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### **County attorney's offices make changes Dakota County eliminates juvenile unit; Ramsey dividing adult, juvenile unites**

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The Dakota County attorney's office is shuffling its departments to become more efficient with staffing and workloads.

Beginning Monday, county cases involving juveniles and adults needing protective services will be prosecuted under the criminal and civil departments.

The move will eliminate the Juvenile and Protective Services Division, a department created in the mid-1980s to handle rising caseloads in the growing south metro county, said Phil Prokopowicz, chief deputy attorney for the county attorney's office. But those cases are decreasing because of an aging population.

Now, assistant county attorneys working in the criminal division will be trained to prosecute adults and juveniles. In the civil division, assistant county prosecutors will handle civil cases as well as juvenile or adult protection and civil commitment cases. "It really is not as much a cost savings as it is to cross-train individuals, so we can have more of an efficient response to the workload," Prokopowicz said.

The training may be a learning curve for some -- for instance, juvenile criminal cases do not include jury trials. But Dakota County Attorney James Backstrom told county leaders, "I am confident that this organizational change will not result in any reduction in the quality of services we provide as we are simply reassigning our current staff."

The structure of county attorney's offices varies across the nation, officials say. Usually, a department's construction tends to change when new leadership takes over.

Starting Monday, newly elected Ramsey County Attorney John Choi plans to divide the prosecution of adult and juvenile criminal cases, which have been merged since 1995. Choi hopes the move will "elevate the profile and the importance" of the work done by the juvenile division, which also handles truancy and youth-intervention programs, said Jack Rhodes, chief of staff for the Ramsey County attorney's office.

"Every office has different approaches," Rhodes said.

In Washington County, newly elected County Attorney Pete Orput said he would need to learn more about combining departments before making changes.

"I'm interested in the topic -- I think all of us are because of the difficult economic times we're all in," Orput said. "It's worth looking at."

In Dakota County, the number of juvenile criminal cases has declined partially because of an aging population -- which has shrunk the department, Prokopowicz said.

In 2009, the number of juveniles charged decreased by about 20 percent compared with

seven years before, when it reached a peak of 2,070. Meanwhile, cases involving juvenile and adult protective services have remained steady at about 300 a year, said Monica Jensen, spokeswoman for the Dakota County attorney's office. Protective services cover civilly committed and sexually dangerous adults.

The merging of the departments will not affect staffing. The new criminal department will include 15 assistant county attorneys and a department head. The civil division will include 10 assistant county attorneys and a department head.

However, for the first time in three years, Dakota County plans to hire two new assistant county prosecutors to handle criminal cases, Backstrom said. The new hires will fill vacancies. The county's child-support department in West St. Paul will remain intact.

Graphic: Pioneer Press  
Juvenile offenders

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