

Editorial, 4/28: It's NO ACCESSNebraska

10 HOURS AGO • BY THE JOURNAL STAR EDITORIAL BOARD

Back in 2011, as the Department of Health and Human Services was phasing in ACCESSNebraska, former police officer Ed Mischler related his experience trying to find assistance for his father, who had a stroke and whose care was going to cost \$6,000 a month.

Mischler completed and turned in all the paperwork. Then he was told HHS never received the material and he would have to start over.

State officials promised that improvements were being made. In a Local View, HHS officials said they had “owned up” to the problems. They were working hard to fix the problems. “We’re already seeing results,” they said.

That was the start of a pattern that continued year after year in a reform effort that eliminated field offices and replaced them with call centers and online connections.

Individual Nebraskans and advocacy organizations told of long wait times on hold, lost forms, never being able to talk to the same person twice.

In 2012 former Sen. Annette Dubas told of a 92-year-old Nebraskan who applied for help after she had almost exhausted her \$65,000 nest egg. The case dragged on for months in a fiasco of repeat phone calls and lost forms.

At the end of 2013 the Legislature’s Performance Audit Committee said the department “failed dramatically” to reach its goals and exhibited “a very high level of program dysfunction.”

There was a time before ACCESSNebraska when Nebraska was accustomed to winning bonuses from the federal government for accuracy in providing benefits under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

That stopped with the new system. The problems persist. State government was warned this year it could lose \$17 million in federal funds if it doesn’t get on the stick and do a better job of processing SNAP applications.

Hope of improvement was renewed when Gov. Pete Ricketts took office. In a move for greater transparency, the department is now putting monthly reports on the system’s performance online at accessnebraska.ne.gov.

Results are imperative.

Long before there were computers, the Internet and even telephones there was an old expression: “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.”

Some Nebraskans have been referring to the system as “NO ACCESSNebraska” for years now. The system is one of the messes that Ricketts inherited when he took office. It’s going to take more than words to quiet the critics. Get it fixed.

