

Yolo supervisors OK department consolidation

By Lauren King, Daily Democrat

November 22, 2016, 2:44 PM

<http://www.dailydemocrat.com/government-and-politics/20161122/yolo-supervisors-ok-department-consolidation>

Yolo supervisors have approved an ordinance to consolidate the county's Public Guardian-Public Administrator services into larger departments to increase efficiency despite conflict of interest concerns raised by the public.

Both Supervisor Jim Provenza and a number of local residents voiced fears regarding conflicts of interest and people falling through the cracks of a larger operation. However, after hearing from Health and Human Services Agency Director Karen Larsen and her staff about plans for the transition and conflict resolution, the Board approved the ordinance 4-1, with Provenza dissenting.

"It is totally understandable that people are fearful about this transition," Larsen began. "I just want to acknowledge that. We take this very seriously."

The director and soon-to-be interim Public Guardian-Public Administrator was confident that the services would continue to hold steady and eventually improve as time goes on.

The county's Public Guardian and Public Administrator duties were formerly combined into one, independent department. For the past 17 years, Cass Sylvia has led the agency alongside several full-time staff members which have shrunk in numbers over the years. Sylvia's retirement, which is scheduled to take effect at the end of December, led the Board to move sooner than initially planned. Sylvia's elected term was originally set to expire in January 2019.

Under the new model, the Public Guardian duties will eventually be taken over by Larsen in the HHS and the Public Administrator services will be handled by Yolo County Sheriff Ed Prieto within the Sheriff-Coroner's Office. Larsen will handle both positions on an interim basis in January.

Yolo's new model is the most common statewide and staff hope that it will provide increased access to resources, service alignment, support staff and internal controls. The changes will not eliminate any of the full-time staff that were previously working in the independent Public Guardian-Public Administrator's Office.

The Public Guardian has traditionally acted as conservator of those who are elderly or severely mentally ill — and have no immediate family — by providing them proper healthcare; arranging for proper nutrition, clothing and shelter; and arranging for reasonable safety, comfort, social services, recreation and family contact. Their estates are also managed after these people have passed on. With the Public Guardian duties being in the same department as other mental health and aging services, it is anticipated that there will be more staff and services for these purposes.

The Public Administrator duties entail investigating and administering the estates of county residents who die without a will or without an appropriate person willing or able to handle the deceased's estate. With these duties falling under the Sheriff-Coroner's Office, information about the deceased will be shared more quickly.

Larsen noted her agency already serves many of the same people that require Public Guardian services and that her staff has taken measures to ease the transition.

The agency has begun reviewing each client's case so that they are aware of placements, diagnoses and case history. She has also sent two of her supervisors to a weeklong training about Public Guardian services. Additionally, HHS is receiving weekly updates from county counsel regarding upcoming court hearings, has arranged for fiscal staff to learn about the new processes and has scheduled interviews for conservatorship officer and public guardian manager positions to be conducted in mid-December.

Though Larsen will hold the title of Public Guardian in the future, the manager and lower level staff will handle the day-to-day operations.

County counsel also went over planned conflict resolution options.

Should there be a dispute between the conservatee and the county, the client's case manager or deputy will be contacted, the Public Guardian Patients' Rights Advocate or the client's public defender. For conflicts between the Public Guardian staff and Mental Health staff, a neutral mental health professional will be called in to analyze the case and give input. The Public Defender's Office and court will have oversight throughout the process.

These measures were not seen as sufficient by several in attendance at Tuesday's meeting. Supervisor Matt Rexroad of Woodland, noted that he would prefer that an ombudsman be employed to troubleshoot conflicts. County staff will consult with the Mental Health Board and other community groups and then return to the Board with feedback on that suggestion at their Dec. 12 meeting.

Several residents also raised concerns regarding Yolo County's elderly population — specifically, those with medically induced mental problems such as dementia and Alzheimer's disease.

Francis Smith, vice chairman for the Yolo County Healthy Aging Alliance argued that the Board should proceed with caution or even hit the pause button on the ordinance, pointing to conflicting interests within HHS that could cause the elderly population to fall through the cracks. Further, Smith alleged that HHS has little experience with dementia patients.

"I think that there is inherent conflict in this," Provenza asserted, arguing that the elected position of Public Guardian-Public Administrator should not be eliminated.

However, the initial ordinance was approved and the transition process will be checked monthly going forward, with the ombudsman component to remain undecided until staff has more time to perform outreach.

When Sylvia was asked to weigh in on the subject last month she asserted, "This was a movement that I was involved with late in the process and the impetus for this whole thing is not my choosing to retire ... It is something that is hard to let go because I'm not sure that the advocacy will be there on the same level."

“I truly believe that the Public Guardian should stand alone and, if not alone, there should be one person who carries that load. It’s a 24-hour a day load and it’s big,” she continued. “But it’s a matter of choice and it’s your choice. Be careful how you leave the most vulnerable people in this county.”

“I think that the Public Guardian has done an amazing job,” Supervisor Oscar Villegas commented on Tuesday, “but I think the county is in a good spot to absorb it.”