

State audit questions agency over new computer system

By JOHN HANNA
Associated Press Writer
TOPEKA (AP)—A new Department of Revenue computer system designed to help merchants calculate sales taxes cost three times as much as first expected, and Kansas purchasing laws were not followed in setting it up, according to a legislative audit.

The audit, released this week, concluded the department failed to inform legislators about the higher-than-expected costs as required. The computer system will cost the state \$1.16 million over four years, compared to an original estimate of \$330,000, auditors said.

But Revenue Secretary Joan Wagon said Thursday that auditors should have focused on how well the computer system helps merchants deal with a new and more complicated sales tax law. She said Kansas' system is now a model for other states.

"I'm outcomes-focused, and this whole administration is outcomes-focused," Wagon said during an interview.

"I would have liked for someone to have said, 'Did we get good value for the money we spent?'"

Sen. Derek Schmidt, chairman of the legislative committee that oversees auditors' work, said he will

seek further legislative hearings on the computer project.

"In this case, there were massive cost overruns involved, and we were completely circumvented," said Schmidt, R-Independence.

Last year, legislators rewrote sales tax laws in an effort—backed by Gov. Kathleen Sebelius—to allow the state to collect sales taxes on Internet purchases. The state imposes a 5.3 percent tax, and cities and counties have their own levies.

For decades, merchants calculated the tax based on the location of their stores.

Under last year's changes, they

must use the rate in effect where their goods are delivered. Some retailers must also track their sales in much greater detail.

Legislators also told the Department of Revenue to create a computer system to help merchants.

The system was operating by February.

Under another law, if an agency plans to spend \$250,000 or more on a computer project, it must submit a detailed plan to the executive branch's chief information technology officer before taking bids.

The audit said that didn't happen with the Department of Revenue's project.

In addition, if a project's projected cost rises by 10 percent, agency directors must consult with legislators.

In April 2003, officials estimated the Department of Revenue computer project would cost \$250,000, with additional annual maintenance expenses of \$20,000, the audit said.

Even when it was clear that the project would be more expensive than planned, the technology officer did not seek all of the proper documentation, auditors said.

The department later put the cost of the system at \$560,000, with maintenance expenses of \$150,000 each year for four years, according to the audit.

Sebelius spokeswoman Nicole Corcoran called the case "an anomaly."

She added the first estimates were based on limited information as the department struggled with getting the computer system operating on "a very tight time frame."

Legislators were not notified that costs had increased, auditors said. Schmidt said legislators are sup-

posed to review the reasons for higher costs and whether the state should spend the extra money.

Still, Wagon said the audit "slapped her fingers" over questions about procedures, when auditors should have asked about results.

"We moved heaven and earth to make that tool available to retailers," she said. "My job was to get it done, and get it done fast."

The audit was drafted by the Legislative Division of Post Audit, overseen by a 10-member committee. Six of the committee's members are Republicans, while Sebelius is a Democrat.

Also, last year's changes in the sales tax law proved controversial, and four audit committee members, including Schmidt, voted this year in favor of unsuccessful proposals to repeal those changes.

But Schmidt said the audit pointed out a serious problem in how the department handled its computer project and, "We need to fix it."

"The issue is accountability," he said.

Coalition urges parents, public to watch for children left in unattended vehicles

TOPEKA — As temperatures rise this season, Kansas SAFE KIDS Coalition is urging people to be vigilant about preventing heatstroke fatalities among children who are intentionally left, or forgotten in, or who gain access to an unattended, parked vehicle.

According to General Motors research, almost 70 percent more of such fatalities nationwide were reported in 2003 than in 2002. Since 1996, GM researchers have identified a total of 228 such fatalities based upon media reports. However, the actual number could be higher.

"We encourage everyone in Kansas to be vigilant this summer and to help prevent these needless tragedies," said Jan Stegelman, Coordinator, Kansas SAFE KIDS Coalition.

"We especially want to reach out to bystanders who see unattended children in a hot vehicle, to urge them to contact emergency services immediately. It could save a child's life."

Since 2001, GM and SAFE KIDS have been educating the public about the dangers of leaving children unattended in motor vehicles with a campaign called Never Leave Your Child Alone.

Until now, education and outreach efforts have been aimed

mostly at parents and other people who transport children.

This year, the partner organizations are extending their campaign to encourage bystanders to contact emergency services if they see a child left unattended in a motor vehicle.

"Many of these deaths happen when a child is left behind or forgotten by an adult, while others occur when a child gains access to an unlocked car and cannot get out," said Stegelman.

"We want parents to know that leaving a child alone in a vehicle, even for a few minutes, is never OK. We also want people to know that if they see a small child alone in a vehicle, they need to get help."

Previous research and real-world incidents have demonstrated that on a warm, sunny day, even at temperatures as mild as 60 degrees Fahrenheit, a closed vehicle can be lethal. Because a child's body temperature increases three to five times faster than an adult's and children are not able to dissipate heat as efficiently as adults, every minute counts when a child is trapped in a hot vehicle.

The Never Leave Your Child Alone initiative includes brochures in English and Spanish that deliver potentially lifesaving information. Kansas SAFE KIDS is just one of the more than 300 SAFE KIDS coalitions

across the country that will distribute the brochures at local community events.

To help prevent more fatalities, Kansas SAFE KIDS Coalition offers these tips:

- Never leave a child unattended in a motor vehicle, even with a window slightly open.
- If you see a small child who is unattended in a motor vehicle and in need of help, contact emergency services.
- If you are in an OnStar-equipped vehicle, simply push the red emergency OnStar button.

You will be quickly connected with an OnStar emergency services advisor, who will expedite the call to public safety officials.

- Teach children not to play in, on or around vehicles.
- Watch children closely around vehicles, especially when loading and unloading.

The Never Leave Your Child Alone brochure can be ordered by calling 866-700-0001 (press/choose option No. 2) or downloaded from the SAFE KIDS and GM Ability Web sites, www.safe-kids.org and www.gmability.com.

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