

OPINION

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The Statesman Journal is the successor to the Oregon Statesman, founded March 28, 1851, and the Capital Journal, founded March 1, 1888.

Editorial page editor: Dick Hughes, (503) 399-6727; dhughes@StatesmanJournal.com

Our Viewpoint

Leader tries to run DHS like a business

Agency takes steps to be more efficient in helping families

Some folks wonder, “Why can’t government operate more like a business?”

It’s a good question — especially these days. Business people, including many local taxpayers, must rethink everything they do to cope with rising fuel costs and increased global competition. They expect government to operate as lean as it can, too.

Bruce Goldberg, the leader of the Department of Human Services, thinks that’s possible. He is trying to transform this huge state agency by

using the same techniques that made Toyota one of the world’s top automakers. That is, by asking the people who do the work how to reduce waste, then taking their advice seriously.

It’s a several-year process that is just in the early stages. Examples: DHS has reduced the application form for the Oregon Health Plan from 10 pages to three. The agency has centralized scattered collection workers and improved its record for recovering the state’s money by 35 percent.

These may be just the start considering the efficiencies that probably can be found at DHS — and that will be necessary to put resources

into helping children and families.

Take just one of DHS’ responsibilities: serving on the state’s front line in the war against meth. Caseworkers investigate complaints of child abuse and neglect. They play a key role in deciding whether children should be placed in foster care, whether families can be safely reunited and whether children should be freed for adoption. Yet several outside studies indicated that the state has too few caseworkers and other staff members for those roles.

By finding ways to work more efficiently, Goldberg hopes to free up money to fill much of that staffing gap.

DHS handles scores of other responsibilities, including distributing emergency food stamps, providing mental-health care and helping seniors live independently. If the state can free up misspent time in those areas and redirect it to actually serving senior citizens, hungry people and people with mental illness, that would make an incredible difference to Oregonians in need.

It also would give taxpayers more confidence that the state is spending their money as carefully as they would.

That’s what a successful business does. It’s how Oregonians would like their entire government to work.