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The Kaizen Philosophy: From Toyota to Canon to Anoka County

Kaizen, a Japanese business philosophy that stresses incremental, continuous improvement in the workplace, is being introduced at Anoka County under a pilot program in the County Attorney's Office and Economic Assistance Department.

Derived from the Japanese word "kai," which means change, and "zen," meaning to make better, Kaizen strives to make continuous changes for the better. It has been adapted and used in private industry since the 1980s, where it is known as Lean Six Sigma, to promote efficiency and the production of high quality goods and services. Kaizen requires that all employees in an organization, line staff and supervisors alike, look for small, incremental ways to improve productivity, safety, and effectiveness. While its origins are in the rebuilding of Japanese industry after World War II, Kaizen principles and practices have now been applied to healthcare, banking, engineering, government, and other industries. (<http://www.epa.gov/lean/thinking/kaizen.htm>)

"The demand for government services is always growing, but our financial resources are limited," said Anoka County Board Chair Rhonda Sivarajah. "We can learn a lot by studying ways in which private industry streamlines and improve its processes to work more effectively."

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The complicated and often contentious area of paternity and child support requires a high degree of cooperation between the County Attorney's Office and Economic Assistance Department. A Kaizen consultant recently worked with a team of 15 staff members from both departments over several weeks to identify and document the current processes used to determine paternity and establish child support. They found paternity determination cases from start to finish required 94 steps, more than 12 hours of processing time, and an average 176-day waiting period. With the Kaizen expert's guidance, the team closely analyzed the existing process and recommended changes that would cut the required steps to 70, the processing time to 10.4 hours, and the average wait time to 63 days. Many of the changes call for improving communications between departments, developing standardized processes, and eliminating duplication of effort. "None of these are dramatic changes on their own, but added together, they result in significant improvements," Sivarajah said.

The plan now is to explore ways in which the Kaizen philosophy can benefit other county departments and processes. The original Kaizen team will train other county employees who will then train their co-workers until the process is shared countywide.