

## Big Test Ahead for Rhode Island's Troubled Social Services System

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(TNS) — PROVIDENCE — There's a lot at stake with the state's new benefits computer system.

It has cost \$364 million so far. It's the update for multiple systems — some more than three decades old — that state leaders assert exacerbated inefficiencies, caused unacceptable delays and created a paper nightmare. It has promised to save the state money by catching residents no longer eligible for aid.

Yet nearly two and half months in, the RI Bridges system — more commonly known as the Unified Healthcare Infrastructure Project, or UHIP — has not appeared to live up to its hyped potential.

The problems began immediately after its mid-September launch: longer waits than before UHIP, delayed payments, lost personal documents, just to name a few. A federal agency demanded a corrective action plan, and told state officials that Rhode Island could face funding cuts if there weren't improvements.

House Oversight Committee Chairwoman Patrica Serpa, D-West Warwick, is concerned it "is getting worse instead of better," and set another hearing for Monday afternoon to discuss progress with the system, or lack thereof. There's also weekly media briefings and Gov. Gina Raimondo has weekly talks with the chief vendor and builder, Deloitte Consulting. She has pledged to keep holding Deloitte accountable.

The next big test occurs Thursday, Dec. 1 — the first day of the month is typically the busiest day every month for the system and field offices.

"We know the overall system is not working as well as it did before the launch, and that's something we expected, but I don't think we communicated that well," Department of Administration Director Michael DiBiase said in the most recent media briefing.

Using a whiteboard, he drew a diagram to show the "expected" drop in service during the transition to the new system — which industry experts have said could take three to six months.

DiBiase, Health and Human Services Secretary Elizabeth Roberts and Department of Human Services Director Melba Depeña Affigne assert that the system is moving in the right direction with Deloitte's help, which they characterized as "responsive." They also said some of the problems experienced on the first of October and November won't be repeated on Thursday; they've conducted dry runs this month to test the system before the busy day.

The corrective action plan given to the U.S. Food and Nutrition Service said all glitches should be resolved, the backlog of applications eliminated, and the nearly paperless system they desire achieved by the end of June.

"It is important as we walk through this transition period, and when we are trying to correct issues in the system, to remember where we expect to get, and why we have taken on this challenge on behalf of the people we serve," said Roberts.

Changes made in the lobby so far seem to have helped. On a recent day, 21 people waited in 34-degree weather for the doors to the Providence regional office to open at 8:30 a.m.

Tim Raymond, of Providence, leaned on the secure box outside that people can now use to drop off paperwork without waiting. He had paperwork with him for a replacement food-assistance card, but said he would rather "talk to a person" than just drop it off. It was his fourth time at the office.

A supervisor came outside to give documentation to some, and answer quick questions. Inside, two greeters talked to each person as soon as they cleared security checks, and directed them to the correct lines. Some were out in less than 10 minutes. On the busiest days since the system launched, some waited four or five hours, only to be told to come back another day.

Raymond was helped within 15 minutes, and thanked the staff as he left.

<http://www.govtech.com/computing/Big-Test-Ahead-for-Rhode-Islands-Troubled-Social-Services-System.html>