Utah's acting Workforce Services director asks advocates to collaborate

Mending fences • Advocates hope department will change focus.

By cathy mckittrick
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Jon Pierpont, acting executive director for Utah's Department of Workforce Services, met with low-income advocates Monday in an attempt to start mending relationships that have deteriorated due to an apparent shift in the agency's focus.

Workforce Services determines who qualifies for more than 150 assistance programs, from Medicaid to food stamps to unemployment. Pierpont started as a frontline eligibility worker with the department 20 years ago and has since worked in several management posts. Only a few weeks into his new role, he said he personally invited the advocates because they often serve the same customers and share "crossover" issues, which he hopes to solve together.

"We had ongoing advocate meetings for years and years," Pierpont said, acknowledging that "we haven't done that in the most recent past."

In 2007, Kristen Cox took over the reins of the statewide agency and steered DWS through a period of modernization and sweeping structural changes. Rumblings of workplace unrest led to the commission of a legislative audit this summer, which is still in progress.

In late August, Gov. Gary Herbert tapped Cox to head his new Office of Management and Budget. Pierpont, Cox's deputy director, moved up to temporarily fill the agency's top slot.
“The elephant in the room is ... the culture over the last few years on Workforce Service’s side that the focus seems to have moved somewhat away from customer service” toward streamlining electronic systems, said Barbara Munoz, health policy associate for the nonprofit Voices for Utah Children.

Between 2008 and 2012, the agency’s public assistance caseload grew by 50 percent while the ranks of full-time eligibility workers shrank by 26 percent.

“Our concern ... is to make sure that the department is moving in a direction of customer focus,” Munoz said, “making sure there are still people available to answer questions either on the phone or in person.”

Cox told lawmakers earlier this year that staff costs to handle each case decreased from $57.66 to $35. The agency’s automated call center averaged more than 100,000 calls each month during the second half of 2011, and about one-third of those calls dropped off due to wait times of 13 to 20 minutes.

Judi Hilman, executive director of Utah Health Policy Project, pointed to the agency’s downsizing and asked Pierpont if there were incentives in place for getting people into programs rather than keeping them out.

Hilman also voiced concern about a “huge ramp-up of eligibility coming in 2014” due to portions of the Affordable Care Act taking effect. With budgetary constraints beginning to ease, Hilman wondered if any staffing reductions would be restored.

Pierpont agreed to share budget information and reasons for what the agency does and why at their next joint session. The group decided to begin meeting the first Wednesday of each month at 1:30 p.m. Advocates will forward their top issues to Gina Cornia, executive director for Utahns Against Hunger, who will set the agenda.

“Decision-makers need to be present,” said Glenn Bailey, executive director for the nonprofit Crossroads Urban Center, “and there needs to be an interactive discussion — not just ‘this is what we’re doing, see you next time.’”

Pierpont pledged to attend every meeting. “Whatever the issue, I will be here, actively engaged,” Pierpont said.

“That’s an excellent start,” Bailey replied.

Whether the governor will make Pierpont’s role permanent remains to be seen. Pierpont said he has no plans for big changes yet. “I think we’re on the right track,” he said.

Rep. Rebecca Chavez-Houck, D-Salt Lake City, attended Monday’s session and said she would be “very happy” to see Pierpont continue as executive director.

“There’s a lot to be said for someone who has come up through the ranks,” Chavez-Houck said, “and has an understanding of the history and a broader feel for the consumers and individuals that they serve.”

cmckitrick@sltrib.com

Twitter: @catmck