System was 22 years in making, and will improve service quality, efficiency and all related costs are shifted from the county to the state. "These new human service zones, and the counties in them, can share staff resources, specialization and expertise amongst each other."

I n 1997, the North Dakota Legislature passed a bill (SB 2124) providing for a major restructuring of how we deliver and finance our system of social services. This legislation was actually 22 years in the making.

Historically, North Dakota’s social service programs have been run by each of our state’s 53 counties, with the costs of administration and the programs themselves being shared by the state and individual counties. While this system had certain advantages — for example, local control and the delivery of services close to the people who need them — it had many disadvantages as well.

Counties were expected to pay for their share of costs through a local property tax, yet they had almost no control of what those costs might be. In particular, counties that had a large portion of land on an Indian reservation were not able to generate property taxes on reservation lands, and also were experiencing much higher caseloads. This, of course, resulted in much higher property tax bills for those residents compared to homeowners and businesses in other counties.

Another major disadvantage: A person had to receive services within the county where he or she lived, even if it was closer or more convenient to receive those same services in another county. Some counties also were not providing quality services, and the state had very little ability to rectify the situation.

THE SLOW, STEADY PACE OF SYSTEM REFORM

While it was apparent our county-led system needed improvement, change comes hard. In the Legislature, we passed a measure in 1997 transferring all administrative costs to the counties in exchange for the state taking on more of the program costs. Because of funding limitations, the state was unable to take on all of the program costs, but this “swap” was at least a step in the right direction.

We also put in place additional funding for those counties affected by reservation lands to help offset their additional tax burdens. These changes gave counties greater ability to manage their overall costs, because they had more leeway in determining staffing and other expenses.

Still, many of us in the Legislature were advocating that the state take over all of the costs of social services, as well as overall management of the system. It seemed patently unfair that local taxpayer dollars should be used to pay for services they had virtually no control over, and for services that could vary dramatically from one county to the next.

Because of ongoing issues dealing with the administration of child support in some regions of North Dakota, the Legislature did pass a bill in 2007 that had the state take over all costs and administration in this particular program area. That decision came with a lot of pushback from the counties, as they were afraid of losing employees and local control. In the end, though, the move was a success in all areas. Complaints over child support issues dropped dramatically, we saw greater efficiencies, and existing employees were able to remain in their local communities.

This experience helped give more credibility for those of us advocating for a total redesign of our system.

PATIENCE PAYS OFF: MAJOR RESTRUCTURING NOW IN PLACE

In 2015, we passed legislation for the state to take over the rest of the counties’ share of program costs for social services. Two years later, we agreed to pay the counties their current costs of running the programs, a total that came to about $180 million. As part of this legislative appropriation, a study commission was established and charged with working out how best to deliver services going forward.

The result of that study was SB 2124, passed during our most recent legislative session. Our new system divides the state into “human service” zones, each of which is made up of multiple counties. These counties hire a zone director with approval from the state’s Department of Human Services. The zones are reimbursed based on the services they perform. Importantly, these zones, and the counties in them, can share staff resources, areas of specialization and expertise amongst each other.

I believe North Dakotans will be much better served, as they can now go wherever is most convenient to them. Also, because we are no longer worried about multiple jurisdictions, we have employees that can specialize in each area to better deliver services to each client. This makes for better efficiencies, as our human-service workers are able to become experts in their focus area.

This restructuring is also a good deal for the counties; all costs are paid for by the state, the newly created zones provide for overall management, and oversight comes from our state Department of Human Services.

TIMELINE OF NORTH DAKOTA’S GRADUAL REFORM OF ITS SOCIAL SERVICES SYSTEM

1997

State takes on more program costs; counties assume all administrative costs

Counties are relieved of the local share of Medicaid payments to hospitals, doctors and nursing homes

2007

Child support enforcement and all related costs are shifted from the county to the state

2019

Passage of SB 214 restructures administration and delivery of social services; new “human service” zones (made of multiple counties) created and overseen by state Department of Health Services

Sources: North Dakota Department of Human Services and North Dakota Rep. Robin Weisz

Rep. Robin Weisz has been a member of the North Dakota House since 1996. He is a graduate of CSG Midwest’s Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development.

by North Dakota Rep. Robin Weisz (rweisz@nd.gov)