

**ACCESSNebraska Special Investigative Committee Hearing (LR 33)
July 17, 2015**

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Good afternoon, Senator Howard, and members of the LR 33 ACCESSNebraska Special Investigative Committee. I'm Courtney Phillips (C-o-u-r-t-n-e-y P-h-i-l-l-i-p-s), Chief Executive Officer of the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services.

Thank you for asking us to be here this afternoon. I value your interest and willingness to talk with us about your concerns and I know our team at the Lincoln Customer Service Center appreciated your time visiting with them this morning.

I am joined today by Felix Davidson, the Governor's Chief Operating Officer who has been assisting us, Calder Lynch, Director of Medicaid and Long-Term Care, and Tony Green, Acting Director of Children and Family Services.

I very much look forward to hearing the testimony of the other groups and individuals appearing today. We've spoken with many of them and we recognize the challenges they and those they serve have faced with the ACCESSNebraska system.

We've also spent considerable time meeting and talking to our staff who are on the front lines in the call centers and local offices. The insight we are gaining from these meetings are critical-- they are key in identifying where some of the biggest opportunities lie to make the needed improvements, and those efforts have begun.

To be sure, ACCESSNebraska has had and still has problems. I know you've heard that before. I know that you, and many of those who will be speaking later today, are tired of hearing about how things will soon get better. They want action and results, and so do we.

I can tell you I feel a great deal of support from the Governor's Office. In his State of the State, he said we need a culture in our state agencies that is people-centric. We need a system that cares for the entire person. He acknowledged there are people who will continue to need our help and that they should be served effectively and with dignity and respect. That's why we are here.

The history of ACCESSNebraska has been well documented and I've had the opportunity to talk with many of you about it. I think it is important to recognize that we are talking about a complex system of interrelated parts.

As I know many of you heard in your visit this morning, ACCESSNebraska encompasses more than just call centers. It also represents the work of hundreds of staff in dozens of local offices, scanning and mail operations, complex eligibility policy development, and significant IT systems. It was developed over the years and it will take time to make it right.

Our focus now is on stabilizing the operation and making measured improvements that will truly impact operations. Then we will work on our long-range goals.

Before we began making changes, we had to first develop the metrics by which we would measure success. That's why we built the ACCESSNebraska dashboard to measure and demonstrate publically how we're doing in an easy-to-understand format that is updated monthly on our website.

The metrics show that for the past four months, we've met the federal standard on timeliness for SNAP application processing timelines for both expedited and non-expedited applications. You'll also see that a year ago we weren't meeting either measurement.

We're also meeting the federal payment accuracy rate. But we aren't meeting two other SNAP performance metrics. The dashboard shows that the average call wait time at our Economic Assistance Customer Service Centers is too high, at just over 23 minutes. We have work to do.

The federal USDA Food and Nutrition Service has provided consultants for our SNAP program and they have been very helpful. They will release their next report on state data soon, and we expect to see improvements.

On the Medicaid side you'll see that the call wait times are much lower, just over 4 minutes. We're exceeding the federal standards for application timeliness and we have a nearly 99 percent accuracy rate on determining Medicaid eligibility. But that doesn't mean we do not face challenges there.

I know today you will continue to hear concerns regarding lost paperwork and challenges with the universal caseload model. We take those concerns seriously and want to work with our stakeholders to find the right solutions.

But these indicators are telling us that much of immediate effort should be focused on stabilizing the operations of the Economic Assistance side of ACCESSNebraska, and that's what we're doing.

With the help of Felix Davidson, the Governor's Chief Operating Officer, we have a renewed approach.

We've narrowed our focus to a Top 10 list. These ten issues have been identified as being barriers to an efficient operation. The list isn't extraordinary, but the activity is extraordinary. We have a cross-department team who's digging deep and making decisions based on research and data. We believe that concentrating on these ten items has the potential to make a dramatic improvement in our operations for both Economic Assistance and Medicaid.

They include:

1. A review of Mail Operations. We need to make sure that the mail is delivered, scanned and indexed into clients' files as quickly as possible. If this occurs, caseworkers can work cases sooner and the number of calls will decrease. We're piloting picking up the mail multiple times overnight to determine how we would shift staff to accomplish this. We're also

looking at better use of technology to tie documents to a case. Mail is significant because we can receive over 2,800 pieces a week in the ANDI Centers.

2. We are also conducting a review of our Interactive Voice Response (or IVR) call routing menus. We're making them more descriptive and shorter to improve the experience for our clients. In many cases, using the IVR can give clients the information they need without having to talk with a person, but we need to make sure the messages are easy to understand and use. New messages will remind people of the information they can access on the website, which will also help reduce the number of calls.
3. Another focus is the retention and recruitment of employees. We have to do a better job of getting the right people on the team and work to keep them. While we've been able to add 13 positions to the EA team, recruitment and retention is still an issue. We're looking at a number of issues, like developing career paths, reviewing training needs, analyzing exit data, and partnering with colleges to develop a better understanding of our work and needs.
4. We are also conducting necessary reviews of our policies to identify areas for improvement. We want to simplify processes where possible to result in a more efficient use of the workers' time, yet allow us to meet federal and state requirements. The Medicaid division did this when staff transitioned and they're sharing some of their best practices with EA.
5. We are spending a lot of time analyzing the top 10 reasons clients call to speak with a person. Most call to inquire about the benefits, check the status of their application, or see if we have received their documents. We've identified the full list by volume of calls and delving into each area to determine ways to provide this information to clients, possibly more proactively, and decreasing the number of calls.
6. We are also examining the amount of time that workers are spending on after-Call Work – We need to make sure we are accurately defining the work required after a call is completed and then analyze ways to standardize those activities. For example, we're considering adding search capabilities within the eligibility system N-FOCUS, we're reviewing case narratives requirements and looking into easier drop-down menus, and the possibility of purchasing a service to help with verification of resources.
7. From a communications perspective, we're also reviewing content on our website, application forms, and our correspondence to clients for readability and to improve understanding. If clients are unsure what something means, they might call with questions or provide inaccurate information. Our communications are key.
8. Another key area is workforce management. We need to identify staff to help with surge capacity on those days when work hits peak levels. For example, we're analyzing what work could move to support staff or alternate sites, like local offices, and what capabilities the phone system could offer in redirecting callers.
9. We also know that the number of work tasks on the Economic Assistance side continues to increase. We have to look at how the workers are receiving these work activities and how to streamline the work or add capacity to address these in the short term and better control them moving forward.

10. And finally, we're analyzing the data requested for reports to ensure we're getting the right information and providing it in a way that's understandable to help all of us better track our progress.

The work on these ten items is a priority and is occurring every day. We believe this phase holds significant promise in stabilizing and improving our operations in the short-term. As we work through these, we often find new opportunities for improvement. If we believe adding it to the mix will result in a dramatic improvement, we do it. In addition to the work, the cross-department team of project leads from program and operational areas meet weekly to provide input and updates, to discuss and problem solve.

On a daily basis, Economic Assistance representatives from the central administrative office, customer service centers and local offices meet in a morning huddle, both in person and via telephone, to discuss daily operations, which have resulted in small changes that cumulatively should make noticeable differences.

As I mentioned earlier, our priority right now is to make improvements in the ACCESSNebraska operations so everyone, including you, is comfortable with it. When that's stabilized we'll broaden our work to include long-term goals for the system as a whole. We are not yet at that point, but the push is here to make change happen.

We'll all know we're being successful when we see the lines move on our Dashboard metrics. Our calls will go down. Your calls will go down. Our clients and our partners will be less frustrated and our team's morale will be improved. Until then we have work to do and our team is committed.

Ask those who are experiencing problems to contact us. Continue to let us know when you hear concerns or good news. That input is important because I view us as partners in our efforts to improve.

Thank you for your support. I'm happy to answer any questions you have.