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County Spotlight: Office of Corporation Counsel
Advocating for those who Live, Work and Play in Polk County
April 21, 2015

On February 5, 1958, President Eisenhower proclaimed **May 1** to be Law Day U.S.A. Law Day celebrates the role of law in the foundation of the country and events in celebration of Law Day recognize the importance law has in society. In celebration of Law Day, The April 2015 *County Spotlight* highlights the Office of Corporation Counsel and its role in advocating for the people who live, work and play in Polk County.

History and Development of the Office of Corporation Counsel

At one time, all county legal matters were handled through the District Attorney's office. In 1989, the Wisconsin Legislature amended the statutes to require counties to employ a Corporation Counsel or to designate an attorney to perform the duties of a Corporation Counsel.

In January 1990, the Polk County Board of Supervisors established the Office of Corporation Counsel, appointed its first Corporation Counsel in March of that year and assigned the responsibility:

- To represent the Board of Supervisors and the Polk County Department of Social Services.
- To administer the county child support enforcement program, to prosecute zoning ordinance violation cases; and
- To advocate as interest of the public in mental commitments, guardianship and protective placement cases.

In 1998, the County established the full-time attorney position of Assistant Corporation Counsel and transferred the responsibility to handle termination of parental rights cases. In December 2014, the County transferred to the Office of Corporation Counsel the responsibility to advocate as interest of the public in children in need of protection (CHIPS) cases.

Currently, two attorneys and two professional support personnel provide a full range of civil legal services for the County. Additionally, the Office of Corporation Counsel serves as the umbrella to the Polk County Child Support Agency, consisting of five technical support staff under the direction of the Assistant Corporation Counsel.¹

Vision:

The Office of Corporation Counsel enhances the organizational strength of the County of Polk by responsively providing professional, proficient and cost-effective legal services.

¹ The August 20, 2014 *County Spotlight* highlighted the Polk County Child Support Agency. See: http://www.co.polk.wi.us/vertical/sites/%7BA1D2EAAA-7A29-46D6-BF1A-12B71F23A6E1%7D/uploads/Spotlight_CSA_August_2014.pdf

Mission:

The Office of Corporation Counsel provides legal services in a manner that complements, supports and advances the ability of the County of Polk, the Board of Supervisors, committees, departments and connected boards and commissions, elected and appointed county officers and employees to deliver programs and services with integrity.

Commitment:

The Office of Corporation Counsel, its attorneys and staff strive to improve the quality of life for the citizens of Polk County by delivering to the County essential legal services in an ethical, proficient and fiscally responsible manner. Through responsive, highly professional and cost-effective legal services, the County:

- Is proactive on legal issues and avoids future lawsuits.
- Promotes and strengthens the organizational integrity of county government.
- Achieves and maintains cost-effectiveness through continued organizational awareness and the avoidance of large fees for retaining outside counsel.
- Improves the quality of life for all who work, live and play in Polk County and increases public safety, especially with respect to the legal services provided to county departments and in the advocacy of the public interest that benefit and promote the well-being of children, elderly, and individuals with disabilities.

Through its work with other departments and advocacy in the interest of the public, the Office of Corporation Counsel helps strengthen, support, develop and preserve cultural, social, and community values and natural resources.

Departmental Function:

The Office of Corporation Counsel carries out this vision, mission and commitment by providing legal representation and advocacy in four inter-related service areas (Time and cost allocation %) :

- **GENERAL GOVERNMENT LEGAL SERVICES (20%):** In this function, the Office of Corporation Counsel serves as a general attorney and provides the County legal advice and civil litigation services in all areas of County operations, including organizational, administrative and personnel development; general government law, policy development and policy administration; county property management, contract negotiation and administration, records retention and completion of records requests; land use planning and zoning, ordinance development and enforcement; and collections and claims administration. In this role, the Office of Corporation Counsel represents and provides legal advice to the County Board, County Administrator, County departments, committees, boards, commissions, supervisors, elected and appointed county officials and employees in respect to official duties and delivers legal services by rendering legal opinions, drafting and reviewing contracts, ordinances, resolutions and county policies and, litigating cases, where necessary.

Through legal services provided through the Office of Corporation Counsel, the County recently:

- Established the County Office of County Administrator.
- Reorganized the County Board Standing Committee Structure.
- Implemented a cost-effective, comprehensive lease administration program, consisting of an inventory of all county leased properties; standardized model lease agreement; lease checklist; and lease closing checklist.

- **ADVOCACY IN HUMAN SERVICES CASES (22%):** In this functional area, the Office of Corporation Counsel represents the interests of the public in prosecuting various types of administrative and court actions that involve protection of the rights and liberties of individuals and the public. These matters include guardianships and protective placements, involuntary mental and chemical dependency commitments, children in need of protection and services (CHIPS) cases, termination of parental rights, and truancies.

Successful outcomes in these cases result from considerable collaboration with public and private service entities in Polk County and adjacent communities. The Office of Corporation Counsel holds annual and periodic training and communication events bringing together representatives throughout the Polk County community from law enforcement agencies, health care providers, schools and public and private social service entities to present and to discuss developments in the law and emerging and trending issues within the community. These collaborative events strengthen communication across public service providers in Polk County and make possible a unified and cost-effective delivery of services to the citizens of Polk County.

In September 2015, the responsibility for prosecuting CHIPS cases will be completely transferred to the Office of Corporation Counsel. The transfer shifts the responsibility of case prosecution to the Office of Corporation Counsel. The completed transfer of this important case segment is likely to improve the quality of life of out of home children through an increased rate of permanency and to increase the efficiency of delivery of legal services by bringing all handling aspects of CHIPS cases into one legal department.

- **EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS (3%):** This functional area involves advising the Employee Relations Department on employment law concerns, representing the County in labor negotiations and in administrative proceedings involving employment law matters.

Through legal services provided through the Office of Corporation Counsel, the County successfully and cost-effectively responded to the challenges presented by changes in Wisconsin Municipal Employment Law.

- **CHILD SUPPORT PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION (55%):** The Office of the Corporation Counsel serves as the umbrella agency responsible for administering the State of Wisconsin/County of Polk contract for child support services.

The successes highlighted above and those in process are attributable to the dedication and committed effort of the officers, officials and employees of the County. The attorneys and staff of the Office of Corporation Counsel are grateful to the people of Polk County and the Polk County Board of Supervisors for the challenging and rewarding opportunities of public service and advocating for those who live, work and play in Polk County.

On behalf of the County of Polk,

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