Human services staff reorganized to provide better county service

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The plan moves case management services into a new business model focusing on process, according to John Pugleasa, county income maintenance director.

The board put the plan in motion by approving, on its consent agenda, the hiring of additional staff — two full-time eligibility specialists and six full-time case aids.

The estimated cost to implement the plan is $408,000 to $456,000, said Pugleasa, adding that since County Health and Human Services lost 29.5 full-time equivalent positions since 2009, the new plan should be budget neutral.

The county department operates offices in Bemidji and Redby where people can apply for public assistance programs, he said. They include determining eligibility by income and assets for programs such as Minnesota Family Investment Program cash, food support, some 37 different Minnesota health care programs and child care subsidies.

"Case loads are now between 250 and 300 people and growing," Pugleasa said of how many clients each case manager has. "A large number of cases are pending in excess of 30 days."

With 6,000 open cases at any one time, Pugleasa said that "too many errors are occurring on cases and the volume and intensity of complaint calls are rapidly increasing."

County Health and Human Services Director Mary Marchel and Pugleasa have been at work trying to develop a system that is more efficient and customer-friendly.

Currently, each client applying for assistance is assigned a case manager who takes the case to the point of acceptance or rejection of assistance. The case manager is also open to calls and questions from anyone, often taking up to 50 calls a day.

Under the new proposal, both Bemidji and Redby offices will be reorganized to offer a new system, moving from a case management business model to a process management model, using case banking.

Under the new system, a supervisor in Bemidji will work with 24 eligibility specialists and four case aides, and an intake supervisor in Redby will work with two eligibility specialists and two case aides.

Clients won't be assigned specific case managers and the structure will have some staff concentrating on answering phones and questions, while other staff work on processing claims in a timely manner.

The goal is to take the number of cases pending more than 30 days from 170 a month now to 80 cases a month in four months, 50 cases a month in eight months and 20 cases a month in a year's time.

"There's no indication against the quality of our employees — they are working their butts off," Pugleasa said.

"How can we help the state of Minnesota catch up with the rest of the world?" Board Chairman Joe Vene asked, after he was told that the state's computer system for human services matters is outdated and unworkable.

Commissioner Jim Heltzer said he supported the reorganization but was nervous about not tackling the root of the problem — changing poverty and a poor local economy, and especially poverty conditions for American Indians.

"I would like to see it where we're not just handling more cases faster," Heltzer said. "How do we make a dent in high unemployment?"