

**HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE  
MINUTES  
(REMOTELY)**

**TUESDAY, MARCH 23, 2021  
3:30 P.M.**

PRESENT: Rob Sassi, Chairman  
Mike Anagnostakis, James O'Donnell, Janet Sutherland, Laurie R. Tautel, Peter V. Tuohy

ALSO

PRESENT: L. Stephen Brescia, Chairman  
Katie Bonelli, Majority Leader  
Michael D. Paduch, Minority Leader  
Leigh J. Benton, Legislator  
Barry J. Cheney, Legislator  
Thomas J. Faggione, Legislator  
Kevin W. Hines, Legislator  
Kevindaryán Luján, Legislator  
Paul Ruskiewicz, Legislator  
Rob Sassi, Legislator  
Kathy Stegenga, Legislator  
Betsy N. Abraham, Legislative Counsel  
Harold J. Porr, III, Deputy County Executive  
Dan Bloomer, Director, Operations and Cost Control  
Darcie Miller, Commissioner of Social Services and Mental Health  
Todd Craner, Fiscal Director, Department of Social Services  
Stephen Knob, Director, Employment and Training Administration  
Danielle Diana-Smith, Assistant Director, Office for the Aging  
Deborah Slesinski, Budget Director  
Gretchen Riordan, Budget Analyst  
Elizabeth Delaney, Budget Analyst  
Samantha Sweikata, Director of Compliance, Department of General Services

Mr. Sassi opened the committee meeting at 3:32 p.m. and asked everyone to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. All committee members were present with the exception of Legislator Amo who was absent.

Mr. Tuohy moved request resolution providing that, notwithstanding Resolution No. 276 of 2020 (resolution reaffirming Orange County Department of General Services Procurement Policy), services may be procured or goods purchased using the least restrictive manner permitted by law for purpose of implementing the Orange County Housing Stabilization Program which relates to the U.S. Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP), Community Development Block Grant-Coronavirus Program (CDBG-CV); and Emergency Solutions Grant-Coronavirus (ESG-CV), seconded by Ms. Sutherland.

Ms. Miller explained that they are on the cusp of deciding whether to directly administer the U.S. Treasury funds of \$11.4 million and the anticipated second round of approximately \$9 million. They have been waiting for the state to decide on how they would implement a statewide program, but the language differs between the assembly, senate and the executive office and how the program would be administered. The stakeholders are concerned that the state objectives may differ from what the Orange County objectives would be. They have seen projections that show New York City only receiving 19% of the total funds; however, they need about 75% of the funds to address their rental arrears. If the state goes forward with a 50% Area Median Income (AMI) plan they will never get to the 80% Area Median Income (AMI) that is allowable nor would they be able to expand into paying utility arrears. By having Orange County administering the program directly, they will have more flexibility on what they can pay and the number of months of arrears as well as any additional housing needs they could possibly support. Unless the state comes up with a plan before they are fully contracted and ready to open a portal, they will be moving forward with the County Executive's support to directly administer the funds. They must have contracts in place particularly a software contract that would allow them to have a portal to work from, receive applications and to process them. The federal procurement allows them to go up to \$250,000.00 for quotes in order to make those decisions so they are making this request to allow them to waive the \$100,000.00 limit on the procurement and to go up to the \$250,000.00 as needed in order to have contracts put in place quickly in order to administer this time sensitive program. The eviction moratorium is slated to be lifted on May 1, 2021, and if that happens, they need to have the rental arrears program in place to avoid mass evictions due to COVID-19.

Mr. Tuohy asked if the \$9 million was in addition to the \$11.4 million received by Community Development. Ms. Miller replied yes, however, they are waiting on the criteria for the funds, but they know it will be for rental arrears and will be extended to 2025. That would bring the total in U.S. Treasury funds to \$20.4 million in addition to the Community Development Block Grant-Coronavirus Program (CDBG-CV) and Emergency Solutions Grant-Coronavirus (ESG-CV) funds in the amount of approximately \$2.5 million. Those funds would be administered simultaneously based on the criteria for eligibility.

Mr. Luján asked about the criteria and/or eligibility for those that would qualify. He recalls that the reason they could not pay their rent was because it was COVID-19 related; however, some landlords have stated that some of their tenants did not lose their jobs due to COVID-19 but chose not to pay their rents. If they are not covered under this program would they be covered through another program. Ms. Miller replied that they would have to make sure they meet the eligibility criteria, and they must target the lower Area Median Income (AMI) and they are doing a needs assessment to look at poverty levels by district and the renters they have. The landlord survey has been distributed for the second time asking for simple data on the number of months their tenants are in arrears, number of tenants and the total amount of arrears. This will help them to get a sense of what the needs are across the county. The first survey was put out for two weeks and they had approximately 160 landlords respond for just over \$5 million so it was distributed again to garner additional landlords to participate so they have a good starting foundation. While the landlord can apply, the tenant must cooperate, and the tenant will have to show that they had a loss of income related to the COVID-19 pandemic such as loss of employment, childcare issues that interfered, two member working family became a one working family member and/or any combination of those issues. If they do not meet that criteria, they will not be able to receive these funds for arrears with landlords moving forward with eviction which will result in homelessness.

Mr. Luján requested the landlord survey be distributed all legislators. Ms. Miller replied that that it was the same survey, but they would gladly send it to them.

Motion carried. All in favor.

On the agenda were the highlighted important issues from the Department of Social Services monthly report.

Ms. Miller reported that Temporary Assistance and Family Assistance numbers continue to decrease which is due to unemployment and the eviction moratorium. They have reallocated staff to assist in the call center, connecting to courts, and processing SNAP applications as they have increased substantially and because of the additional unemployment benefits some people's eligibility for SNAP benefits has changed. Since they are slightly behind on processing those cases, they have reassigned staff and approved overtime in order to have the application determination done within the 30-day regulated time frame. They continue to process HEAP applications and they ended 2020 with approximately 300 children in foster care. Child Protective Services caseloads are beginning to increase but they are working closely with schools and the possibility of having preventive staff onsite with children slated to return to school. They recently had a social worker from one school district make 40 preventive referrals in one day and Raise the Age numbers remains consistent.

Ms. Tautel asked if the extra money a person receives from unemployment would be equal to the amount of SNAP benefits they would have received. Ms. Miller replied that to receive SNAP benefits they must meet a certain income eligibility requirement and if they no longer meet that income eligibility, they would not be eligible for SNAP and it is not dollar to dollar as their income would have to increase enough to make them ineligible.

Ms. Tautel asked if they have discussed the summer cooling program. Ms. Miller replied that the summer cooling program has not been discussed as they are still in the middle of the HEAP season.

On the agenda was a Department Update from Danielle Diana-Smith, Assistant Director, Office for the Aging.

Ms. Diana-Smith explained that COVID-19 and vaccine distribution remains a top priority for the Office for the Aging. They are vaccinating a large part of their population; however, there still remains a great deal of their population that needs to be vaccinated. They continue to field hundreds of calls a day with staff going to the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) daily register people for the vaccine in addition to manning point of distribution (POD's). In addition to the aging population, they are now assisting the vaccination of the homebound and group home population with transportation being an added hurdle. HEAP has begun to wind down, but it does remain in effect until the end of April. The Tax Aid program is currently going on for older adults and low-income individuals throughout Orange County. Prior to COVID-19 they were able to do thousands of tax returns but because of the pandemic they do not have as many sites available, so they are only doing a few hundred. The Friendly Visitor program through Jewish Family Services is still very active and is in nine municipalities and during these times it targets and addresses loneliness and social isolation. In addition, every member of their staff is responsible for thirty to fifty wellness calls a week. They are always in need of volunteers and they lost a great deal due to COVID-19. Seniors are starting to get anxious as senior centers have been closed for nearly a year. They are beginning

to get calls on when they can open, what is the Department of Health stating and what protocols will be in place. They met with Dr. Gelman on Friday regarding this issue and she is still not comfortable with just opening the senior centers right now. She has stated that she would entertain conversations with mayors and supervisors in the municipalities if 80% and/or more of seniors and staff coming into the centers have been vaccinated before she can entertain opening the senior center. She and Dr. Gelman agree that they need to be a little bit cautious and vigilant for a few more months. With respect to the dining program, the spring menu will be going out shortly and they continue to conduct zoom events with their Caregivers Support Group and Elder Abuse Awareness Coalition.

On the agenda was a Department Update from Stephen Knob, Director, Employment and Training Administration.

Mr. Knob addressed the committee stating that they are open by appointment only with most services being done virtually. They are contacting approximately 500 individuals a week who are either on public assistance or unemployment insurance and to offer their services; however, they currently do not have any takers to fill the approximately 400 to 500 jobs in Orange County. The unemployment insurance extension now runs through September so there is not a big incentive for people to go back to work. The New York State Labor Department is being inundated with unemployment fraud just when they were beginning to get ahead with claims. They are hopeful that in the next month or so they can begin to investigate employer complaints and possibly get people off unemployment which would in turn be a benefit to them. This would mean that more people will be off unemployment and take some of the available jobs being offered in Orange County. They received their allocations for July 1<sup>st</sup> which included an increase of 25% and some of their training programs at Orange County Community College and Orange/Ulster BOCES have reopened.

The meeting adjourned at 4:07 p.m.