

The story posted on jsonline.com yesterday about the state pushing to take over the public assistance programs administered for the state by the county included this section at the end of the story:

“Supervisor Peggy West, chairwoman of the County Board’s Health and Human Needs Committee, said that she was disappointed with the state move.

“I wish that they would have been more supportive and given us the funding” needed to manage the programs better, West said, “I debate the fact it actually has to do with our performance and would argue that it has more to do with posturing.”

She said it appeared that Doyle was trying to create a 2010 campaign issue against Walker, who is expected to mount a Republican challenge to Doyle.”

Some how this was cut from the print edition and is no longer in their online story.

Supervisor West’s words speak volumes.

For years, I have asked the state to take over these programs that they mandate on the county – not because they are better managers – but because they have a lower fringe benefit rate and could hire more employees for the same cost to work with people in need.

What the state announced yesterday (that they let everyone know about except the people who run the current program) is the worst possible scenario for three reasons:

Years ago (and again recently) I asked the state to take back this state mandate. Now, they are acting on that but in a way that will do more harm than good. As Supervisor West suggests, maybe there is something more to this than just policy.

People seeking public assistance in our community need more help. Two things are driving the major increase in the need for help.

First, the change in the economy has increased the number of people seeking assistance. Since 2000, the caseload in the county for Food Share has increased by 60% and for Medical Assistance and Badger Care Plus has increased by 28%.

Second, the state government cut funding by \$2.4 million for the programs that help people obtain assistance. While they did fill in part of the hole, the level of state support for their mandated program is still \$1.2 million less than it was five years ago.

Rapidly growing caseloads and less support from the state are driving the challenges faced by those seeking public assistance.

In response, I asked the state (nearly five years ago) to take over the full functions of the state mandated program. The reason was simple. State workers cost less than county workers and the state could hire more people to serve those in need – all for the same cost.

Unfortunately, the state denied the request.

Last year, we proposed contracting with IMPACT and the University of Wisconsin – Milwaukee to run the call center operations in our 2009 budget. This move would allow 87% more calls to be served by the call center.

Unfortunately, the County Board rejected this proposal.

Now, I am asking the state to take over this program. Earlier this week, they informed the county that they will be taking over management of the program but would still rely on county employees to do the work.

This is the worst of all solutions.

Does not add workers: The plan proposed by the state will keep county workers. The only advantage to having the state take over the program is that they have the advantage of hiring more state employees for the same cost. Instead, they keep the same number of workers and put their own state staff in place to supervise them.

Anyone who has seen the Milwaukee Child Welfare system knows that just having the state manage a program without more staff is not the solution.

Exposes county taxpayers: Since the workers will still be county employees, the county taxpayers will be exposed to any additional costs. The state cut funding for this program in 2004 by \$2.4 million and only put back in \$1.2 million. This is an actual cut and not a decrease in an increase. Now, local taxpayers already pay over \$3 million to cover that hole and the costs of an ever-growing caseload – and they must cover all of the risk.

Keeps workers in county pension system: Again, since the state will continue to use county employees, the workers will continue to earn time in the county pension system.

People seeking public assistance do need more help. But asking the state government to do it with the same staff is not the right answer. Changing who does the work and how they are held accountable for results will lead to success.