



## Helping Others with comPassion and Empathy - H.O.P.E.

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**Date:** November 20, 2021  
**To:** Richland County Strategic Planning Committee  
**From:** Tracy Thorsen, Director (on behalf of the Health and Human Services department)  
**RE:** Review and Response to Drafted Strategic Planning Documents

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I have reviewed the drafted chapters (1 & 2) of the Richland County Strategic Plan and below are my comments and responses to the questions posed by the Committee. I hope this feedback is helpful. I will be glad to offer clarification or answer any additional questions that the Committee may have.

*After reviewing the drafted chapters, what questions do you have with the language? Or, which sections could use further explanation to frame context?*

In the Chapter 1 draft, the description of the priorities, framework for decision-making, as well as the mission and vision statements were nicely articulated. I also thought the organizational chart gave a very good overview of the full county system. I thought the “Considerations” section on page 6 was very good in outlining guiding principles for decision-making, but they did cause me to question how they would be regularly included in discussion and debate when difficult decisions are before the County Board or the County Administration. Without a strong commitment and clear process for incorporating them, they could easily be set aside and forgotten. I don’t think that an explanation of the specific process that will be followed is necessary in this document, but it may be important to commit to a process that regularly incorporates these considerations into decision-making or they will be set aside and forgotten.

In the draft of Chapter 2, I think that the Committee has focused in on the most important goals to move the county forward. I believe that the initial focus on the internal structure and operations of the county and its departments makes the most sense in assuring a good transition to the County Administrator organizational format.

*In context of the services you help provide or oversee, what concerns do you have with the drafted language?*

*In context of the services you help provide or oversee, what recommended amendments, additions or deletions would you offer to the chapter’s content? (do keep in mind that additional chapters are under development)*

For the above two questions, I’ve taken each section of the Chapter 2 draft and summarized my feedback under the headings of “Concerns” or “Recommendations” below. There are some sections in which I did not have any specific feedback to offer. I realize that some of my comments may have strayed away from type of feedback that the Committee requested from Department Heads. I’m afraid that I may have gotten too much “into the weeds” of how the tactics might be implemented. Reading through these drafts generated a lot of thoughts that I wanted to get down on paper. If the Committee feels this is feedback that is more appropriate for another time, I certainly understand.

## Organizational Structure

### Streamline Organizational Structure (Effectiveness)

I think the tactic of centralizing common county-wide processes/systems under the County Administrator is the next logical step in changing the county's organizational structure and will create greater efficiencies and effectiveness in the county's functioning and operations. Doing so will also lead to the other tactics outlined in the draft for establishing a process for county-wide procurement and updating the payroll and finance system. Updating the financial systems is greatly needed. Currently Health and Human Services must track expenses and revenues in separate spreadsheets because the AS400 system too cumbersome to run the needed reports for managing the complex funding streams of our programs.

My experience previously working in another county that had standalone human resource, finance, and maintenance departments was very positive. These departments provided significant support for both large and small county departments so that they could focus on their primary intended purpose or service. I think creating these separate departments in Richland County would be an overall benefit.

Concerns: Making some of these changes will be complicated, however, and will have unintended consequences if not fully thought through. Although I support the goals of streamlining the county's organizational structure, being a larger department, Health and Human Services has very well-established human resources and financial processes that meet our agency needs. I'm sure the same is true for the other large county departments. My concern is that by creating separate human resources and finance departments that it does not result in unintended cumbersome layers of administration and thereby reduce efficiencies for Health and Human Services. I am also concerned about how these changes may impact Health and Human Services staff positions. In order to create these separate departments, staffing will likely need to be evaluated and it will be necessary to determine if some positions should be moved to the newly formed department; whether it be human resources, finance, or maintenance. In some cases, there may not be an easy way to pull out staff positions from Health and Human Services and place them in a new department. For example, Health and Human Services staff who perform human resources and financial functions may have other roles that must remain within the agency. There will also be financial considerations. Health and Human Services is able to use funding for indirect expenses because they are a part of the overall agency overhead. It would be important to evaluate the financial impact of changes and assure that there is not a net loss of available funding.

Recommendations: It would be my hope that there be significant participation by the county departments that already have established staff, systems, and processes for human resources, financial functions, and maintenance so that unintended consequences of re-organizing do not occur.

### Improve Financial Practices (Improvement/Effectiveness)

This goal and the tactics listed in this section are needed and will help assure a comprehensive financial strategy for the county. The budget development process will become more involved, but I think the tactics outlined will assure the County Administrator and the County Board able to better understand the county's financial position so they can set appropriate priorities for Richland County. I don't have any specific concerns or recommendations as they relate to Health and Human Services.

### Increase Coordination (Effectiveness)

While this goal and the tactics listed will be beneficial, they do not appear to have a direct connection to the mission and work of Health and Human Services. I do not have any specific concerns or recommendations to offer.

## Workforce (Growth)

### Improve employee Pay and HR Policies

I am grateful to see that the County Board recognizes the importance of retaining quality employees and has made it a primary focus of its strategic goals. This is even more important when every employer (public and private business) is struggling to recruit and retain staff. The tactics of obtaining market value for the county's pay plan and providing annual pay increases is vital to this retention goal.

Concerns: The pay plan has never been fully implemented and there is no comprehensive plan for how it will be implemented. Step 8 of the pay plan is intended to be the "control point" or the estimated market rate for each grade and there are no steps above the control point. The current pay plan rules restrict movement above step 4 for the general wage scale (Pine Valley is different) except for some employees who were originally placed at a higher step when the pay plan was adopted. There are a few other exceptions. Because of these restrictions, staff with longevity have not been advancing to the market rate. New staff catch up to the same level as long-time staff within two years. Long-time staff feel that the institutional knowledge and skills that they contribute as a result of their longevity are not recognized.

With regard to developing uniform human resources policies, overall I think it is important to have a set of policies that apply consistently across the county. However, there are good reasons for the special provisions that are contained in the separate department-specific addenda to the county's employee handbook that address department operational needs. These are still necessary.

Recommendations: Establish a comprehensive plan for applying the pay plan and funding it. There should be a policy for annually adjusting the plan to maintain market competitiveness, for determining placement on the plan when hiring, and for advancing staff along the steps to reward longevity. There should also be steps beyond the control point. As a department head, it would be beneficial to have the flexibility to place new hires on the plan based upon skills and experience. It would also be important that the plan be regularly "aged" or updated so that our wages stay competitive. Finally, we need to value and reward employees for their longevity with the county by having a clear plan for advancing employees up the steps of their pay grades based upon either a set years of service schedule or some sort of performance-based advancement. Carlson Dettmann would be a potential resource in developing policy options to ensure a comprehensive plan that covers all areas.

Currently, there are still many human resource-related issues that need to be brought before the Finance and Personnel committee (e.g. approving vacation extensions). With a County Administrator in place, this does not seem like a good use of committee time. It would seem more appropriate for all human resources decisions to be established in policy so that the County Administrator can be fully responsible for applying them without taking unnecessary time to bring them before a committee. It would be my hope that there will be an opportunity for department heads to provide input to proposed changes to policies and procedures and that the special provisions for department-specific operational needs not be eliminated.

### Develop a culture of support for employees (Improvement)

I'm glad the Committee has included this goal. Employees remain with an employer because they feel valued and appreciated; and they feel that their work is important. Wage is not the only factor. It is important that each of tactics outlined in this plan be pursued.

Concerns: Health and Human Services conducted a Staff Survey recently that highlighted staff concerns about the health insurance plan; especially related to the cost of the premium and the high deductible. With regard to the vacation benefit, there was an effort a couple of years ago to improve this benefit for new staff, but I

don't believe it is working as envisioned. There is a need to improve the vacation benefit so that it is more competitive with other public and private employers.

Recommendations: I believe that the County Administrator has indicated that addressing concerns with the county's health insurance plan will be a priority in 2022. Given the feedback that Health and Human Services received in our staff survey, it is important that this happen and that employees are very aware of the efforts. It would be my hope that there be significant participation by employees in setting priorities for the health insurance plan that is selected by the county. The work group that the County Administrator created in 2021 was very appreciated by Health and Human Services staff. They indicated that they felt like they had a voice and consideration was given to their concerns.

Improvement vacation benefit should also be addressed in 2022. Possibly adjusting the schedule (e.g. 1 week at six months; 2 weeks at one year; 3 weeks at five years; 4 weeks at ten years)

### **Prioritize Service over Staffing (Improvement)**

This goal and the tactics make sense to me and I do not have any concerns or recommendations to offer.

## **Capacity (Effectiveness)**

### **Invest in Education of County Board Supervisors (Improvement)**

This is an especially important goal. The tactics outlined would assure that Richland County has a knowledgeable County Board that is equipped to make good decisions for the county.

I imagine that the Strategic Planning Committee also appreciates the importance of educating the Board following each election on the county's strategic plan and goals in order to create buy-in and to maintain consistency of actions with regard to longer-term goals that must be pursued over a period of years.

### **Deepen Staff Training in Leadership and Management (Improvement)**

This is an important goal in order to assure competent managers who have necessary leadership skills. It is also important to develop these skills in employees who may advance to leadership roles.

Concerns: Health and Human Services has access to many funded trainings because of our connection to the State structures, however training budgets are usually the first to be reduced when funding becomes tight. While Health and Human Services funding is able to be utilized for training of staff, many of the county departments do not have any funding for these types of trainings unless it comes from tax levy.

Recommendations: If this goal is going to be a priority, the county will either need to develop a training budget that can be utilized by county departments or departments will need to be encouraged to include funding for training in their budgets. It will also be important that departments are not pressured to reduce budgeted training line items in order to reduce their need for tax levy.

### **Transparency (Improvement)**

This is an excellent goal. Health and Human Services has been following the tactics listed, except for posting meeting materials on the county website. All Health and Human Services Board materials are placed in the iPad Board folders, but I support also including the materials on the website as well.

## **Growth**

### **Maintain Investment in Workforce and Community Development**

As it relates to Health and Human Services, this goal and its tactics are important for maintaining investment in our own workforce. Many of the tactics would address concerns for the ability of Health and Human Services to recruit and retain a stable workforce so we can deliver our services to those who need them.

### **Support Business Attraction and Retention**

While this goal and its tactics would be beneficial for the county to pursue, it does not present any concerns or prompt recommendations in the context of the services or programs of Health and Human Services.

### **Improve County Identity and Marketing**

Again, while this goal and its tactics would be beneficial for the county to pursue, it does not present any concerns or prompt recommendations in the context of the services or programs of Health and Human Services.

## **Operational Performance Metrics**

Setting performance metrics is important in understanding the effectiveness of efforts. I do not have any specific concerns or recommendations to offer related to this area.

*In context of the services you help provide or oversee, do you see any conflicts with the drafted language and your current operations?*

I do not believe that there are any Health and Human Services functions or services that do not align with the strategic priorities and core values outlined in these draft documents. The Health and Human Services mission and practices align with the county's stated core values, mission, vision or strategic goals. Any concerns that I've shared are more related to considerations for implementation.

*Please add any additional comments that you think the Strategic Planning Committee should be aware of, or consider.*

As I stated on the first page, I realize that some of my comments may not be the most appropriate in the context of the feedback that the Committee requested. I'm sure that I've gotten deeper into the details of how tactics might be implemented and I'm sure that these issues will be addressed as this strategic plan is carried out.