

The Bastrop County Emergency Food Pantry is feeling the burn from problems with a new automated state human services system. Since the Texas Health and Human Services Commission implemented the first phase of the system in January, the food pantry's client load has increased noticeably, according to pantry officials.

The next phase, which would include most of Bastrop County, has been put on hold until technical and operation problems have been resolved, HHSC officials announced Wednesday.

But some Bastrop County Food Pantry clients who have tried to use call-in or online services to apply for or track benefits have found themselves ensnared in a system fraught with problems.

"They're very confused and very frustrated," said Martha Chabot, emergency food assistance coordinator with the Bastrop County pantry. "They can't get a consistent answer or they get no response at all."

The automated system, unveiled by HHSC in January, was designed to improve access to food stamps, Medicaid and other state services. Using the system, clients can apply for and track benefits over the telephone or online instead of having to go to an HHSC office and meet with a caseworker.

But the system, which currently runs through three privately owned call centers (a fourth is scheduled to open this summer), has not had a smooth start. Technical problems, staffing shortages and poor training have resulted in delayed services to clients and caused thousands of Texas children to lose state health insurance benefits.

"Every time they call they're talking to someone different and getting a different answer every time," Chabot said.

"It's taking six to eight weeks to get a response before they even get their appointment made," Chabot added. "After the appointment it's taking another six to eight weeks to get the benefits."

And clients who are waiting on food stamp assistance or who have had to shift limited financial resources to medical care while waiting for CHIP benefits are turning to the food pantry for extra help.

"We saw 95 emergency families in March," said food pantry Director Tresha Sanders-Silva. "This time last year we saw about 60 families."

Emergency clients are those who need food now. The pantry has enough resources to provide a week's worth of meals to emergency clients while they get back on their feet, and clients who need extra assistance are helped on a case-by-case basis.

But because resources are being stretched, the pantry can only provide a week's worth of food every three weeks, said Sanders-Silva.

"The bottom line is that the phone system is in crisis which causes crises for the families that use those services," she said. "And that puts an additional strain on the local agencies that serve those families."

But even when the system works the way it is intended, local agencies will still feel extra pressure, Sanders-Silva said. The shift to private-sector call centers means many HHSC employees will lose their jobs. Many already have, including some local HHSC employees, Sanders-Silva said.

"Agencies like ours will be filling those gaps because we've built relationships with our clients," she said.

The gaps the food pantry has been filling include providing Internet access, walking clients through the online system and assisting those who have difficulty with call-in access.

David Weber at Computer Tech Solutions donated a computer system to the pantry for online access. Without the donation the pantry would not have been able to provide that service because it cannot afford to purchase a computer, and the state does not provide funding for the extra burden local agencies are taking on, Sanders-Silva said.

With the automated system on hold for at least 30 days, pantry officials are wary about the future. The food pantry's client load continues to increase, and with school out for the summer, the pantry will also have to provide food for some of the children who receive free lunches from the school district.

"Our doors are going to spill open," Sanders-Silva said.

But HHSC officials remain optimistic about the new system, which will be reviewed in 30 days and could be rolled out to the rest of the state by the end of the year.

"The new system has worked well for many Texas consumers," HHSC Executive Commissioner Albert Hawkin said. "We will not roll out if we are not absolutely confident that we're ready. We will closely monitor our progress and adjust as needed to ensure a smooth transaction to a better, more cost effective system."