

Butler Eagle Editorial

As reported in a Butler Eagle article Nov. 20, Butler County Children and Youth Services has been dealing with a growing caseload without a growing staff to deal with the increased workload. Through October, this year's agency caseload totaled 755, and CYS anticipates more than 900 cases next year.

In 2005, the agency handled 596 cases.

The initial reaction might be to blame the county commissioners for the challenges that have evolved, and some of that blame might be rightly placed, since they are the ones ultimately responsible for ensuring smooth workings of the county government and its bureaucracy. They must remain aware of needs and ways to address them.

However, it's clear that CYS hasn't lobbied hard enough on its own behalf, especially this year, despite the availability of funds from a state grant that paves the way for hiring additional caseworkers — caseworkers that could make it easier for CYS to carry out its important responsibilities.

The county has been aware of the availability of that money since spring, but it was only on Nov. 19 that the agency's current staffing plight entered the public spotlight, when Joyce Ainsworth, who became the agency's director in May, presented CYS' needs at a commissioners meeting.

At that meeting, it became clear that CYS has been remiss for longer than Ainsworth has been at the helm in making county leaders and the public aware of the staffing and caseload challenges confronting the agency. Fortunately, the Nov. 19 discussion created an awareness for helping the agency address, in a reasonable amount of time, its needs and, thus, the needs of the people it serves.

Reacting to what had been evolving toward a virtually impossible situation for the CYS' 23 caseworkers, CYS reduced the amount of preventive services it provides. Unfortunately, while easing the strain on CYS somewhat, that has put added stress on some families in need of the agency's help.

Amid all of that is the \$244,000 state grant, from the Department of Public Welfare, that remains unused because the county hasn't taken action to hire the caseworkers whose positions the money would help to fund. According to Ainsworth, the grant would pay about 80 percent of the salaries of new caseworkers.

Ainsworth feels that, with the state money that's available, coupled with the agency's workload, the county should consider hiring no fewer than four additional caseworkers. Beyond that, she said she would be comfortable with a plan to bring aboard an additional caseworker each year for the following four or five years.

With that eventual staffing level, she told the Butler Eagle this week, "I think we could do the job."

But the first order of business must be ongoing communication between CYS and the commissioners — not just communication at budget time or when difficulties surface. Apparently there has been better communication between CYS officials and county leaders in a number of other fourth-class counties, because some of those counties' CYS staffs are about double the size of Butler County's.

That's not to imply that this county should go on a hiring binge on CYS' behalf. With the current fiscal challenges, due primarily to the much-over-initial-estimate prison project, tight fiscal measures must be sought and maintained.

Still, the importance of CYS' responsibilities dictate that its needs not be ignored.

The current board of commissioners, which took over the reins of county government last January, was handed many difficult issues to confront, and many difficult decisions to make. All considered, the commissioners have done as much as could be expected, and they've done their work in a spirit of good government.

Agencies within the county government must work to help the commissioners. It can be said that CYS in recent years has not done enough in terms of apprising the commissioners of the facts surrounding its operation.

It is to be hoped that Ainsworth's presentation on Nov. 19 set the stage for better communication in the future, and it is to be hoped that the commissioners will be open to reasonable requests from the agency.

— J.R.K.