

First Steps initiative battles expectations

By Jeffrey Pieters

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Up to now, First Steps has been waging a war against expectations -- those of its fellow service agencies, and those within the organization itself.

For the other agencies, steep funding cuts in recent years -- including a \$600,000 slash this year -- hurt programs. First Steps has raised \$2.4 million thus far and continues to be focused on attaining its goal of \$4 million.

To the agencies affected, First Steps and its six-figure contributions from the likes of Mayo Clinic and IBM looked like a rescue ship.

The agencies asked First Steps to "backfill" lost funding, but First Steps said no.

"The programs that they're looking for funding are ongoing programs that are fairly expensive," said Sheila Kiscaden, a former state senator hired as a consultant to the program. "(First Steps) is a community initiative that we'll be working on for five to 10 years. We aren't in this the same way that the school district, the city, the county and the state of Minnesota is."

Donors' interest in a cause usually lasts about seven years, Kiscaden said, "so unless you have a huge endowment for a particular endeavor, you have to do things that are shorter term."

Where First Steps can help, Kiscaden said, is by attracting grants, and by broadly increasing public appreciation for school readiness, which eventually could translate into financial support.

Meanwhile, within First Steps, impatience played a role. Some leaders in the business-backed foundation were disappointed that success didn't come faster.

Kiscaden has been working to change the outlook. She assigned board and staff members to read a 35-page management primer called "Good to Great," which explains why traditional for-profit expectations aren't right to apply to the social sector.

Sometimes, it's wrong to insist that certain things be run "like a business," she said.

"You really have a more complicated environment in the not-for-profit world and in the government sector," Kiscaden said. "You're dealing less with things that are directly measurable. You're dealing with expectations and values in different ways."

Rebuilding relationships

The relationship between First Steps and the other agencies hit a low point late last year, when it was announced that First Steps would withdraw its \$68,000 contribution funding an Olmsted County program for parents of firstborn children.

The county, in turn, rescinded its \$50,000 annual commitment to First Steps.

"I think there's a lot of misunderstanding," said county board Chairman Jim Bier, who met recently with Kiscaden.

"I think we can still get together," he said.

The addition of Kiscaden has agency and government leaders speaking with renewed optimism. Paul Fleissner, director of Olmsted County Community Services and a First Steps board member, called the hiring "huge."

Before her political career, Kiscaden worked locally in social services starting in the early 1970s. She has decades of experience working with many of the present leaders.

"It's helpful to them -- and me -- that we've worked together before," she said. "It's kind of a real pleasure to be back. It's like I've been away for a long time and a lot of things have changed, but a lot of the same people are around the table."

But her organization is new. Kiscaden regards the situation First Steps faced prior to her start as "like being the new kid at school."

In other words, just another job in school readiness.