
County dept. tells of savings

■ Human Services chief says more welfare clients finding work.

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The top official from Monroe County government's most expensive sector briefed lawmakers Tuesday on her department's yearlong efforts to reduce costs while helping the county's most vulnerable residents.

Project SAVE, unveiled as part of the county executive's 2008 budget proposal, is an initiative of the Department of Human Services and is aimed at reducing county costs by helping welfare recipients achieve self-sufficiency and reducing the number of children in the foster care system.

It diverts public assistance cases from being opened if possible, with the idea that people want to work, not receive public assistance, said Human Services Commissioner Kelly Reed.

The program also expedites cases for individuals living in homeless shelters.

The Human Services sector comprises 25 percent of expenses in the county's operational budget, or \$223 million. Another \$102 million is spent on this sector in the county's grant budget.

During a Human Services Committee meeting of the County Legislature, Reed talked about Project SAVE's results, noting that a record 152 welfare recipients were placed in jobs in September, up from a monthly average of 34 before the new program was implemented. The average monthly job placement rate is now 80.

The initiative has also reduced the number of children in foster care from 854 children to 751 children, a benchmark that earned the county a \$1.7 million credit from the state.

One target the department missed was the reduction of the county's welfare caseload to 12,500, which Reed blamed on the poor economy.

The caseload is about 13,000.

Project SAVE has a goal of saving \$13.4 million in net expenses over four years, and Reed said the county has so far saved \$4 million in gross expenditures because of those efforts.

Reed could not say how much in net expenses were saved, but said she expects more significant savings to be achieved in 2010 and 2011.

The Social Services Department, part of the Human Services agency, hired or will hire 118 employees to carry out the project, and many of those employees are filing vacant positions, Reed said.

Half of the new staff was funded through a grant in 2008 that won't be renewed in 2009.

Lawmakers responded to

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the program, saying they agreed with the project's overall goals.

"I really do believe that people want to work if given an opportunity," said Legislator Willie Lightfoot, D-Rochester.

Legislator Carrie Andrews, D-Rochester, said she thought the project's goals were "appropriate" but questioned whether the number of welfare cases could continue to decrease, as is budgeted, given the economy.

The budget does not raise the tax rate of \$8.99 per \$1,000 of assessed valuation. But the amount raised by county property taxes increases from \$329.6 million in 2008 to \$338.8 million in 2009. □

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