
Sponsor: Financial Assistance Services

Meeting Date: 5/28/2024

Title: Personnel Complement Increase in Financial Assistance Services

File Number: 2024-115

Background and Rationale:

The Basic Sliding Fee Program provides childcare assistance to low-income families for infants, toddlers, preschool, and school-age children. The program helps families pay childcare while they look for work, go to work, or attend training or school to prepare for work. Ramsey County Financial Assistance (FAS) has historically entered into contract agreement with Think Small to manage the Basic Sliding Fee (BSF) Child Care Assistance Program while FAS administers the Minnesota Family Investment Program (MFIP) Child Care Assistance and MFIP Transition Child Care Programs. Since at least 2019, FAS has considered bringing Basic Sliding Fee Child Care in-house rather than contracting with Think Small. Initial planning began that year but was put on hold during the pandemic.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) requires that between 90 - 100% of funds allocated for the Basic Sliding Fee Program childcare are spent each year. All other metropolitan area counties spend more than 90% of their allocated funds - many over-spending. Ramsey County underspent in 2019, 2022, and 2023. For 2024, Ramsey County is projected to spend 61% of its allocated funds. In part because the Minnesota State Legislature increased the allocation for childcare which went into effect in 2024. Ramsey County's allocation increased from \$20.7 million to \$51.6 million.

The decision to bring BSF in-house grew out of several meetings and conversations with Think Small to address both the underspending and the waitlist. Think Small does not have data or systems in place to properly evaluate why spending has declined drastically since June 2023. Since FAS is already providing administrative support and working with Think Small to meet program requirements, these processes will be more streamlined and be done more efficiently, such as onboarding with other staff, working directly with Health and Wellness Service Team Fiscal Services team to manage program spending. Embedding the work within FAS ensures that Ramsey County is meeting its as well as managing the waitlist per DHS' requirement.

The doubling of the funding allocation will allow counties statewide to serve all eligible families. To do so, FAS will need to properly staff this team. Bringing the management of the Basic Sliding Fee program in-house can provide more stability, quality improvement, and a deeper connection with the department's goals in service delivery. FAS requests an increase in personnel complement for up to 28 FTEs to form the new Basic Sliding Fee team.

In conversations with other metropolitan counties about their BSF programs, they report that BSF teams tend to be stable and aid in overall employee retention because they are focused on a single program and allow for increased lateral mobility for all staff. FAS allows cross-training with other teams that will provide resiliency and support. The BSF team will be in the same section as MFIP and MFIP Childcare which will increase communication between teams that serve the same families in very similar programs. Families will have a single place to go to apply for programs and receive a warm hand-off to BSF.

In addition to hiring the new BSF team, FAS plans to hire an additional 30 employees in June to fill authorized vacancies across the department. There is still work to do to reduce caseloads for case management staff and reduce the new application backlog to the goal of zero.

Ramsey County plans to address the current Basic Sliding Fee waitlist backlog through fast-track training for current seasoned MFIP Childcare workers. In addition, FAS has four fully trained staff dedicated to support the BSF program. FAS will be hiring and training multiple new Financial Workers over the next two months to reach the appropriate level of staffing need. As part of this plan, FAS will do a waitlist removal, mailing applications to all families currently on the waitlist. The goal is to open the waitlist beginning in September and continue to monitor the spending.

To maintain fiscal responsibility, FAS will continue to monitor and adjust staffing need based on the program demand and stay within the allocated administrative reimbursement.

Recommendation:

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners resolved to:

Approve an increase in the personnel complement of the Financial Assistance Service department up to 28.00 Full Time Equivalent.

A motion to approve was made by Commissioner Frethem, seconded by Commissioner Reinhardt. Motion passed.

Aye: - 7: Frethem, Martinson, McGuire, Moran, Ortega, Reinhardt, and Xiong

By: _____



Mee Cheng, Chief Clerk - County Board