

## Counties seek upgrade to ‘Oregon Trail’ era software for key social services



Minnesota Commissioner of Information Technology Tarek Tames speaks at the Association of Minnesota Counties legislative conference on Wednesday. Behind Tames, on the screen is a key lobbying effort for the association — which is to update a decades-old human services computer system that counties use.

Peter Cox | MPR News

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To sign people for food assistance or subsidized health care coverage, many Minnesota county workers spend hours entering and reentering data by hand into software launched almost four decades ago.

They toggle around using computer keys rather than a mouse to avoid errors or software crashes. Some keep a pen and paper close by to verify the information they submit.

County leaders say the technology is slow and inefficient. And it causes errors that can lead to improper payments.

This year, they’re urging state lawmakers for an upgrade.

“It is slow. It isn't always accurate. It requires a lot of double checks and work arounds, and it's costing taxpayers a lot of money,” Scott County Commissioner Barb Weckman Brekke told MPR News. “We think this is a year to invest to really get us going on a plan for the future so that we can do this work better.”

Impending changes to requirements on states and counties that administer federal health care and food assistance programs are fueling a sense of urgency to redo their technology. Without that step, county officials say they'll face additional demands from the federal government that will take more employees and more time to manage.

The cost for staffing could come at the expense of other county services, such as snowplowing frequency or library hours. Or it could be borne by taxpayers in steeper property tax rates. That's after homeowners around the state saw property taxes surge this year.

"I am very fearful that next year will also be historic if we don't do something about this," said Matt Hilgart with the Association of Minnesota Counties.

While other issues have touched off debates in the narrowly-split Legislature about how to divvy up Minnesota's projected budget surplus, technology upgrades for counties have garnered broad bipartisan support.

Legislative leaders and Gov. Tim Walz are coalescing around the goal of upgrading IT software that counties use to sign people up for Medical Assistance, that's Minnesota's version of Medicaid. They also want tech fixes for SNAP, which is food assistance. The human services software is also used for child protection cases.

"The state has sort of neglected investment in this, the basic infrastructure that we expect counties to use to implement a lot of these social safety programs that we expect counties to administer," House Republican Caucus Leader Harry Niska, of Ramsey, said. "If we're going to put burdens on our counties, we have to give them the tools that they need in order to be able to administer those programs."

With some of the changes coming from the federal law that Republicans call the "One Big Beautiful Bill," county officials said it's important that they have adequate software to comply with new requirements for public benefits programs.

As part of that legislation, Congress added work requirements for people on Medicaid who don't have disabilities. Eligibility checks need to happen every six months — more often than the annual check in that happens now.

Counties will also get half the reimbursement rate they currently see for administering services. The state could get asked to pay more for SNAP and Medical Assistance depending on its error rate.

The upgrades are expected to cost many millions of dollars. While that is a big ask in a non-budget year, county and legislative leaders say it's worth it.

They said there could be financial match funding that could come to the state if they make these upgrades. And they note that the current system is really slow and inefficient — so they could save time and money by making the change. Legislative leaders also view the upgrade as a potential anti-fraud measure. Bringing the tech into this century could make it less vulnerable to fraudsters.

“The goal should be to prevent fraud before it happens, and getting these systems into this century,” House DFL Leader Zack Stephenson, of Coon Rapids, said. “Getting them out of the Oregon Trail era and into the modern day is a great way to do that.”

County commissioners did a walkthrough for members of the House Taxes Committee last week. Rep. Wayne Johnson, a Republican from Cottage Grove, said he tried using the software in his county and ended up walking away.

“I went and pretended I got hired at Washington County, and sat down and for this, and I said, ‘That's it. I quit,’” Johnson said. “After the first page I walked out, it's like, I'm done. It's just unbelievable what you have to go through.”

The House Ways and Means Committee will get a similar walkthrough Monday morning, along with an ask from counties for a tech refresh.

*MPR News reporter Peter Cox contributed to this report.*