by relying on automated databases rather than paper documents and they generally do not need to interact with clients. As a result, the department maintained nearly twice as many cases per program field employee in August 2007 compared to August 2003.[11]

The department is also using automation to store case file information. In 2006, the department changed how it manages clients' information by implementing paperless case files using document imaging technology. As a result, department staff can now access client documents from any location. This allows the department to distribute workload across staff in different areas of the state.

The success of ACCESS in improving productivity has been outpaced by higher workload

While ACCESS has produced many benefits, the length of time the program uses to process applications for public assistance benefits has increased. Application processing time was initially reduced after ACCESS was implemented, but it currently is taking longer to process cases than it did before the system was put in place. After the ACCESS system was implemented, the average time to process cases decreased by 14% (from 15.7 to 13.5 calendar days between January 2003 and December 2004), due in part to the simplified application requirements. However, as the number of applications increased and the program began to experience difficulty managing the workload, the

[7] For example, family members who live in another state can more easily assist aged or disabled relatives with their applications.

[8] This percentage reflects the portion of applications that can be submitted electronically and excludes applications for Medicaid for pregnant women and presumptively eligible newborns, KidCare medical insurance, and food stamps for individuals receiving Supplemental Security Income.

[9] The department still tries to complete face-to-face interviews with clients eligible for emergency food stamps, homeless individuals, and with clients who previously committed benefit fraud or who have complex error-prone applications.

[10] This increase represents an average of 36 cases processed per program field employee per month in 2007 compared to 14 in 2003, distributed across all field employees. We could not compare productivity changes specifically for processing staff because the assigned duties of the job have significantly changed.

[11] This increase represents an average of 330 cases maintained per month per program field employee in 2007 compared to 166 in 2003, distributed across all field employees.

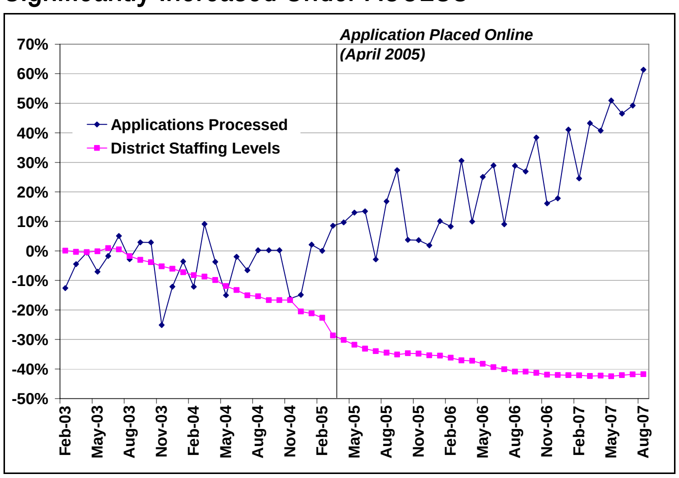
average time to process cases increased by over 43% to 19.3 calendar days in August 2007. [12]

Several factors have contributed to the increase in processing times. An unexpected increase in the volume of applications has outpaced the program's productivity gains. This workload increase proved difficult to manage, in part because planned technology enhancements are not yet in place. The department also split responsibilities for helping clients with their applications between processing and call center staff, which made the application process difficult to navigate for clients who have questions or complex applications, and further increased workload. The combination of these factors has slowed processing times.

Application workload unexpectedly increased under ACCESS

The number of applications for public assistance increased substantially after the department made the online application available statewide in April 2005. As shown in Exhibit 4, while the number of applications had grown by less than 1% from January 2003 through January 2005, this volume grew by approximately 20% per year after posting the online application. At the same time, the program's staffing was reduced by 43% from Fiscal Year 2003-04 to 2007-08 in anticipation of efficiencies gained by streamlining the process.

Exhibit 4
The Number of Applications for Assistance Significantly Increased Under ACCESS



Source: OPPAGA analysis of data from the Department of Children and Families.

Several factors contributed to the increase in workload. A major factor influencing the increase in applications is the ease and convenience of the new process. Clients can now apply for public assistance from any computer 24 hours a day, seven days a week. As a result, more individuals may submit applications based on the chance that they might receive assistance. The department's denial rate for applications has increased, indicating that more people are applying who are not eligible for benefits. From April 2004 to March 2005, before implementing the online application, the department denied 25.4% of public assistance applications; this rate was 34% from October 2006 to September 2007.

Another factor affecting the increase in applications is that some clients are submitting multiple applications, which creates extra workload. Between October 2006 and September 2007, 9% of clients submitted multiple applications within three months and 4% of clients submitted an additional application before the department finished evaluating their initial application.

Clients submit multiple applications for several reasons. Some may not apply for all eligible benefits on their initial application so they submit additional applications to apply for additional benefits. Clients may also submit another application if they do not get a quick response to their first application. Clients also may reapply if the department denies their initial application; they may now be more likely to do so because caseworkers no longer meet with such clients to explain the reason for their denial.

Additional technology enhancements are planned to better manage workload and assist clients

Although some of the technology enhancements the department planned to help manage workload and assist clients were not in place during the early stages of the program's redesign, the department is currently developing and implementing these changes. The department implemented automated scanning for faxed documents in some but not all of the sites that receive faxed information, designed a more user-friendly online application, and is in the process of clarifying the language in letters mailed to clients about their applications. The department also plans to expand online case information and better integrate data systems. However, the department does not have set timeframes for

[12] The department made the online application available statewide in April 2005.

finishing some of these improvements, and others will not be finished until the end of 2008.

The department is still using manual rather than automated scanning for faxed documents in many of its offices. A key part of the ACCESS system is that it maintains computer files of scanned documents rather than paper records. In this process, staff manually scan documents such as birth certificates and pay information into an electronic case file. While this is an improvement over the paper storage process used in the past, having staff manually scan documents submitted by fax is inefficient compared to automated scanning for faxed documents. Program workload is further increased because staff frequently ask clients to resubmit documents that staff cannot locate in the electronic files.

In practice, the program has stacks of documents waiting to be scanned and organized into electronic client files. In addition, some of the program's categories for filing documents electronically are very broad and electronic copies of all permanent records, such as a birth certificate and drivers' licenses, are placed into a single electronic file folder. As a result, staff have difficulty quickly locating information in the electronic files. [13] As clients may be denied public assistance if they do not provide specific documents within deadlines, clients frequently contact the call center to check on the status of their applications. If call center staff cannot locate the information because submitted documents have not yet been scanned into the system or cannot easily be found in client records, call center staff tell clients they have not received the information and should resubmit it, which compounds workload. Similarly, processing staff may send letters to clients stating they have not received documents needed to determine eligibility, which also causes clients to resubmit information.

The department has recently implemented automated scanning of faxed documents in nine of the 105 offices that receive faxes, including large offices in Miami, Tampa, and Orlando. The department plans to implement automated scanning statewide, but has no deadline to finish statewide implementation. The department is considering options for how to fund and implement this initiative. Department managers are aware that staff can have difficulty finding certain information in its electronic files and believe that automated scanning will help by freeing up staff resources to better organize information in electronic files. They also have plans to change how information is organized in the files, but do not have a deadline for this improvement.

The department recently launched a more user-friendly online application, but simplified paper applications for pregnant women remain a problem. The original online application was not user-friendly and the current process for pregnant women may result in delays in receiving prenatal care. While a new application, available in March 2008, addresses many of the problems with the original online application, additional improvements are needed and the department also needs to take steps to make it easier for pregnant women to apply for assistance.

The original online application directed clients to enter demographic, income, and assets information. The application allowed clients to view basic help boxes for each page, but the language in the application and help boxes was confusing to some clients. [14] Clients were also required to view lengthy material in help boxes to get help for a specific question. Clients who do not understand the application or how to fill it out contact the call center, increasing the program's workload.

The program's website also does not clearly inform pregnant women that they can immediately qualify for temporary Medicaid and also submit simplified paper applications at local county health departments or other selected locations, or that clients can download and print this simplified application. [15] With the simplified application the department can accept self-reported income and

[13] The department organizes files by the primary applicant, with information on all family members included in each file. The permanent records section can be complex because it includes birth certificates, driver's licenses, work or school IDs, attestations or other proof of citizenship, and other identifying documents for an entire family.

[14] For example, the application asks clients to list their "*liquid assets.*" The help box explains liquid assets as follows: "If you select YES for this question, you are saying that one or more members of your household own part or all of at least one liquid asset. A liquid asset is money, a checking or savings account, stocks, bonds, annuities, or any number of accounts that can be converted into cash. The screen lists most examples of liquid assets. If you or anyone else in the household has one or more of these assets, you need to select YES. If no one has any liquid assets, select NO."

[15] Pregnant women can obtain immediate, temporary Medicaid coverage for prenatal care by applying for presumptive eligibility at county health departments or other selected locations. However, they must still complete either a simplified or full Medicaid application to continue coverage throughout their pregnancies.

other information and forego the interview. [16] This expedites Medicaid eligibility determination to ensure that low-income pregnant women receive prenatal care in a timely manner. Pregnant women who are unaware of these expedited options and submit the full application online may delay their access to prenatal care, as the program spends an average of 19 days processing full Medicaid applications, while it processes the simplified applications within an average of five days.

The department recently implemented changes to partially address the need to clarify the online application and its instructions. In March 2008, the department released an improved online application with improved help boxes, simplified language, and an easier process for entering and changing information. The department also plans to allow pregnant women to complete and submit the simplified application online, but it has not yet set a timeframe for making this change. [17]

The department could further improve the new online application by providing images of routinely requested documents, such as Medicare cards and drivers' licenses, in the application screens to help clients better understand the information they must submit, and a description of how the application process works. These steps could reduce workload and call volume by informing clients when they should expect to hear from the department, the types of documents they will need to submit, and how long it should take the department to determine eligibility for the selected benefits. It also should establish a deadline for moving the simplified application link to the program's main web page to inform pregnant women of their application options and to better enable clients to download, print, and complete the simplified application.

The department is in the process of clarifying the language in letters mailed to clients. In 2007, the department began revising the wording in the standard letters it sends to clients. Department staff and stakeholders indicate that some clients have difficulty understanding the technical and legal language used in the standard letters that explain the types of documents clients must submit and whether their applications have been approved or denied. The department has revised its letters to simplify the language that explains case status to clients, but cannot make all desired changes because of limitations in its data system. To address these limitations, the department plans to contract with a vendor to reformat and further simplify the letters using new software. The department recently identified the needed funds but has not yet selected and contracted with a vendor to complete these programming changes.

The department plans to expand online case information by mid-2008. To provide clients with more information on the status of their applications and reduce call center workload, the department plans to offer a secure account as part of the ACCESS system by mid-2008. Currently, clients can review some basic case status information online, such as whether the department is evaluating their application or benefit amounts. However, clients must contact the call center to determine whether the department has received specific documents, the time and phone number for scheduled interviews if they misplace the agency's letter, the next steps for their case, or reasons their application was denied. These frequent calls increase call center volume.

The department is developing a "My Account" website that clients will be able use to view detailed case information online. This feature will allow clients to see a list of received and still needed documents, the benefits for which they have applied, and which benefits have been approved, denied, or are still under review. Clients will also be able to directly update or add to their application while it is being reviewed. Some community partner sites will also be able to view most of this same information so they can better assist clients.

Department administrators anticipate that the "My Account" feature will reduce call volume, since clients most frequently call for case status information. In addition, since clients will be able to review their case information, they may be less likely to submit multiple applications or duplicate documents, reducing workload for processors and scanners.

The department is developing a system to better integrate program data and expects to complete the new system by the end of 2008. The computer

[16] Pregnant women using the simplified application can only obtain Medicaid coverage for conditions related to their pregnancies. If they want additional assistance for themselves or their family, they must use the full online application.

[17] Placing the simplified pregnancy application online is part of a larger effort to revise the online application so that clients only answer questions needed to determine eligibility for the specific benefits requested.

program that electronically transfers the online application information into the eligibility determination data system is designed to interrupt the data transfer in certain circumstances. Field staff report that the computer program stops so frequently that many of them prefer to enter application data manually, although this can increase their workload.

The department is developing new programming to integrate application information with the eligibility determination data system. This new system will serve as a single data entry point for multiple data systems, thus eliminating manual data input and reducing the level of training staff need to use various data systems. The department completed the first phase of this system in September 2007 and expects to complete the system by the end of 2008.

Split responsibilities for helping clients apply for benefits make it difficult for clients to navigate the system and increase workload

While specializing staff functions for processing new applications and maintaining existing case files has improved productivity, dividing responsibilities for helping clients complete applications has made it more difficult for clients to navigate the application process. As part of the effort to move away from a social work to an eligibility determination model, the department split responsibilities for assisting clients between processing staff, who determine eligibility, and call center staff, who answer clients' questions about their applications. As clients no longer have assigned case workers to work with them and help ensure that they submit all required documentation needed for their application, clients frequently contact the call center with questions and can have difficulty receiving answers. Community partners and department staff told us that although they do not want to return to the old application process, the current division of duties between processing staff and the call center is not working as envisioned and has created additional work for staff. Appendix B shows the application process and the paths that clients must navigate between processing and call center staff.

Clients no longer have one department employee to help them with their application. Dividing responsibilities for helping clients between processing and call center staff has made it more difficult for clients to get needed assistance to complete the application process. In the past, a single case worker handled each application and could help the client understand and navigate the process. Now, clients can no longer call or visit a service center to speak directly with the person who is handling their applications. Instead, they must try to get their questions answered by whoever takes their calls in the call center.

This is especially problematic for elderly, disabled, illiterate, homeless, or mentally ill clients if they do not know how to use computers and do not have family or advocates to help them. These persons often need assistance completing applications, understanding the documentation required to prove eligibility, interpreting written notices, and checking the status of their cases.

While the department has established partnerships with community groups to give clients more locations to submit applications online and fax documents, these community partners have limited resources to offer assistance with completing applications and answering questions. Many of the community partners we interviewed said that because of their own limited staff resources, they frequently cannot help clients check their application status or obtain needed documents. Further, because community partners are not expected to know the eligibility rules for all of the state's public assistance programs, they cannot answer many client questions.

Clients overwhelm the call center and have difficulty getting their questions answered. The department expects clients to contact the call center if they have questions about their applications or benefits. The volume of calls is high and often beyond the capacity of the program's telephone system, resulting in clients' calls not being answered. Department data showed the call centers received an average of 882,690 calls per month from July through December 2007. The call center was able to answer only 37% of these calls. Over half of the calls (56%) were not answered and the clients received a busy signal and had to hang up and call back later. Clients abandoned the remaining 7% of the calls. [18]

[18] The department is trying to reduce call volume by working with entities who call most often to develop different methods to answer their questions. For example, medical providers can call many times a day to confirm Medicaid coverage for their clients, and the department is encouraging these providers to submit their questions using email instead; this reduces call center workload.

Clients also can receive inaccurate and inconsistent information when they do get through to call center staff. Staff reported that clients may get different responses to the same question based on how the client phrases the question. Staff also told us that the knowledge and expertise of the call center person who receives the call can vary. Providing inaccurate and conflicting information can create client confusion and additional calls to the call center. In an effort to address this problem, the department recently completed a 12-week training series on policies and procedures for call center staff to improve the accuracy of their responses.

In addition, as noted earlier, call center staff cannot always answer questions about case status due to delays in scanning and organizing documents or if scanning staff have not placed the information in the appropriate electronic folder. They may also have difficulty finding and interpreting notes made by processing staff in the electronic files. When the electronic case files are unclear, call center staff tell clients that they will email the processing staff who handled their application and the clients will need to wait for the processing staff to contact them. This can be frustrating to clients and can result in them resubmitting information, creating more workload for the program.

Reorganizing staff would help the program better serve clients and process applications. Reestablishing case managers for initial client applications would make the process easier for clients to navigate and reduce staff workload. It would also help resolve internal staff disputes in the program. Currently, processing and call center staff allege that staff shift responsibility for delays, errors, and poor customer service to each other. For example, processing staff complain that call center staff do not fully or accurately answer questions so that clients can accurately complete their applications. At the same time, call center staff complain that processing staff do not sufficiently document their actions or decisions in electronic case files, making it difficult for them to properly assist the clients.

Although department administrators expect technology improvements to sufficiently decrease client confusion and reduce staff work load, we believe that the department still needs to reassign staff responsibilities to fully address this situation. Giving processing staff full responsibility for initial application processing and support would help clarify responsibility and give clients a single point of contact regarding the status of their application. The department could shift staffing from the call center to its processing units, which would give staff more time to interact with clients. The call centers would be charged with answering clients' questions before they submit applications and with accepting client-reported changes after they begin receiving assistance, but would refer clients to their designated processing case manager for any questions regarding the status of their application.

Recommendations

While the department is planning several technology enhancements to address its customer service problems in the Economic Self-Sufficiency Program, additional changes are needed. Once these changes are made, the department should reassess its staffing levels to determine if the program's staffing is sufficient to manage its workload.

Additional technology and process changes would improve the application process and the program's ability to manage its workload. We recommend that the department make the changes described below.

- To reduce call center volume and better support clients, the department should revise the online application to add pictures of required documents, list the most frequently required documents for each benefit, and provide a more complete description of the application process to help clients understand how their eligibility will be determined and the length of time this could take.
- The department should encourage clients to complete an online screening tool before submitting an application by making this link more prominent on its website and highlighting the benefits of prescreening in its description of the application process. The screening tool should provide immediate electronic feedback to clients on the likelihood they will be eligible for each benefit applied. The department also should revise the screening tool to solicit more specific information and develop software to populate the application with this screening information, so that clients do not need to reenter information.

- To ensure pregnant women receive early prenatal care, the department should move its link for the simplified application to the program's main web page to better inform pregnant women of their application options and ensure that pregnant clients can easily download, print, and complete this application.
- To ensure that staff properly sort documentation into the correct electronic folders, the department should establish a deadline for creating more detailed electronic folders for organizing faxed documents. The department should also create more specific instructions for using these folders and train and monitor staff regarding correct document filing.

Reorganizing staff responsibilities would help decrease client confusion and reduce staff workload. We recommend that the department reassign staff responsibilities and amend certain components of its current organizational structure, as described below.

- For initial eligibility determination, the department should assign processing staff specific cases and designate these persons as the single point of contact for clients during eligibility determination. Establishing a case manager model for initial eligibility determination would increase accountability for completing eligibility determination in a timely manner and provide more responsive customer service. This change would also reduce workload by decreasing the amount of time staff spend learning and researching each client's situation, reducing the number of calls to the call center, and helping ensure that clients understand the reasons for any denial, which in turn may reduce the extent to which clients reapply when they are not eligible.
- Reassign a portion of staff from the call center to application processing units. Program staff reported that call center staff have the necessary training to assume processing duties. Call center staff should be assigned responsibility for answering general questions that cannot be answered by an automated response system. For example, call center staff should continue to answer questions about the different assistance programs and how clients should fill out the application as well as processing client-reported changes in household membership, income, and assets after initial benefit determinations.

The department should reassess program staffing levels. We recommend that once the department has implemented its planned technology improvements and our recommendations for additional improvements, it assess whether its workload exceeds its staffing capacity.

Agency Response

In accordance with the provisions of s. 11.51(5), *Florida Statutes,* a draft of our report was submitted to the Secretary of the Department of Children and Families for review and response. The Secretary's written response to this report is in Appendix C.

OPPAGA supports the Florida Legislature by providing evaluative research and objective analyses to promote government accountability and the efficient and effective use of public resources. This project was conducted in accordance with applicable evaluation standards. Copies of this report in print or alternate accessible format may be obtained by telephone (850/488-0021), by FAX (850/487-3804), in person, or by mail (OPPAGA Report Production, Claude Pepper Building, Room 312, 111 W. Madison St., Tallahassee, FL 32399-1475). Cover photo by Mark Foley.

Florida Monitor: www.oppaga.state.fl.us

Project supervised by Nancy Dufoe (850/487-9242)
Project conducted by Rae Hendlin (850/410-4795), Justin Graham (850/487-9241), LeNée Carroll, and Zachary Hunt
Becky Vickers, Staff Director (850/487-1316)
Gary R. VanLandingham, Ph.D., OPPAGA Director

Appendix A

The Department Significantly Changed the Application and Eligibility Determination Process When It Created ACCESS

The 2003 General Appropriations Act mandated that the department achieve significant savings in the Economic Self-Sufficiency Program, including eliminating a minimum of 375 FTEs in Fiscal Year 2003-04. The Legislature also directed the department to develop a plan to eliminate additional FTEs in subsequent fiscal years. To reduce costs and staffing needs, the department substantially revised the eligibility determination process. These changes affect how clients submit applications, complete their interviews, submit required documents, ask questions about their case, and report changes. Table A-1 compares the differences for clients from the old and ACCESS application processes.

Table A-1
The Department Significantly Changed the Application Process for Clients When It Created ACCESS

Activity	Old Application Process	ACCESS Application Process
Application	Clients visited a department office during regular business hours and submitted a request for assistance. The client received a future appointment date and time to return and complete an application.	Clients can directly apply from any computer at any location 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Clients can also visit a community partner site or any of the 81 application storefront offices for assistance.
Interview	Clients completed a face-to-face interview with their eligibility worker or an interview clerk when completing the application (second visit).	Clients generally complete the interview by phone.
Documents	Clients received a letter when submitting an application that listed needed documents, and eligibility staff explained this letter. Clients brought the required documents to the eligibility office during a return (third) visit.	Clients receive a letter from the program listing needed documents. Clients can mail or fax the documents to the program.
Questions	Clients could visit the eligibility office and wait to speak with their assigned eligibility staff member or try to call the staff member.	Clients call the customer call center. Some questions can be answered by automated responses or clients can speak with the next available call center representative.
Reported Changes	Clients brought their supporting documents to the eligibility office to report changes in address, household composition, income, and assets.	Clients can update their case file online, or report changes by phone with the next available call center representative.

Source: Department of Children and Families, Economic Self-Sufficiency Program and OPPAGA analysis.

The program also significantly changed how staff interact with clients and process applications. This includes changes in job duties, locations, case files, and client interaction. Table A-2 compares how staff organization and activities changed from the old model to the implementation of ACCESS.

Table A-2
The Department Significantly Changed Staff Organization and Activities When It Created ACCESS

Organization/Activity	Staff Organization and Activities Under Old Model	Staff Organization and Activities Under ACCESS
Duties	Each eligibility staff member completed interviews, answered client questions, determined eligibility, managed case changes and re-determined eligibility at required time intervals.	The program divided staff functions, so that different staff members manage documents, determine eligibility and conduct interviews, and answer client questions.
Locations	Eligibility staff had to be located in small offices to provide convenient access for clients.	Processors, case maintenance unit, and call center staff have been centralized into fewer offices and can complete their work for any case from any location.
Case Files	Case information, including applications, submitted documents, case notes, and official communications were stored in large paper files. When staff needed case information, the staff member had to retrieve the paper file. Staff from other offices could not view the file.	All files are electronic. When staff need case information, they can obtain the entire file quickly. Any staff member in any location can obtain any case file.
Client Interaction	Each eligibility staff member had assigned cases. Staff or their co-workers in the same locations interacted with the same clients over time and face-to-face. The program expected staff to have extensive interactions with clients.	No staff is permanently assigned a case. Staff in different locations interact with the same client for different aspects of the case. The program does not expect staff to spend a significant amount of time interacting with clients.

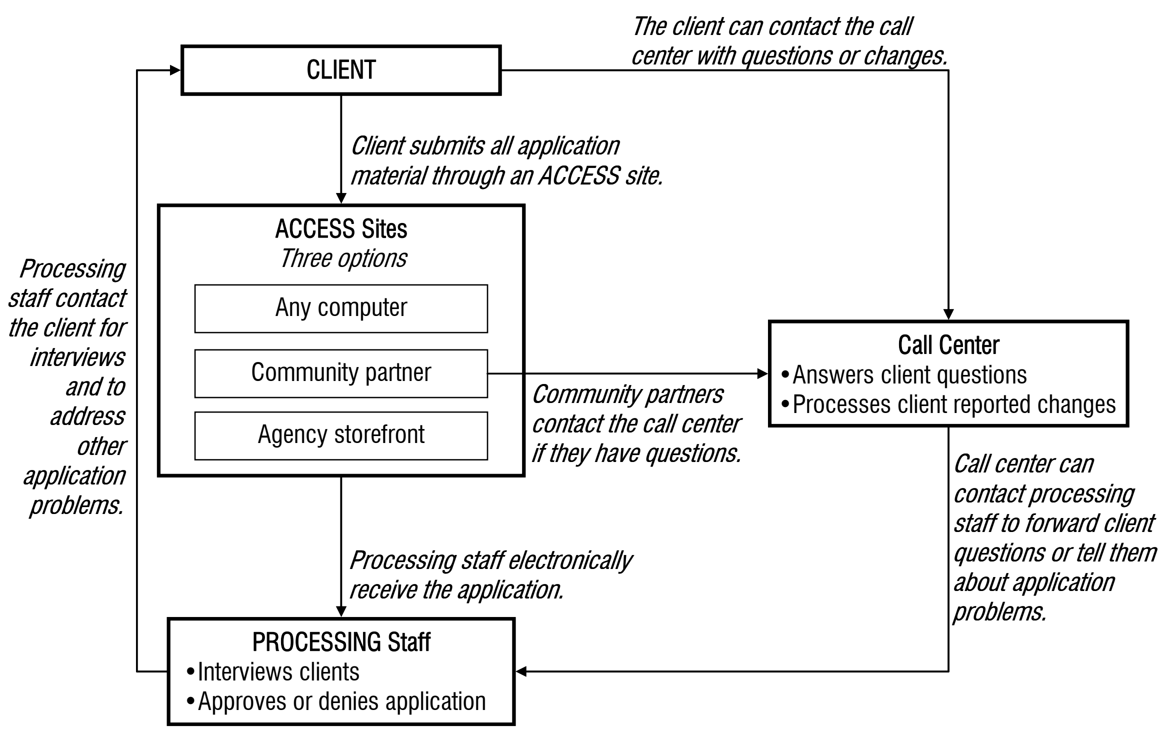
Source: Department of Children and Families, Economic Self-Sufficiency Program and OPPAGA analysis.

Appendix B

Split Responsibilities for Helping Clients Apply for Benefits Make It Difficult for Clients to Navigate the System

As a result of dividing responsibilities for client interaction between processing and call center staff and moving away from a case manager model, no individual staff member is responsible for assisting an individual client. The split in responsibilities has made it difficult for clients to navigate the system especially during the application process. Clients cannot easily get their questions answered or determine the status of their application. Table B-1 shows the application process and multiple paths that clients must navigate between processing and call center staff. Clients, community partners, as well as processor and call center staff report that the current division of duties is not working as envisioned and instead has created additional barriers for clients and work for staff.

Table B-1
Splitting Processor and Call Center Staff Responsibilities Made It Harder for Clients to Get Their Questions Answered



Source: Department of Children and Families, Economic Self-Sufficiency Program and OPPAGA analysis.

Appendix C

State of Florida
Department of Children and Families

Charlie Crist
Governor

Robert A. Butterworth
Secretary

March 7, 2008

Mr. Gary R. VanLandingham, Director
Office of Program Policy Analysis and
Government Accountability
111 West Madison Street, Room 312
Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Dear Mr. VanLandingham:

Thank you for your February 18 letter transmitting the original draft of the OPPAGA report on our ACCESS Program. The model has been nationally recognized as innovative and was awarded an "Innovations in American Government Award" by the Ash Institute at Harvard University. Your analysts did a good job understanding the new service delivery system however; modernization was not a shift from a social worker model to an eligibility model. That shift occurred nearly 30 years ago. Modernization changed Florida's program from an inefficient, staff intensive, eligibility model to an efficient one well supported by technology. The specialization of functions within the ACCESS model has enabled eligibility specialists to serve 57% more people each than in the old model. With the 43% reduction in ACCESS staff, returning to the old way of providing support for applicants would further inhibit our ability to process the work received. The Department fully supports the position that additional refinements are needed to better manage the increasing workload. While we have achieved a 72% increase in employee production from 2003 to 2007, we face difficulties managing increases in the application rate. It is for that reason, that we submitted and the Governor's budget supported a request for additional staff in the ACCESS program.

The Department is committed to providing quality customer service. We have included a customer satisfaction survey as part of our web application and consistently review results to ensure that satisfaction is increasing. As of December 2007, 93% of the 36,574 customers surveyed stated their experience completing the screens on the application was easy or fairly easy and 84% stated they did not need help in completing the application. Most clients stated the overall time it took them to complete the web application was less than 30 minutes. Even those that took over 60 minutes to complete the application are still saving many hours of their time not needing to make multiple trips to an eligibility office. As you know, state revenues have declined in recent years. This state fiscal year, the ACCESS program lost an additional $10.9 million in budget that was targeted for refinements to technology. The Department fully supports a recommendation from OPPAGA to provide funding to complete projects that would improve call center operations and allow clients to manage their accounts on-line.

1317 Winewood Boulevard, Tallahassee, Florida 32399-0700

Mission: Protect the Vulnerable, Promote Strong and Economically Self-Sufficient Families, and Advance Personal and Family Recovery and Resiliency

Mr. Gary R. VanLandingham
March 7, 2008
Page Two

We believe there are ways to improve call center operations without returning routine calls to processing staff. Our Director of Operational Support and the ACCESS Program Director are examining alternatives for process improvements including shifting of staff responsibilities. I have also asked them to examine the OPPAGA recommendations regarding our internet site and improvements to the web application that may further improve clients understanding of the application process. We will continue to prioritize all recommendations and implement those that have the greatest impact on service delivery and the clients we serve.

Should you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at your convenience, Should your staff have any questions, please have them contact Ms. Jennifer Lange, ACCESS Program Director at (850) 921-0253.

Sincerely,

Robert A. Butterworth
Secretary