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Learning more about Iowa's mental health redesign

The redesign of the state's Mental Health/Disability services system is one of the major items being considered right now, but it is only one of the many parts of the picture for the Iowa Department of Human Services.

DHS is the largest executive branch agency in state government. Of the 3,046,355 Iowans, 30 percent (or 925,000) Iowans are served in some capacity by the department. DHS provides statewide services in food assistance, adult Mental Health/Disability services, Family Investment Program, child care, child welfare, Medicaid, and adoption and child support.

It also is responsible for the four state mental health institutions, two resource centers, two juvenile facilities and the Civil Commitment Unit for Sexual Offenders. All of these programs help Iowans achieve safe, stable self-sufficient and healthy lives.

The total budget for the department is \$5 billion — with 68 percent of the funding coming from federal or other non-general funding and 32 percent from state general funds.

The Family Investment Program was

initiated as part of the 1996 Welfare Reform. Currently, 11.8 percent of Iowa's population lives in households with income below the federal poverty level — which is \$10,830 annually for a single adult and \$18,310 annually for a family of three.

In 2011, 17,075 Iowa families received an average of \$338 FIP aid per month. Seventy-seven percent were single-parent families, 6 percent were two-parent families and 17 percent were children living with caretaker relatives. The average FIP family is headed by a single, white mother between the ages of 20 and 29, who has two children under the age of 6. The average time spent receiving FIP is 22 months.

Welfare reform made in 1996, allowed for a FIP lifetime maximum of 60 months of payments, and required recipients to sign a contract pledging to be self sufficient. FIP caseloads have decreased dramatically during the last 15 years because of welfare reform. In 1994, the monthly caseload was almost 40,000 — compared with 16,000

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in 2011.

Currently there is much discussion about the Mental Health/Disability Services re-design. Since 1996 counties have had the primary responsibility for planning and funding delivering services to people with mental illness and intellectual disabilities. This has produced a service delivery system that varies from county to county. Each of Iowa's counties may determine services based on their own values, resources and capabilities.

The current system is funded with a combination of federal, state and county property taxes. The redesign proposes to group counties into regional administration units, add additional state aid to counties and establish performance-based contracts to assure quality.

In addition, a basic set of "core services" will be established so that people needing service will receive the same set of core services regardless of where they live in the state of Iowa.

The recommendations now are being debated in the state legislature. Although the recommendations for reform are established, the "devil is in the details" and much work remains until the re-design becomes a reality.

The department is under the direction of Chuck Palmer, who was appointed by Gov. Terry Branstad in December 2010. Palmer is not new to the department, having served as its head under Branstad from 1989-99 and as the head of the DHS

division of MH/DS services from 1979-1989.

Palmer will be in Iowa City as the guest of the Johnson County Task Force on Aging at 2 p.m. Friday in Room 203 of the Johnson County Health and Human Services Building, 855 S. Dubuque St. He will be here to talk to Iowans about issues facing the department.

You are invited to attend and join the conversation.

Johnson County Supervisor Sally Stutsman is a member of the state Department of Human Services Council and served on the mental health redesign regional work group.

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If you go

- **What:** Chuck Palmer, director of the Iowa Department of Human Services, will participate in a forum hosted by Johnson County Task Force on Aging.
- **When:** 2 p.m. Friday.
- **Where:** Room 203 of the Johnson County Health and Human Services Building, 855 S. Dubuque St.

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