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County hires new human services director

Following a national search, Snohomish County Executive Aaron Reardon has selected Kenneth Stark as the new county human services director.

Stark currently is the director of Gov. Chris Gregoire's Mental Health Transformation Project and has a long history of work in human-services-related fields. He will start his new position on June 23.

"Ken Stark has an impressive employment record in the field of human services so it's with great anticipation that we make him our new director," Reardon said. "We believe he will fulfill the goals we set before him and transform a department that is becoming more and more crucial to Snohomish County residents."

Since 1975, Stark has worked in the private and public sector, mostly overseeing or administering alcohol- and substance-abuse programs, including programs in King County and the Washington Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS).

Gregoire called Stark "a dynamic visionary leader" when she asked him in 2005 to retool delivery of the state's mental health care system.

"Ken has built an impressive career on the principle of identifying and implementing effective treatment strategies," she said. "He has been a staunch supporter of quality improvements and evidence-based decision making – exactly what our mental-health-delivery system needs."

Stark will lead the county's Human Services Department, which includes divisions offering community mental health, substance abuse, veterans and housing/homelessness programs.

Reardon said Stark will re-energize a department with nearly 200 employees. Reardon has charged Stark with finding innovative and effective ways to provide human services to Snohomish County residents.

"We need new direction and a fresh perspective. Ken can provide that," Reardon said. "He will be responsive to the needs of Snohomish County residents, providing services that increase their quality of life."

Snohomish County began a national search for a new director in December 2007. More than 25 applicants were narrowed to a handful for personal interviews. Stark was chosen by a team representing varied interests.

“I’m looking forward to working in Snohomish County,” Stark said. “It gives me the opportunity to truly work in an area that brings multiple programs together, so that we can improve coordinated services to the people of Snohomish County.”

Stark earned a master’s degree in education from Seattle University in 1979 and a master’s in business administration from City University in 1981. Prior to his work for the governor, which began in 2005, he served a year as deputy assistant secretary of the Health and Rehabilitation Administration for DSHS. Before that, he spent six years as DSHS’ director of the Division of Alcohol and Substance Abuse and one year as administrator of the King County Assessment Center, which refers clients to various alcohol and drug treatments.

In addition, Stark also has worked as administrator of the private-based Riverton Hospital Careunit and was president and director of First Step, a for-profit, outpatient chemical-dependency treatment program.

Among many honors that he has received, Stark received the 2005 governor’s Distinguished Management Leadership Award and the 2003 Service Award from the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors

Since December, Cindy Hart has been acting human services director. She will return to her previous position in the county’s Department of Facilities, where she is deputy director.

“Cindy has been instrumental during our transition in the Humans Services Department. I thank her heartily for the work she’s accomplished there.” Reardon said. “However, she is an asset to us in the facilities department, and it is important to get her back to the work for which she was hired.”

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