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Health and Human Services Committee
April 08, 2013

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The Committee on Health and Human Services met at 9:00 a.m. on Monday, April 8, 2013, in Room 1510 of the State Capitol, Lincoln, Nebraska, for the purpose of a briefing on ACCESSNebraska. Senators present: Kathy Campbell, Chairperson; Bob Krist, Vice Chairperson; Sue Crawford; Mike Gloor; Sara Howard; and Dan Watermeier. Senators absent: Tanya Cook.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: I think we'll go ahead and start. I expect several more committee members to come in. We'd like to welcome you to this briefing of the Health and Human Services Committee. It's handled as a briefing and not necessarily as a public hearing, so obviously we don't take any testimony. But really it is meant to be an exchange of information and dialogue between whoever we're having come to the briefing and the committee. And it helps us look at some issues that the Health and Human Services Committee has been following. I particularly want to welcome Senator Bolz today, who has a bill that we've been following for her and with her. And part of it has to do with ACCESSNebraska, although not totally, but we thought it might be a good idea to start. So, as is our custom, I'm going to have the senators introduce themselves, and then we'll proceed. So, Senator Watermeier, would you like to start?

SENATOR WATERMEIER: Dan Watermeier, Syracuse.

SENATOR HOWARD: Sara Howard, midtown Omaha.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Kathy Campbell, 25.

MICHELLE CHAFFEE: Michelle Chaffee, legal counsel.

SENATOR GLOOR: Mike Gloor, District 35, Grand Island.

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SENATOR CRAWFORD: Sue Crawford, District 45, eastern Sarpy County.

DIANE JOHNSON: And I'm Diane Johnson, the committee clerk.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: And our page today is...

SABRINA BUCKWALD: Sabrina Buckwald, Lincoln, Nebraska.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Thank you. So we want to welcome you. And we have a lot of visitors today, so we're glad to have you. With that, we'll have you start. And let's just do this right at the beginning, and then we don't have to worry about it. Can you introduce yourself, and state your name and spell it for the transcriber?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Sure, Senator. Good morning, members of the committee. I'm Thomas Pristow, T-h-o-m-a-s P-r-i-s-t-o-w. I'm the director of Children and Family Services for DHHS.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: And, Jill, do you want to go ahead?

JILL SCHRECK: Good morning. I'm Jill Schreck, J-i-l-l S-c-h-r-e-c-k. I'm the deputy director of Economic Assistance. Good morning.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: And Senator Krist has joined us and Senator Gloor. So we did introductions; didn't want to miss that. Thomas, I think you wanted to start off with some comments, and then I'm sure Jill has some...wants to explain the sheets in front of us. So you go right ahead.

THOMAS PRISTOW: (Exhibits 1-3) Yes. As I said, good morning, everyone. I do have some prepared remarks, and I'll go ahead through them. I was just going to paraphrase, but I think I'll go through these. It's about three pages, but I'll kind of be quick.

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ACCESSNebraska has been in full operational status for just over a year. We began with part of our on-line applications in September 2008. The last of the four customer service centers started taking calls in January of 2012, so just over 15 months. Since then, we've scanned over 16 million pieces of documentation, and we've answered over 2 million calls. I've been the director of CFS for over a year now and, as of last month and during that time, I've changed the management and structure of ACCESSNebraska. In this past July, I named Jill Schreck as deputy director of Economic Assistance, giving her oversight of the Economic Assistance field staff previously under the supervision of the service area administrators of Protection and Safety. This allowed service area administrators to focus on the protection, safety, and delineate the accountability process. Deputy Director Schreck spent time in the field, talking with the staff to get a good understanding of what is needed to help them do a better job to help serve the clients and citizens in a more effective and efficient manner. Changes as a result of this include: On November 19, 2012, clients who live in a nursing and assisted living facilities were given assigned workers in local offices; on December 3, 2012, workers in the customer service centers were permitted to process case following an interview if all required information has been received. Although this does keep the worker off the phone for a longer period of time, we do believe this is providing better customer service. The other thing that happened between November and December of '12 is that we took off the quota requirements of all our customer service workers. At that particular time we had quotas that they had to hit each day, so many calls they had to answer, so many applications they had to do, and we just felt that that was...just added pressure that...it wasn't...we didn't believe it was focusing on customer service. It was more about the numbers, and we needed to get away from that.

SENATOR GLOOR: What was the date of that, Thomas? When?

THOMAS PRISTOW: It's...

JILL SCHRECK: Gosh, I think it was in August...

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THOMAS PRISTOW: Hmm, no. Was it...

JILL SCHRECK: ...when we took the quotas off.

THOMAS PRISTOW: It was in August, I guess, we took the...

SENATOR GLOOR: Fall, late summer, fall, okay.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Yes, in the fall, sometime in the fall.

JILL SCHRECK: (Inaudible) sometime, yeah.

THOMAS PRISTOW: We experience technical difficulties almost on a weekly basis, which result in the phones or computers being down in the customer service centers or even statewide. Sometimes the solutions means working with and through external partners, like Windstream and other phone companies, or through the OCIO, which is the Office of the Chief Information Officer. A few hours of downtime have a significant impact on our ability to answer calls and process work tasks, such as income verification, address changes, and follow-up on significant information. Downtime may be a result of anything from a fiberoptic cable being cut or a statewide N-FOCUS dashboard outage that lasted the entire morning of March 8, 2013. We've also seen some great successes in the past year. The majority of client payments are now paid electronically. Aid to Dependent Children payments, for example, are paid to either a checking or savings account or a U.S. Bank ReliaCard. Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, SNAP, the previous food stamps, have been paid to EBT cards for several years now. As you also may know, the department has requested, and the Governor included in his recommendations for fiscal year '12 and '13, a \$3.3 million supplemental General Funds request for Economic Assistance. This need is due to the communication costs at the centers being higher than projected. On January 24, OCIO

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notified the department we had been overcharged a total of \$1.2 million going back to July '12. This notification came after the Governor submitted his budget recommendation. With this credit provided to DHHS, the department had reduced its request to \$2.1 million. The department has implemented changes into the communication process in the customer service centers that will not require this level of funding in future budgets. For example, we added a new Lincoln phone number for ACCESSNebraska for Lincoln callers to use instead of using the toll-free 800 number, and implementing that change has saved us \$1,000 a day, every business day. We're currently working on doing that in Omaha, but there's some technical difficulties, of course. But we hope to have that done in early summer, where we could have local phone call numbers in Omaha for our citizens there, which we would have even higher savings at that point. Transitioning the Medicaid eligibility determination process to the Division of Medicaid and Long Term Care is a significant change. The Lincoln and Lexington customer services centers, the Lincoln scanning center, and a number of local offices' staff will be transitioned to MLTC. CFS will continue to handle the Economic Assistance programs, such as SNAP, ADC, childcare, energy assistance, and others. The Scottsbluff and Fremont customer service centers, as well as the Omaha scanning center and many staff in our local offices will stay with CFS. This change will allow us to be more responsive to client needs for these complex programs. It has been a year that has presented challenges as well as opportunities for us. ACCESSNebraska is still relatively new, and we are learning how to adapt and make changes as necessary. I am committed to the success of ACCESSNebraska, as Jill Schreck is, and we are confident that we will see more successes as we continue down this path.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay, do you want to cover the handouts? And then we'll go to questions. Did you want to make comments, Jill, about the...

JILL SCHRECK: I'll wait for any questions. And I believe the handouts are several wait times that you will see in early March and our work tasks, number of calls received,

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number of calls answered, average wait time. And average wait time is the overall wait time between all the different queues. We have several queues that we have calls come in on. And then the number of work tasks, which is basically, you know, there's so many work tasks for each case, and so we do have numbers of tasks created and number of tasks completed.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Senator, one thing I just want to add. Last week we implemented a new change. We weren't seeing our call times change dramatically at all over the past number of months, even though we had made some significant changes. So, last week, Deputy Director Schreck instituted a process where we answer phone calls immediately, and then we have a 48-hour callback protocol. And our callback times have been...we have answered those callbacks in an appropriate manner, and our call wait times have dropped about nine minutes. So we're shifting and we're trying to make things a little bit different because what we were doing, even though all the changes we're making and all the shifts we're making in how we process, it just wasn't dropping the call wait times.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Two questions that I'd have, and then we'll start out with...I have received several e-mails about the 48-hour callback. And part of the problem to that is a person said, do I sit by my phone for 48 hours,...

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: ...and was very concerned because of job and having to leave for the job. And so the first question is: Does the person have some idea when you're going to call back in 48 hours?

JILL SCHRECK: In my directive to the staff, I asked them to ask for a requested time of return phone call, and that's noted. And we don't promise that we'll be able to get...call back at that time, but we will make every effort to do so. And I also heard some

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concerns from, like, community partners and people like that who might be assisting clients. And the direction is that, if they have the person there and they're waiting for assistance, that they transfer the call because certain calls will get transferred to a lead worker or supervisor to handle the call at that time and not do a callback.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay. And I know that Senator Gloor has some follow-up on that from a constituent. The second question I have is, with the announcement that two of the centers will go to Medicaid, so now will people have to fill out two applications?

JILL SCHRECK: Yes. As part of the Affordable Care Act, there is a separate application that will be (inaudible).

THOMAS PRISTOW: But that isn't on-line yet, Senator. I don't think that starts until January (inaudible).

JILL SCHRECK: Right. Officially, we have to be able to start...we can take them in October. But it officially starts January 1, 2014.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: So when will we go the two applications?

JILL SCHRECK: Well, we can start taking them in October.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: In October.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Some of the fear is that people will get lost here. I mean, they'll think, I've filled out this one, I'm good to go, I can get...if I need SNAP or I need some other categorical program, I'm going to be lost. And that's...how do we work towards ensuring that those people are not lost?

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JILL SCHRECK: Well, Medicaid/Long Term Care and me and my staff are working closely together on how we're going to do...handle those phone calls, how we can assist those clients when they call or come into a local office and how we do a soft transfer to the other unit. For a while, we'll pretty much be doing each other's work until we are ready to transition all the way where it's just Medicaid or just Economic Assistance.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: So if that application goes into Medicaid after October, the staff there will double check and say, oh, this person could be eligible?

JILL SCHRECK: We haven't determined exactly how we're going to do the process yet.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay.

JILL SCHRECK: But, you know, whenever possible, we'll try to alert the client that if they want to apply for more than just Medicaid they need to fill out a separate application. If they applied for Economic Assistance and they might be eligible for Medicaid, we will advise them.

THOMAS PRISTOW: From the...from our citizens' point of view, they don't know MLTC from CFS.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Right.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

THOMAS PRISTOW: They just see the state. We have to make this as seamless as possible so, you know, that they're not experiencing more difficulty, that they get their questions answered and their applications processed as quick as possible. This is a shift and it's a change. And is it going to be perfect on October 1? No. But we are

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committed to...I mean, the divisions are working together. The CEO has made that a huge priority for both Vivianne and I. And Jill is absolutely, with her team, on board with this, and we are making it...we will make it work. We're just...you know, this is all new ground for us.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay, I'm going to go...Senator Gloor, did you want to follow up on your constituent?

SENATOR GLOOR: Sure, thank you.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: And then I'll come back to Senator Krist.

SENATOR GLOOR: You know, let me start with a positive comment first. And this isn't to say that I have negative comments. I've just...I want to relay an experience that a constituent has gone through. But it is worth noting that the comment is staff are helpful and polite and courteous. So from a customer relations standpoint, when they can get somebody on the phone, their experience is, this person does care about me. So that's the lead-in to this.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Thank you, Senator.

SENATOR GLOOR: And I should also point out that the constituent and her parents, this really is a result of talking to her parents. The constituent is developmentally disabled, and so her parents are the ones who end up having to make the contacts and do the interviews. They're working on her behalf. They...this starts about the middle of February, where they get a notice for review of the SNAP recertification, and they submit an application on-line. Then there is a notice of an interview that ends up being sent out. Called the number, went through the steps outlined in the letter. After about a 10-minute wait, a live person came on to ask what was the reason for the call. Individual then transferred to the next available person. They waited a half an hour and the line

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went dead. Now it's 4:45 in the afternoon, and to try to reinstitute all this that close to 5:00 they decided was not worth doing, but within a day got a date of notice of a missed interview dated the same day that the telephone interview was attempted to be held. And, you know, it's like we are so efficient in sending out the notification that says, you missed your interview, but inefficient in being able to make it possible for the people to have that interview. A letter went to the department from the parent, trying to set up the call again and explaining that they were going to be out of the state for a period of time, don't have a cell phone, had to use somebody else's land line from out of town. Then, several days later, they get a notice that they had to resubmit an application for Medicaid so that it wouldn't be terminated. They called the department about three days...by now, they've gotten back into the state. They've called the department, waited about 40 minutes, had a telephone interview with a worker--their words; I've tried to lay this out in a chronological process--who was very pleasant, very helpful. The parent mentioned that the notice had been received, Medicaid had to be submitted, all asking for the same information on SNAP. The individual stated, we can't use the same information for SNAP as we can for Medicaid, so it has to all be done again. So they put together the packet. They did get notification, finally, that SNAP was reauthorized. Now they're going through all the process, trying to reverify Medicaid. They get an appointment set up for a telephone interview about the Medicaid application. We're now into the end of March. They called, never got to a live person, going through the rerouting on the phone, stayed on the line until it was disconnected about 30 minutes later. They were never given a real person to talk to, never given a chance to interact with somebody. They called again, later in the morning, after ten minutes didn't get a live person. The individual was again polite, tried to explain there was a new system in place, and explained how the new system was supposed to work, eventually ended up getting a phone call back. And the person that called them back said all the information they had supplied on-line was perfect, they were in good shape. And so that basically is saying that all the work that they went through on trying to connect with somebody on the phone probably wasn't necessary because the on-line application was perfect. And so that brings up my first question, which is: Why are we doing the telephone

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interviews? If we have an application that's okay, we've just put ourselves and this individual through a lot of waiting on the phone, the hassles that we have to put up with, with the complaints, when the application seemed to be...again, according to the constituent, the application was fine on-line. And these phone interviews don't make sense to me if we've got a good application that comes in. That's the first question. Why...and what reason is there that we can't take a perfectly good application that we already have and move that over and use it for other applications where it's appropriate, one generic application of some kind? That would seem to cut our workload in half or thirds for some of this. So, you know, I'm giving you the scenario they laid out to me. But it brings forward those two questions.

JILL SCHRECK: Well, currently we do have one application for all services, and that will change with the Affordable Care Act some...separate from Medicaid. But right now we do have one application where there's a paper on-line for all programs.

SENATOR GLOOR: But it has to be submitted twice, the same application.

JILL SCHRECK: Well, it should only have to be submitted once. Without looking at the case, I don't know if there was some additional information, something that changed in that family's life that maybe we needed additional information for the Medicaid, such as maybe income or something changed.

SENATOR GLOOR: Well, and I point out that they are developmentally disabled so that we understand that there's not likely to be dramatic life changes with this particular applicant.

JILL SCHRECK: Right, right. Yeah, and I can't speak to exactly what would have happened. I can tell you the staff, as we do quality control and things on cases, we do find sometimes that staff may not investigate far enough into what we have received on a client. But, you know, when we catch those situations, we advise the staff so that they

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will look into the case and, if everything is in, that we process at that time to save that phone call from that client or any delay. For the most part we do a really good job with that. And as far as the interviews, we do have an automated system that, if the interview does not show as completed in our system, even though the person may have attempted, the system automatically reads as not received, and that's why there's an automated notice sent out.

SENATOR GLOOR: That's not very good.

JILL SCHRECK: Yeah, it...yeah, and so...

SENATOR GLOOR: That's just...

JILL SCHRECK: The interviews, you know, with this new process that we just put in place last Thursday, if it's the interview, we are prioritizing those calls that we...you know, handle those as quickly as possible so that those notice of missed interview does not go out. But it does happen that those will go out if the person didn't call in or didn't get through for some reason.

SENATOR GLOOR: Well, and it's not calling in that the system is set up for, and I understand that. It's when people have tried to call in...

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR GLOOR: ...and, you know, the line is cut off. I mean, we're talking to parents of this individual here who are college educated, in one case, with graduate degrees. So these folks are pretty sophisticated individuals...

JILL SCHRECK: Yes, um-hum.

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SENATOR GLOOR: ...and also have huge credibility with me because I've known them for so many years.

JILL SCHRECK: Sure.

SENATOR GLOOR: They're not prone to inflate stories.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR GLOOR: And that's the reason why, of all the different conversations I've had, this is the one that strikes closest to home for me because it's all of the bad things we hear,...

JILL SCHRECK: Yeah.

SENATOR GLOOR: ...rolled up into one individual, unfortunately,...

JILL SCHRECK: Yeah.

SENATOR GLOOR: ...whose story I absolutely believe.

JILL SCHRECK: Sure, and I don't doubt their story either. And the purpose of the interviews is because a lot of times we have an additional question.

THOMAS PRISTOW: The phone interviews.

JILL SCHRECK: The phone interviews. Or even if they want to do a face to face, which is still an option, there are additional questions that we have to ask. And we go through the application with the client or their power of attorney or whoever it is that's handling their case, a family member, as example. We go through and ask additional questions

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so that if we can process at the time of the interview, we do so, or if we need to notify them of other verification information that needs to be sent in.

SENATOR GLOOR: So my question of you would be, going back to my, you know, business background, is...you always look for steps that appear to be important, and then in the final analysis decide, you know, maybe this was something that doesn't have any added value. And my question would be: Do these phone interviews have to be across the board, or do they have that added value? Are they causing us more problems than they're worth, adding to the workload, really not changing the outcomes? In both cases on this the application was clean, yet the hassle factor for this individual, for what were otherwise clean, on-line applications, we would have had...given their interaction with people was very positive from a personal standpoint and the interaction standpoint, this would have been a positive experience for these folks if they didn't have to be on the telephone. And that's where we seem to be tripping, time and time again. It's...we're insistent that we have to be and do much of this on the phone when, in fact, we seem to have it done pretty well on-line.

THOMAS PRISTOW: And I would defer to Jill on this. But given that...unless there's some requirement that we have to have some sort of verbal acknowledgement, I don't disagree that having that on-line and having that be vetted that way would certainly save a lot of time and effort.

SENATOR GLOOR: And understand, again, we're dealing with somebody whose circumstances in life, opportunity for...I mean, there's not the same level of opportunity we're going to see dramatic changes that would seem, to me, to change this application year to year to year, even some vetting on the applications to say, not worth our time and taxpayer money, worth our time and taxpayer money.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

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SENATOR GLOOR: And clearly this individual, I think, on-line applications would be enough, year to year to year.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Senator Krist.

SENATOR KRIST: I'm going to keep beating this dead horse but from a different perspective. And, not to pick on Kathy (phonetic), but if you'll notice Kathy (phonetic) in a wheelchair, she is never going to get out of that chair. Courtney Krist is never going to grow back the 22nd band on the 13th chromosome. The federal government has found a way to keep certification for the DD in the system on its tricare system. We don't go through it every year. We don't reevaluate it every year. Sometimes they call upon us and say, has anything changed. And I say, no, she hasn't grown back any part of the chromosome. To that point, we can do much better in streamlining that effort. The interview process that Senator Gloor brings up is the logistics part of it, and you need to deal with that. And I'm not going to pretend to try to solve your problem. But I still come back to those other 1-800 numbers that I call. Because they want my money, they're going to be very accommodating to tell me, your average wait time will be, or, you are not going to be answered today, or, we're going to call you back in 24 hours or 48 hours. I think you've gone in the right direction, going to a 48-hour callback, don't get me wrong. But Senator Campbell's point about when in 48 hours, how do I reach you in 48 hours, that's a huge factor for some folks. And then how do you tell, when you're talking to that person, that this is not an immediate problem, that I can put you on a 48-hour recall? Those are things, again, I don't pretend to solve your problem but, logistically, I think you need to think through it. The last thing I would say is it seems to me, from a personal perspective, in the hearings that we heard a year and a half ago, two years ago, we wanted everything to be automated as much as possible. And in Senator Gloor's case, it can be automated as much as possible, as long as there is a person who can logically get on-line and do all the things that we're asking them to do. And then there are those folks that need to talk to a real human being. So the trick, I think...and again, I'm not going to try to solve your problem. The trick, I think, in the fix

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here is to find out where that line is. If I could immediately identify someone who's calling in as, you've got to talk to a human being, as opposed to, all you need to do is fill in that, and then an immediate feedback that goes back to them to say, your form is perfect, you're done, thank you so much for what you've done, so.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Senator, if I may? The difference...no, it...all your points are absolutely well taken. And my...things that Jill and I worked on over this past year is to make sure that our staff are...they're social workers. They need to connect. Calling Cabela's or L.L.Bean, you're buying something. Here, we're dealing with emotional, trauma, an issue in folks's lives that are disruptive or they're really struggling. So having that type of connection is hugely important for us and to make sure that we don't...you know, it's not a business in that sense for us. It is extraordinarily important to...that Jill has worked over the past year with her team to make sure that we recapture that social work aspect of what we do because it was being lost based on the quotas that we had earlier, that I talked about, that we got rid of.

SENATOR KRIST: With your quotas, also I would recommend, now that you've gone to this 48-hour process, it needs to be statistically captured in the metrics. How many have I put on 48 hours? And at what time have I gotten back to them within that 48-hour period?

JILL SCHRECK: We are...through the direction to the staff, through our system, we have to narrate. So the direction to the staff was to narrate every time you spoke to a client, so that way, if you called in twice, I would know you called in twice and that's too many times; we need to just take care of Mr. Krist. So we are narrating that. I asked for...that we'd have, you know, a large percentage of our calls call back even on Friday, which would have been within 48 hours. It was early this morning, but from what I did hear from my field administrators is we are about 60 percent of returning calls within 24 hours. So I'm hoping by the end of today we will show 100 percent of those we've tried to reach.

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SENATOR KRIST: Good. That's good progress. Thank you.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay, well, now we'll go to Senator Howard.

SENATOR HOWARD: And, actually, I have a couple questions, but my first one is about the callbacks. I was reviewing some recommendations from February of last year, from the Customer Service Junkies, February 23, 2012, and they actually recommend to us to remove extra work queues such as callbacks, regardless of the timing queue, providing the option of a callback only as another work item to manage with an outbound call when we haven't been able to manage the inbound queue. So I'm wondering, why are we implementing a protocol that's in opposition to a recommendation?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Well, I'll start off, and then Jill can finish. What we're doing doesn't work. We were running 20-25 minute wait times. And we were...even though, with the changes that we talked about, we were still running high wait times. We have to do something to lessen that anxiety of folks and still provide the customer service. And this is a shift that we wanted to try and see if we could have better results and a better outcome.

JILL SCHRECK: I would say, through some of the changes we made the last year, such as if you call in at the time of interview and we have everything, we process at that time...so that was taking us a little bit longer. So the client or the staff person was off the phone a little bit longer. But we still weren't seeing...

THOMAS PRISTOW: ...whereas before...

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JILL SCHRECK: (Inaudible) back in.

THOMAS PRISTOW: ...it could go back into the queue and you get different people, different workers.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Now the one person takes it all the way through, which is a difference.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum, yes. And so we were seeing a high satisfaction with our clients as well as our staff. The staff felt good that, I helped this person, the case is done, they weren't going to have to wait any longer. So that was extending our wait times a little bit longer. However, we felt like this was a good approach to maybe settle both of those. We have a callback. I happen to run into one of the staff yesterday at a store, and she told me that she loved it because she was able to pull up the case in front of her before she called the person. Some of those situations where we have to call them back right away or, ideally, we send them to a lead or supervisor, is like SNAP expedite. We have to process those right away. So we recognize those up front and get them to somebody who will handle the calls while we have the person on the phone.

SENATOR HOWARD: And then what's our current staff-to-supervisor ratio?

JILL SCHRECK: It's typically 9 to 1.

SENATOR HOWARD: 9 to 1?

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR HOWARD: And then what is...is our training still 12 weeks?

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JILL SCHRECK: It's up to 16 weeks to do all the training and some hands-on involved with that.

SENATOR HOWARD: Are we still doing paper training? Are we using paper, or are we using computers for the training?

JILL SCHRECK: It's computers. There's a lab, a computer lab.

SENATOR HOWARD: And they no longer have the three-ring binders?

JILL SCHRECK: Some people that are comfortable with paper, you know, might have the three-ring binder, but for the most part it's electronic and we have training tools on-line for staff.

SENATOR HOWARD: Okay.

THOMAS PRISTOW: And they actually practice. I mean, they...that's the computer pieces that they're practicing, taking the calls, etcetera.

SENATOR HOWARD: Okay. And then, for my last question, I'd like to revisit a question that I asked you the last time you were here because we're still...or at least I am. I can't speak for my colleagues. I'm still getting a lot of constituent complaints and concerns about ACCESS (Nebraska), long wait times and inaccessibility. Can you answer the question now as to what you would need from us in order to make it work?

JILL SCHRECK: Well, I think some things...the change that we just put in place last week is helping with the wait time, so that is definitely something that we're, you know, using our...what's available to us and resources to do that. And it is working. I mean, it's two days into it, so it's a little early. But that is something that's been beneficial. We

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have also...are looking at shorter training and specializing a little bit more, so that will also help us with moving forward in the wait time and the lesser training time for staff.

SENATOR HOWARD: Even though the recommendations from last year had recommended a longer training time than you implemented?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Right, well, we have a different environment now than we did February of '12.

SENATOR HOWARD: Um-hum.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Medicaid is moving to MLTC; there's more opportunity for specialization and to trim down the training time a little bit, at least from our point of view.

SENATOR HOWARD: Thank you.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Question? Senator Bolz, do you have a question?

SENATOR BOLZ: Good morning. I have a few questions for you. The first question is that I find this number of unworked tasks a little bit concerning. Can you speak to what the unworked tasks are and how we're addressing those and how all of that impacts the client?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Go ahead.

JILL SCHRECK: The work tasks, some of them are, like, older ones where maybe we didn't get to but we have since addressed the issue with the client. So those are...and some are created in error, so we've been working through. We have a variety of ways that we're addressing work tasks. One is we have multiple lists that we have supervisors

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or designated staff working to get through the work tasks. And then we also have a work task day, which is on Thursdays, where we focus on certain work tasks, such as changed management, which a lot of those...we have a high number of those. Those are address changes, and sometimes people change addresses multiple times. Some of the work tasks are from when the N-FOCUS does a run for some kind of program or another, and then we see a larger dump of work tasks on about the 15th of the month. So typically, in any of our reports, you'll see that. So we are working...for the most part we're doing more work tasks than are created. It's getting to address some of those backlog. I think, for the most part, because I'm not hearing a lot of concerns from clients anymore, that I've been waiting as long as I used to wait, so I feel like we're doing a much better job of addressing the work tasks. Did that answer your question?

SENATOR BOLZ: It does, but I remain concerned.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR BOLZ: It seems like some of those work tasks could have a significant impact on clients. For example, if a work task was related to somebody's food stamp allotment and that wasn't correct and isn't getting corrected, they could be responsible for the...for being part of the payback, and I think that has a significant impact on clients. The related question is, you know, we have a significant amount of work tasks that are going undone, but I see, you know, somewhere between 60 and 80 percent of an occupancy rate. So we're not...what that...what those statistics are telling me, and you can clarify for me if I'm not on task here, but that you're not fully staffed and you have a backlog. Can you explain why that is?

JILL SCHRECK: The amount of staff available is...when we're fully staffed, that's if we have nobody on leave. And when ACCESSNebraska was built, and we're still continuing on this at this time, is that we allow for 20 percent of planned leave, such as planned vacation time, 10 percent of unplanned leave. So the administrators in the field,

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as much as possible, try to keep it within that 30 percent, where we have 70 percent staffed of our existing staff. So that's what the number represents is, of the staff that are hired and on board, that we would have...70 percent is our ideal number to have working every day. But sometimes unplanned leave might be a sick child, a family emergency, something comes up. And sometimes that 10 percent might go over. But the 20 percent, the administrators do a really good job of keeping that in line of planned leave, and that's across the state.

SENATOR BOLZ: Just a couple more questions, if I can have your patience? Can you tell me how that will be impacted by this change to moving workers over to the Medicaid Division?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Yeah, I'll start and you can finish. We're working with the Medicaid Division. The number of workers that are moving over there was based on a percentage of staff that does Medicaid just for us now, although all our staff do all the programs. We...I don't know if you're familiar with the term "random moment timers." That's how we get our federal dollars. We took an average of that over a period of time, and it was 40 percent for Medicaid,...

JILL SCHRECK: Forty percent, um-hum.

THOMAS PRISTOW: ...forty percent of any given time any of our staff are working on Medicaid. That number of staff is going to be moving over to MLTC. So as that...those staff move over, we believe that...and again, we're supporting MLTC and making sure that they have all the resources they need to do their job. We also, we believe, will "depressure" us a little bit because we won't be doing Medicaid anymore. We'll just be doing our SNAP and energy and etcetera. So we believe, as this sorts out over the next couple months, that we will have some better outcomes, or at least we'll be able to track it better to see exactly what's going on.

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JILL SCHRECK: I would also say, with the Affordable Care Act and Medicaid, that moving over to Medicaid/Long Term Care the processing, it will allow us to align some of our other programs that we might be asking certain things on an application because it's a Medicaid requirement but necessarily for SNAP. So our policy unit is looking at ways that we can align and simplify some of our processes because now we'll just have non-Medicaid programs.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Senator Bolz, I'm going to go to Senator Crawford so everybody gets a first chance, and then we'll go to second-round questions. Senator Crawford.

SENATOR CRAWFORD: Thank you. I just wanted to come back to Senator Gloor's question and ask what information is required to be on the phone, come back to this question of how much could we get less wait time if we're able to get information through the on-line application? I mean, do we need to talk to every single applicant on the phone, or is there something you would need from us in terms of statue change to make it so you didn't have to talk to every single person on the phone or...so I want to come back to that question of why do we need to talk to every single person on the phone.

JILL SCHRECK: We have some federal requirements, and I wouldn't be able to outline for you right now.

SENATOR CRAWFORD: Okay.

JILL SCHRECK: But that...our feds would want us to talk to the individual, plus if we have to verify any information that they put on the application or to ask for additional information, such as we might have got...received an interface from another entity, such as Department of Labor, for unemployment. And if that wasn't disclosed by the client--they may have forgotten or it was a recent situation--then we have to have the

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opportunity to ask the client about that situation. We have to interface with Social Security, new wage hire, so those kind of things come up and that's an opportunity for us to go over those questions with a client.

SENATOR CRAWFORD: So if the client's...their case comes up on a screen, you'd seem some flags of certain things that need to be checked or verified. Now so are there any cases that can go through without a call?

JILL SCHRECK: There are some. I'd have to get you a list.

SENATOR CRAWFORD: Okay.

JILL SCHRECK: But we're also looking at ways to simplify our interactive voice response, IVR, to see what more we can do with the phone systems so if they call in, that they can do some self-help, just like they do on-line. So we're working with our community support specialists who work with all of our community partners to give us some suggestions on changing that up-front IVR so that we can maybe eliminate some of those calls and clients can get through and also so that they can be directed to the right person more quickly and, you know, that we have that information in front of us when they call us.

SENATOR CRAWFORD: Thank you.

JILL SCHRECK: You're welcome.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: I'm going to go back to a comment, Thomas, that you made at the beginning of the comments, and that was that you experienced...the system experiences technical difficulty weekly. What are we doing about that?

THOMAS PRISTOW: Well, Senator, that's a...I'll let...Jill knows these firsthand, so I'll let

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her talk to that.

JILL SCHRECK: On a regular basis we have some situation that seems to occur where, you know, either a local phone company or our computer system or through OCIO something happens with our phone system that we drop calls. Might be 4:00, something happens and we lose all calls, or maybe in one customer service center we lose all calls. As an example that Thomas provided, on March 8, it was a combination, and it was statewide. It wasn't just ACCESSNebraska. It was all programs from 7:45 a.m. to 12:30. We couldn't...we could take some calls in, and we just took messages. And we called them back when certain staff could get access through another little process we call Citrix. But for the most part, we couldn't. The other situation Thomas mentioned was a fiberoptic cable cut. I think it was construction. It was out of our control. Lexington: totally down. It was a (inaudible).

THOMAS PRISTOW: Those are major. But even we have...you know, I'll get an e-mail from Jill weekly that says, you know, we're offline for 45 minutes because of X or something. I mean, not as dramatic, like six hours. But even that 30-minute offline issue, where all the calls in Lincoln just get...just are done, just completely offline, and then everybody has to call back again, I mean, that's extraordinarily frustrating. And Jill's new best friend is OCIO and Windstream.

JILL SCHRECK: (Laugh) We talk a lot. We are tracking what kind of problems we're experiencing because it is a variety of things. But I do have regular contact with OCIO, regular meetings with them to discuss the issues. And I know they're in regular contact with Windstream, which is, you know, the biggest piece of what they do. So it is...I mean, those dropped calls, sometimes it is because of a technical issue and not because of staff, and that does hurt how people look at ACCESSNebraska.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: So it's not an internal technical problem? It's all...

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JILL SCHRECK: No, sometimes it can be, you know,...

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Right.

JILL SCHRECK: ...depending on how we transfer the call and if the person doesn't pick up immediately when that call is being transferred to them. I know one situation that I know was ongoing was the staff person hangs up with the call, and we have what's called wrap-up time so they can finish what was...you know, narrate what's on the case or process the case. And they would get another call immediately when the system shouldn't have allowed for that to happen, so then that throws off the client. And if they don't pick up the call right away because they're trying to just finish up this one last thing, then they'd lose the customer.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: And I hear you. I am worried though, when we go to the fact that somebody is going to have to fill out two applications and work with this, it seems to me that the technical problems do have to be addressed. And if they are external to that, what is it? If it's the system that we bought, what does that mean? I mean, that would concern me that you're talking weekly you're having these.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: It's one thing in our own private business where we'd have that, but not weekly.

JILL SCHRECK: Right, yeah.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: I mean, that's a concern, I have to be honest with you, because that just throws this whole system off. Senator Krist, do you have a follow-up by now?

SENATOR KRIST: I have a question, but I have a comment also, regarding this subject

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matter that we just talked about. Jodi Fenner sends out notifications of things that have happened in BSDC because we got a black eye with BSDC. Are...your customer service, in terms of the clients, gets fed back through their representatives. When it becomes critical and it's a half a day down, maybe just a quick all-call to senators saying, our system has been down, if you receive. That will help us answer some of those calls and we can be part of your screen, if you will, to help you in that way.

THOMAS PRISTOW: That's a good point, Senator. Thank you.

SENATOR KRIST: The...okay, then my question is...the worst possible outcome from not getting through to you or not doing what the client needs to do is cut off the services. That's the worst possible outcome. There are people out there that can't survive without the support that they get from the state. My daughter's caseworker, Abby Smith, in Omaha does a wonderful job of starting three to four months out because she knows I'm not responsive in many cases for different reasons. But she starts a few months out. Are we starting as far back as we can, notifying people, you're going to drop dead on the 30th of this date? Can we do that, 90 days prior, to give some time in there, or are we saying, you're within 30 days? Is that the first notification they get?

JILL SCHRECK: We do give notification, and now I'm drawing a blank on if it's 20 or 30 days, so that people have time to apply, at least 30 days to apply for benefits. And if they don't, you know, they can...and if their benefits do get cut off because we don't receive it, they still have an opportunity to reapply. And if we can backdate it, if our regulations allow for it, we'll backdate it.

SENATOR KRIST: Most of the comments I have gotten that are devastating have nothing to do with customer service. They have...within the cutoff of the service itself. So the further out we can afford that notification...and I know they should know, but that's...

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THOMAS PRISTOW: Regardless, we should...

SENATOR KRIST: Yeah, so that would be enough recommendation.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: I'm going to go back to finish up with Senator Bolz in a minute, but we have a lot of the senators' staff visiting today for the briefing. When we get constituent e-mails or phone calls about the system, who do you want us to send that e-mail to or make that? Because the staff, it would be helpful for everybody if we knew. What would you like us to do?

JILL SCHRECK: Well, you can send them to me. I will redirect to somebody who might be in their area to assist them, but you can start with me.

THOMAS PRISTOW: And I'd like to, if it's not too much of a bother, be cc'd on those, so to both Jill and I.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay. Okay, so we'll finish up with Senator Bolz's last question.

SENATOR BOLZ: I just...the term "soft transfer," I'm afraid that doesn't mean anything to me. Could you just explain to me what a soft transfer is?

JILL SCHRECK: Whatever we can do to help the client when they talk to...whether they start with us or they go to Medicaid, Medicaid or us will each assist as much as we can. As Thomas mentioned, a lot of the staff is going to Medicaid, our current staff, so they already know Economic Assistance programs. So both Medicaid and Economic Assistance is committed to helping that client at that time. At some point, Medicaid will just handle Medicaid. But for many months ahead, we expect that we will both be working with the client to assist them and process their case, and there will be training going on. When the opportunity comes that we have done what we can on Economic Assistance side and they need to be assisted by Medicaid, we're working with Medicaid

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to devise a system or process, you might say, to make it basically a soft transfer to...

THOMAS PRISTOW: We don't want them to exit the system, then have to come back in.

JILL SCHRECK: Right.

THOMAS PRISTOW: We want to be able to keep them in the system and soft transfer them over. We just haven't figured that out yet.

SENATOR BOLZ: Meaning, they'll stay on the phone?

JILL SCHRECK: They'll stay on the phone or have somebody that will call them directly back. Again, we're figuring out how that's going to work, but we want it to be as least evasive to the client as possible.

SENATOR BOLZ: I appreciate the intention to make it as least evasive as possible for the client, but I think that transfer is particularly important.

THOMAS PRISTOW: It is, Senator.

JILL SCHRECK: It is, it is.

THOMAS PRISTOW: I mean, it is, especially with the ACA and the shift. It's going to be...that piece is...Jill and her team and Medicaid is spending a lot of time making sure that we can do the best we can with that.

JILL SCHRECK: Um-hum.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: Okay, any last questions? Thanks very much for coming for the

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briefing. And I guess what I'd like to see is, as you proceed with some of the changes you've talked about today, Jill or Thomas, if you could sort of give us an e-mail update,...

THOMAS PRISTOW: Absolutely.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: ...as we go along here because part of our problem, I think, is the fact that we're following this issue. But someone, here and there, we have a bill, we have a hearing. But if we could sort of have some...an ongoing, regular, this is how it's working, so forth, would help us.

THOMAS PRISTOW: Senator, if I may? Other than Senator Krist's idea of letting you...every...all the senators know when there's an outage or something, I think what I'd like to do is an every-other-week update to you on where we are with what's going on, if that's all right.

SENATOR CAMPBELL: That would be great, and we'll make sure that it gets out, on to the staff and senators. With that, we will close our briefing for today and thank everyone for coming. Thank you, Senator Bolz, for joining us.

SENATOR BOLZ: Thanks for having me.