

Tribe shares Vilas County’s struggles with social service staffing

By Kelly Holm
OF THE LAKELAND TIMES

Vilas County has long dealt with hiring and recruitment shortages in its social services division, and the Lac du Flambeau tribe shares this plight, tribal Family Services Manager Kristin Allen reported at March 15’s county social services board meeting.

Though board meetings are typically held at the county seat in Eagle River, this one took place in Lac du Flambeau in order to have greater tribal participation. The county and tribal social services departments frequently collaborate on several responsibilities.

“As far as staffing within those departments, we’re both very over-worked,” Allen said. “For the tribe right now, we are at half capacity as far as our staff ... some of our people that we’ve had employed are leaving to go back to school, but primarily (the issue is) the stress of the job, the burnout.”

Currently, between 20 and 25 tribal children are in foster care, according to Allen. Numerous others have been placed out-of-home with relatives, with substance abuse being a primary reason for parents losing custody. Allen says the constant exposure to such traumas are a major factor in staff burnout.

“Trying to work with parents that are on methamphetamine, it makes it very hard, because they don’t remember phone calls. They’re very hard to engage, the paranoia and some of the things

we’re seeing,” she said. “It makes it very hard to try to bring them back into being a parent ... we’ve coordinated several parents to go into treatment, where they’re there three or four days and then they leave.”

Tribal administrator John Young said that the county had stepped up significantly in terms of working with the tribe on social services matters.

For example, the tribe and county both conduct initial investigations and facilitate meetings with children in out-of-home care, Case management, however is generally done “for our kids by our workers, and (for) tribal kids by tribal workers,” according to county social services director Kate Gardner.

Gardner added that the county’s membership in a 12-county consortium helped to mitigate its own burden compared to the tribe when faced with vacancies.

“It’s a bigger pool,” Gardner said. “Back when we were a single county, we’d lose one worker and we’d be in the same boat.”

Hiring and recruitment

Gardner said that the county social services department had found a viable candidate for a child support specialist position and that they would be going to the finance committee to discuss the candidate’s salary expectations — another matter that has come up within the department in recent months.

The board voted last month to

post the full range of starting salaries on the department’s job listings, but since there were no applicants for a social worker position after this information was added, Gardner thought that listing salaries as “negotiable” might bring more success.

“If you’re going to put down the full range, what do you think that person’s going to ask for? The top,” board member Ron Kressin said in support of Gardner’s idea. “Just say it’s negotiable and start talking.”

The county also plans to conduct a wage study this year, in order to determine how competitive they are in today’s market.

Remote work policy

Additionally, Gardner intends to bring an updated version of the remote work policy she presented at last month’s meeting to an upcoming meeting of department heads, from there to human resources and the county board. Initially, the plan was drafted specifically for the social services department.

“I think that what we were looking at was maybe a little too much of a piecemeal perspective,” she said. “In other counties that we’ve talked to, what they did first was put an employee handbook policy in place, and that policy basically indicated the department could voluntarily take the remote work policy into their department, and set up a policy at their discretion.”

The proposal would outline which positions and duties would be compatible with work-from-

home arrangements, set restrictions on telesecurity and remote days per week, and determine the county’s responsibility vs. the employee’s responsibility when it comes to technology installation and troubleshooting.

Head lice

Social services is also introducing a policy regarding its responsibility on dealing with head lice in children, especially since the public health department, like the social services department, is understaffed.

“We get a lot of referrals from the schools ... sometimes they’re really surprised that we’re not the ones that go in there and do a lot about lice,” said Gardner, adding that the new proposal was inspired by a federal memo that advised against keeping children out of class during lice treatment. “(Lice can be) a harbinger or a red flag to other issues in the family, so what we wanted to do is develop (policy on) how we take those calls.”

If a child merits four separate reports of lice during a 12-month period, social services will send a packet to their family containing instructions on lice detection and treatment, as well as supplies like lice shampoo and garbage bags, or certificates to buy them.

“For the caseload that we get, we decided that we needed to put something together,” Gardner said.

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