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For immediate release

Looking to streamline services, Rice County board OKs departments' merger

The Rice County Board of Commissioners voted Tuesday to create a Community Services Department, a combination of the current Social Services and Community Corrections departments, that's designed to streamline and improve services.

The board chose the most transformative of three options presented during a December work session.

The new structure replaces the two department head positions with a single deputy administrator-community services who will report to the county administrator. It also splits the social services manager role into two: adult services and child/family services managers, and includes operations/family supports and community corrections managers.

Rice County Administrator Sara Folsted estimates it will cost the county up to an additional \$260,200 annually, before reimbursements, to implement the new structure.

Discussions about modifying the organizational structure came after Social Services Director Mark Shaw, who has served in that role since 2003, announced his January retirement. Personnel changes such as Shaw's retirement often provide an opportunity to evaluate delivery of services and look for potential improvements.

Rice County, the 14th largest in the state, ranks near the bottom in overall expenditures per capita, and is 75th out of 87 Minnesota counties when it comes to spending, according to the Medicare Cost Report, said Folsted.

"Having the lowest ranking per capita isn't the best thing. Sometimes you've got to spend money to correct issues that have been happening," said Commissioner Galen Malecha, who noted the increased need for mental health services.

Folsted also explained that while county strives to be cost-conscious, there is a fine line between efficiency and failing to invest when needed.

During the December discussion on the proposed restructure, Shaw and Community Corrections Director Rick Gieseke told the board that many of their clients are served by both departments, and explained how a single department would be more efficient and beneficial for clients and county staff.

"Let's do it right," said Commissioner Jeff Docken. "This will help people a lot quicker than we have in the past."

Folsted will provide updates on the departments' merger throughout the process.

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