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Wayne Children Services takes focus to relative care

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By CHRIS LEONARD, Staff Writer

WOOSTER -- For the Wayne County Children Services Agency, 2009 marked the culmination of several years of strategic planning, making the agency just as efficient, but at a lower cost to taxpayers.

According to Director Randy Muth, the agency has three types of care children are placed into -- residential, foster and therapeutic. He said the agency tried to reduce residential costs the most.

Residential placement is when a child is placed in a secured facility. Muth said research showed extended stays in residential placement were ineffective for the child and too costly.

"We came to the realization, we came into line with the current thinking that residential placement and high-end placement is necessary in the short term but should not be overutilized," he said.

Overall, the agency spent \$252,137 less in 2009 in placement costs. With less residential placement, the agency saved \$157,647. With a goal of a cost-savings in mind, Muth said the agency still balanced the needs of what was best for the child.

"The key was to make sure we could safely do this. We would never step a child down for financial reasons," he said. "It was always with the belief that children are best served in their natural environment; residential hospital-like settings are just not natural."

Muth said employees also took on more responsibilities as the agency did not fill some spots through attrition in 2009. He said the agency had 66 employees as of January 2009, and is now down to 63. He said it saved the agency around \$150,000.

Former board Chairwoman Melody Snure credited the agency's employees and volunteers with 2009 being such a good year.

"It really was a good year. There was a lot of progress, although there was a lot of pain to get to that progress," she said, noting the debates board members had when considering spending.

One area the agency concentrated on this year was relative placement with children, in which relatives of foster children are sought out to care for them.

Muth said when a child is removed from a home, the next best thing is to place him or her with a relative, a familiar face, as to not have the process be too jarring for the child.

"Our goal is to get that child placed with a relative as quickly as possible," he said. "We want to minimize the disturbances in the child's life."

Muth said the agency saw an increase in relative placements, about 34 percent, and it saved the agency money as relatives did not receive stipends from the agency. He said the agency saved about \$150,000 from 2008 to 2009.

And in 2009, the agency also passed a 0.2-mill replacement levy for general operating purposes, a reduction from a previous 0.6-mill levy.

The new levy will generate \$459,000. The previous levy generated \$907,000.

Muth said with the cost savings it had accrued in the past years, the board was able to validate the reduced levy. Also, considering the poor economy, Muth said, the agency wanted to give some money back to taxpayers.

"It really was good year for the agency in a lot of ways," Snure said.

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