

OUR VIEW

Tale of a flop at the Oregon Employment Department

The more you know about the failure to update the Oregon Employment Department’s computer system the more frustrating it becomes. It has had the money. It has lacked the leadership, organizational stability and technical expertise to pull it off.

The Employment Department has scrambled to process more than 600,000 unemployment claims since the pandemic hit. It has not kept up. It has hired hundreds of new employees, opened a new center, started up a new hotline and more. Still, it has not kept up. And the department’s computer system has been a powerful obstacle.

So what went wrong? The Legislative Fiscal Office put out a seven-page report Friday. It reads like a government horror story, though we can’t recommend reading it for fun.

The department’s computer system was developed in 1993. Yes, it’s that old. Old

technology can work. It’s just not as flexible. The system relies on an old computer language called COBOL. It can be hard to find people in information technology who know it. The task of reprogramming the system was so daunting, the department waived what’s known as the waiting week so people could get unemployment benefits sooner after initially saying it wasn’t going to do that.

The department did have the money to start updating the system — in 2009.

In the wake of the Great Recession of 2008, the federal government gave the department \$85.6 million in what are commonly called modernization funds. The department kicked off several information technology projects during the 2009-11 biennium. It’s one thing to start projects. It’s quite another to carry them out effectively.

In the 2011-13 biennium, the Oregon Secretary of State’s Office released an

audit of the problems with the department’s computer system. The system was too difficult to update. And many changes had to be manually entered in the system. Those problems led to about \$56 million in overpayment of unemployment benefits in 2010 and 2011. So it is not as if the problems with the department’s system had not been publicized.

The Employment Department’s next budget request was oddly for things other than the benefit information system. And even those projects were then put on hold, delayed or stopped. The agency’s chief information officer resigned. The resignation was at about the same time an internal audit of the department’s information technology department criticized it for a deficient structure. Many projects were even being undertaken without required approval from the state’s chief information officer.

The resignation is part of a pattern of turnover of key staff — information technology project members and agency leadership — that repeats again and again, even including this year. That has made progress and prioritization difficult. You can see it in the agency’s next budget request in 2012. Even after the audit, the next request was again for technology projects other than the benefit system.

In 2013, Cover Oregon failed. That was the health insurance exchange website flop that cost the state about \$300 million. That incident was not related to the employment department. The failure rippled through state government, though, leading to a needed, new heightened oversight of information technology projects. The employment department continued to have a hard time moving forward because of more leadership changes. To make matters worse, the department had a security breach in 2014

that led to the release of the confidential information of 800,000 Oregonians.

We could go on. But you get the idea. As we said, the money has been available. The agency has lacked the leadership, organizational stability and technical expertise to upgrade its systems. Does it have it now? We hope so.

New computers would not have solved all the department’s problems. Even states with updated unemployment computer systems have labored with the spike in unemployment claims from the pandemic. But it has made Oregon’s situation worse.

Legislators and the governor are supposed to be the ones providing oversight of how the state spends money. They failed to adequately monitor and question the performance of the state’s employment department. And Oregonians who are out of work are suffering more because of that.



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MY VOICE

It’s time to stop blaming Lighthouse church and its leadership

We have all heard how a local church apparently spread the COVID-19 virus through the mingling of the congregation weeks before the state gave permission to reassemble. Now we know the decision to open early did not turn out well and should have been delayed. Hindsight proves accuracy better than foresight. It is regrettable that people in our community suffered, and may continue to do so, with this virus. What should we be feeling about the church now?



DORIS EAKIN RECTOR
LA GRANDE

of a woman caught in sin and literally thrown at Jesus’ feet for his declaration of guilty, the religious “good guys” were ready to cast stones at her until death. Never saying a word, Jesus leaned down and wrote in the dust. (Perhaps listing the accusers’ sins and shortcomings?) Then he said, “Those who are without sin can throw the first stone.” One by one the accusers slunk off. Jesus said to the woman, “Neither do I accuse you. Now go and sin no more.” In light of this biblical story, let us not pick up a verbal or literary

stone to throw at the Lighthouse church. Rather, let us replace those thoughts and words of condemnation by remembering the good works the church has done. I am not a member or regular attendee of this church, but I have a few memories of the church lifting others up in their needs. For one, I attended a funeral for two families grieving the loss of their young boys. This church offered their beautiful building to the families for a place to hold the wake and funeral service. Another memory, the church presented a moving Christmas drama service for the community, which I attended and was deeply blessed even to tears.

Again, the church pastor officiated at my wedding, and the church provided the tables and chairs for the buffet in the yard, including picking up and delivering them which was a much appreciated act of kindness. Lastly, the church has educated hundreds of children with a Christian education, gifting many the price of tuition. The Bishop’s wife, Robin, has directed this school for 35 years, serving 70 children each year. Yes, they made a wrong call regarding the virus, but the church and its leadership should not be shunned with “rolling of the eyes” and veiled threats as detected in the former articles of

this paper. In this instance, we should continue doing our acts of kindness to all in our community while obeying the government’s COVID-19 directives. Union County’s communities know and practice obeying the laws, treating other people as we want to be treated, and forgiving. Let us move on.

About the Author
Doris Eakin Rector has lived in La Grande for 50 years, serving as the founder and director of Heidi Ho Christian School and day care for 24 years, and the Union Country director of the Court Appointed Special Advocates for seven years.

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