

CROW WING COUNTY BOARD

Persistence pays

County close to realizing long-sought goal of health care purchasing system

By **RENEE RICHARDSON**

Senior Reporter

After years of frustration and effort, Crow Wing County is close to a goal it first sought about eight years ago.

"We're this close folks," Susan Beck, human services director, told commissioners Tuesday as she nearly pinched her forefinger and thumb together. "This is a sure thing as far as I'm concerned."

At issue is a health care purchasing system operated by a county or group of counties. The system allows a county to purchase localized health care service for certain residents in Medical Assistance, General Assistance, Medical Care and MinnesotaCare.

The county has long contended this option will provide better health care and reduce costs but found opposition from Kevin Goodno, Minnesota Department of Human Services commissioner. Goodno was against a single managed care organization providing service in the county.

Crow Wing County commissioners contended opposition was motivated by managed health plans.

Now those hurdles appear to be in the past. For the counties, work behind the scenes included special legislation, many meetings with elected officials and agency staff members and continuous sessions with South Country. Beck said she did not believe Goodno would oppose the plan at this point.

County-based purchasing is considered an enhanced alternative to those the state purchases through contracts with health maintenance organizations.

Crow Wing County has been working with Cass, Wadena, Morrison and Todd counties to join South Country Health Alliance. The alliance — in operation for five years — serves nine Minnesota counties to the south — Brown, Dodge, Freeborn, Goodhue, Kanabec, Sibley, Steele, Waseca and Wabasha.

Crow Wing County will be able to buy into the alliance as a full and equal partner for an

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Human services director

estimated \$2.8 million to be paid in installments during the next four years.

Beck said she feels strongly the plan will be a superior option for the people the county serves and will provide excellent health care.

Commissioners agreed, passing a series of motions to move forward. Crow Wing County will be the largest member county, in terms of population, in the organization.

Chairman Ed Larsen noted Commissioner Terry Sluss and Jim Hill, former commissioner, were involved in Crow Wing County's initial attempt to start a county-based purchasing group here. Larsen said if the program had gotten off the ground, South Country Health Alliance would have been asking to join the group here.

The ill-fated program never materialized. But South Country Health Alliance has referenced the trail-blazing effort for its organization.

"I'm just glad we are there," Sluss said.

Beck said National Committee for Quality Assurance's Health Plan Employer Data and Information Set ranked South Country first in nine out of 21 specific health care areas monitored by the state, gaining more firsts than Blue Plus, Medica or UCare.

In regard to the national average, Beck said South Country exceeded the national average in 18 of 21 areas.

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