

Committee advances tight Human Services budget

By Alexa Zoellner Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, September 17, 2015 9:13 am

JEFFERSON — Departmental budget hearings continued on Wednesday with the Jefferson County Human Services Department declaring that its budget this year will be extremely tight.

The Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Finance Committee approved the recommendation for a 2016 budget of \$8,331,713 in tax levy for the Human Services Department, representing an \$18,678 decrease from this year's amended budget.

“Human Services has returned significant amounts of money at the end of each year,” Jefferson County Board of Supervisors Chairperson Jim Schroeder said. “In turn, a significant amount of that money has gone to bail out other departments that are not meeting their budget. What we're hearing is that that's coming to an end.”

The Finance Committee is recommending a countywide tax levy of \$26,721,957. That represents an increase over \$26,510,891 this year.

If adopted, the levy would result in a countywide property tax rate of \$4.3259 per \$1,000 equalized valuation, translating into a 7-cent-per-\$1,000 decrease from last year.

“I think we have a history of managing our funds well,” Kathi Cauley, Human Services director, said. “We've been able to do things because we're using performance management and continuous quality improvement as far as identifying efficiencies and saving money.”

Many of the services provided by Human Services are funded, at least in part, if not fully, by the state. This creates risk areas due to state budget changes that potentially could impact the financing required by the department from the county.

“We're very aware that Human Services is one high-risk case away from throwing the budget out of whack,” Richard Jones, Finance Committee chairperson, said. “It might happen today, tomorrow — we don't know.”

Some of the programs offered by Human Services that are funded solely by the state include kinship benefits and assessments; youth independent living; family support; a certified mental health professional; emergency mental healthcare; foster parent training; adult protective services; youth empowered solutions; and a coordinated services team.

Estimated 2016 revenues for the Human Services Department are \$14.3 million, of which approximately \$7.7 million will come from intergovernmental revenues and approximately \$4.7 million from public charges.

Estimated 2016 expenditures are \$22.6 million. Approximately \$12.4 million would be personnel expenses and \$7.5 million would be operating costs.

“We have an issue with (being able to hire and retain) mental health professionals who are credentialed,” Cauley said. “We are surrounded by counties who are paying more. The starting wage is usually \$2 more an hour.”

The Human Services Department asked that those who gain the required credentials, or who already have them, receive a \$2,000 bonus so long as they are meeting the key outcome indicator for their area. Based on the people the department currently has, that turns out to be \$34,000 in tax levy funds.

“It’s important to have these credentialed staff,” Cauley said. “In the outpatient clinic area we absolutely have to have the credentialed staff or we can’t bill through insurance.”

The cost of capital items is \$295,088 and includes three county vehicles, replacement of an 11-passenger van, replacement of existing floors and wireless, technology projects and the complete installation of Tridium Automation System at the Workforce Development Center.

“The mileage that we pay staff for using their own vehicles versus using a county vehicle, we’ve been tracking very closely since 2009,” Cauley said. “We have some really nice data. It was one of our larger continuous quality-improvement projects to show that using the county vehicles has saved about \$70,000 a year.

“The problem is, we have 17 vehicles in our fleet and they’re all in full use. So we have now noticed a trend that personal mileage is back up. That’s why we’re asking for additional vehicles.”

There will be six position changes within the Human Services Department that will have a limited impact on the tax levy.

The Finance Committee also heard budget reports from the Health and Child Support departments.

Both were approved unanimously.

The Health Department requested a 2016 budget of \$838,207 in tax levy, which is a \$37,016 decrease from this year.

“We had five staff retire as of May 1,” Gail Scott, health officer of the Health Department, said. “We were able to cover the payouts by some of our unassigned fund balance. Out of the five that retired, we eliminated one clerical position. We also did not replace our public health tech, but in

this budget we are proposing to bring that position back three days a week — the days we have clinic.”

Scott explained that the department also was able to hire three new public health nurses.

“We didn’t think we were going to be able to (because we don’t pay as much),” Scott said. “But we had three people whose passion is public health. Two are pretty well experienced and one has no experience.”

Estimated 2016 total expenditures for the Health Department are \$1,569,306 and total revenues are \$601,126. The department will be utilizing a fund balance of \$129,973, \$15,000 of which will be used for capital expenses and the remaining for operations.

Child Support requested \$166,519 in tax levy for 2016, which is a \$20,032 decrease from 2015 due to a reduction in staffing.

The proposed budget is based on revenue estimates, according to Stacey Jensen, child support director.

Usually the department receives final numbers just prior to the final budget going into effect in November.