

Ramsey County officials struggle to maintain services amid steadily shrinking budgets

By Frederick Melo

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Ramsey County Attorney John Choi has seen the average time it takes to charge a domestic-abuse case drop from seven business days in 2009 to a day in 2010, just by combining the review and charging of cases into a single desk.

Choi said those kinds of reorganizations save time, encourage a victim's cooperation with the system and, hopefully, save lives. But making them happen requires flexibility when it comes to manpower, and he worries that a tough budget climate will undermine his wiggle room.

He stands to lose 22 positions by 2013, an outcome he'd like to avoid.

Choi and Ramsey County Sheriff Matt Bostrom each appeared before Ramsey County commissioners Tuesday morning as they examined a series of proposed departmental budgets for 2012 and 2013. Because of cuts in state aid and federal grants, decreased housing values and other revenue reductions, the commissioners are under pressure to slash millions of dollars from their two-year budget projections.

The proposed 2012 county budget calls for \$575.08 million in spending, a decrease of \$15.4 million, or 2.6 percent, from the current year's \$590.48 million. Nonetheless, county staff has alerted commissioners that an increase of 2.6 percent to the overall county tax levy is still likely.

Choi said his department has responded by keeping 11 positions vacant in child-support collections, which are on the decline, in part because federal support has been cut and the economic slowdown means parents earn (and thus owe) less money than in years past. His department's proposed 2012 operating budget is \$35.18 million.

His goal is to proceed without any layoffs, despite a projected drop of more than \$300,000 in personnel funds in 2013. Without additional help, that would eliminate the equivalent of 5-1/2 full-time positions - including paralegals, legal secretaries, a clerical typist and a customer-service specialist - little more than a year from now. "Losing those positions, or the funds to fund those positions, makes it more difficult to make some changes that I want to make," Choi told the commissioners.

Overall, his staff is poised to shrink from the equivalent of 325 full-time employees this year to 311 next year and 303 in 2013.

He's pursuing some strategies to increase revenue, such as raising the hourly rate his department charges public entities such as the Regional Railroad Authority for legal reviews from \$148 to \$153 per hour. Renegotiating contracts for law library books and automated legal research materials with Westlaw and other companies is saving \$69,000 next year.

He said he also hopes to raise \$57,000 next year by charging hospitals a standard rate for Jarvis hearings, which are hearings to determine whether a doctor has the right to force a committed patient to take medication he or she doesn't want to take. Agreements stemming back 15 years or more left rates all over the map, and some hospitals aren't charged at all.

"I think the county attorney's office, quite frankly, has done a fantastic job," said Ramsey County Board Chairwoman Victoria Reinhardt. "You've figured out a way, so far, to make sure there's not a decrease in services, although I understand for 2013 you're concerned about that. You've taken some pretty deep cuts in personnel."

The county sheriff said he's under similar financial pressure. The sheriff's office had the equivalent of 396 employees in 2010 and 394 this year.

That's proposed to drop to 385 employees in 2012 and 381 in 2013. Bostrom foresees eliminating a clerk typist, a deputy in the property room, a court deputy in the Juvenile Justice Family Center and other vacancies. Even the number of canines would drop from 10 to seven.

"We have been running with a great deal of vacancies," Bostrom said. "I think we had 14 - three sergeants and 11 deputies that we're currently not staffing right now, in order to close this year's budget gap."

Bostrom said that when St. Paul police and other public-safety agencies leave an injured or ailing detainee at Region's Hospital, they will often transfer custody to the sheriff's office, leaving the county covering his or her health costs.

That's about to change. Bostrom said the county will no longer assume responsibility for the patient until the patient is ready to be discharged from the hospital and transferred to the detention center. The policy change will mirror current practice in most, if not all, other counties in the state.

"We believe on the low end that is probably going to save the county \$425,000 to \$450,000 on an annual basis," Bostrom said. "If St. Paul makes an arrest, until the person is capable of being detained at the detention center, then they stay with him."

Bostrom said that historically, the county detention center has housed 30 state detainees because of overcrowding at state prisons, on top of 60 federal detainees. The county is no longer being asked to house them, so his office has closed an inmate-housing pod and eliminated the temporary employees needed to staff it. "There's been a decline in crime for over a decade, particularly in felony crime resulting in long sentences," Bostrom said. "They don't need our bed space right now."

The sheriff said his overall operating budget went from \$44.3 million in 2010 to \$45.45 million in 2011, and the current proposal is to keep it fairly flat at \$45.4 million in 2012. The budget would then increase slightly to \$45.85 million in 2013, largely as a result of labor costs, he said.

"What I was proposing for 2013 was to meet me halfway," he told the commissioners. "I can keep up with some of the (salary) step increases and so on and take a bit smaller reduction to staff."

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