

Legislature to hire company to develop DSS task force

by Carol Thompson

The Oswego County Legislature has approved spending \$9,500 to hire an outside company to form a community task force for the Oswego County Department of Social Services.

The resolution, presented at the Oct. 14 meeting, allows the county to hire The Center for Governmental Research, Inc. for the purpose of developing a community-advisory council.

The Rochester-based company will be responsible to develop a foundation for a Citizen's Advisory Council.

"This group has a very important purpose," Legislator Jack Proud said in his introduction of the resolution. "The establishment of this council will go a long way toward improving the interactions among all the agencies that deal with children to improve Child Protective Services."

At the March 18 meeting of the Oswego County Legislature's Health and Human Services Committee, it was decided that a task force would be formed to deal with concerns of the community, professionals, and social services.

The task force concept arose in response to much public concern in regard to how DSS workers handled the case of Erin Maxwell, the 11-year-old Palermo resident who died Aug. 30, 2008.

DSS caseworkers had visited the home on at least two occasions prior to the girl's death and never found reason to remove her from the house, where the living conditions were described by police as "deplorable" after her death.

The state Office of Children and Family Services issued a report last spring that faulted case workers for how they responded to the complaints received in regard to Erin Maxwell.

The report concluded that DSS must develop a protocol for identifying each household member and his or her relationship to the children in each Child Protective Service investigation, and that DSS must determine what actions are planned or need to be taken to address how staff will gather sufficient information from collateral contacts to assess safety and risk adequately.

These actions must include how supervisory staff will monitor information gatherers.

The report also noted that DSS must determine what actions are planned or need to be taken to address how staff will monitor the condition of a home found to be in unacceptable living conditions.

Corrective action has already been taken and the department recently hired additional case workers to alleviate the ratio of case loads per employee.

Three years ago, Oswego County Legislature Majority Leader Shawn Doyle was instrumental in forming a task force that connects the DSS with the Pulaski Central School District and other human-service organizations.

Doyle's initiative has now become a model that legislators hope the company can expand.

When recently asked why the county is spending money for an out-of-town firm to establish the task force, Legislature Chairman Barry Leemann defended the expense stating that the county wants to have the best DSS in the state.

"We want to be the best and we wanted to hire someone who could assure that," he said.

The county solicited Requests for Proposals and the chosen company was well qualified, Leemann noted. When asked why the county did not attempt to receive assistance from SUNY Oswego, Leemann said he was not aware if they offered the service.

The task force will provide a link between the community and DSS.