

**First lady of state helps social service agencies
Strickland visits city, tours Ohio to learn problems facing organizations**

By TIERRA PALMER

The Eagle-Gazette Staff

tlpalmer@nncogannett.com

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LANCASTER - Local social service providers say compliance issues and a lack of funding have impeded their efforts to improve the quality of life in Fairfield County. Now they are looking to first lady Frances Strickland to help them cut through the red tape.

Strickland visited Lancaster Thursday and met with members of the Fairfield County Family, Adult and Children First Council which is a partnership of civic leaders, public, private nonprofit and for-profit social service agencies committed to improving the well-being of children and families locally. Strickland, who chairs the Ohio Family and Children First Cabinet Council, said she has heard similar concerns about mounting paperwork and increased bureaucracy during meetings with other family councils in the state.

"Those are recurring themes that we have heard around the state," said Strickland, who has talked with Family and Children First councils in 54 of Ohio's 88 counties.

The first lady is touring the state in an effort to learn more about the challenges those organizations face and what the state council can do to alleviate those barriers.

"They see these problems at the local level every day, so they know (what) the solutions (are)," Strickland said.

Becky Edwards, executive director of the Fairfield County Family, Adult and Children First Council, described Thursday's roundtable meeting as productive.

"It wasn't just a courtesy visit or a PR event. She (Strickland) was present and engaged. She asked good, thoughtful questions, so she left with an understanding of what the issues are," Edwards said.

The consensus from local leaders was that lower wages, coupled with higher living expenses, are making it harder for area families to meet their obligations. Many of those families are turning to social service agencies for assistance.

Approximately 6 percent of the county's 140,729 residents live in poverty. Of those, nearly half - 47 percent - are female-headed households and one quarter are married couples. And there are about 17,000 Medicaid recipients, more than two-thirds of which are low-to-moderate-income children and families.

"When a family walks through the door, they don't even know what to ask for. They're just asking for help," said Laura Holton, who oversees the community services division of Fairfield Job and Family Services.

"But the rules are overwhelming and helping families navigate (application process) is cumbersome. The state needs to simplify the eligibility rules," she said.

Strickland said she is assembling a committee to help streamline that process. She also has proposed creating a centralized database that would make it easier for agencies to collect and review applicants' personal information.

"The goal is to cut unnecessary spending - specifically, administrative overhead - and free up additional money to serve more families," Strickland said in reference to those efforts.