

**HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
MINUTES
(REMOTELY)**

**TUESDAY, MAY 19, 2020
3:30 P.M.**

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

ALSO

PRESENT: L. Stephen Brescia, Chairman
Katie Bonelli, Majority Leader
Leigh J. Benton, Legislator
Barry J. Cheney, Legislator
Thomas Faggione, Legislator
Kevin W. Hines, Legislator
James M. Kulisek, Legislator
Kevindaryán Luján, Legislator
Kathy Stegenga, Legislator
Antoinette Reed, Legislative Counsel
Darcie Miller, Commissioner of Social Services and Mental Health
Todd Craner, Fiscal Director, Department of Social Services
Christian Farrell, Director, Veterans Service Agency
Ann Marie Maglione, Director, Office for the Aging
Stephen Knob, Director, Employment and Training
Gretchen Riordan, Budget Analyst

Mr. Sassi opened the committee meeting at 3:33 p.m. and asked everyone to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. All committee members were present with the exception of Legislator Anagnostakis who was absent.

On the agenda was a Departmental Update from Christian Farrell, Director, Veterans Service Agency.

Mr. Farrell explained that the Veterans Food Pantry has seen an increase in the number of bags they deliver as they would generally deliver approximately 200 bags of food a week; however, that has increased to between 230 to 250 bags a week. They are collaborating with the Orange County Office for the Aging to help arrange approximately 30 extra bags of food from the Town of Montgomery ShopRite for delivery. While burials have continued, traditional services are not being conducted at the cemetery. However, they are in discussions with the County Executive's office to possibly have a large service/ceremony for the veterans that were not given a proper burial. Even though the office is closed to the public veterans' claims are still being processed with counselors conducting appointments over the phone. They continue to transport veterans to Castle Point but only for chemotherapy, dialysis or infusion treatments. This Friday, the NAM Knights Motorcycle Club will be placing flags on veterans graves while maintaining social distancing.

On the agenda was a Departmental Update from Ann Marie Maglione, Director, Office for the Aging.

Ms. Maglione addressed the committee stating that they have been extremely busy as older adults have been hit extremely hard by the pandemic. A majority of their 600 volunteers are over 60 and when the pandemic hit in March, they told their volunteers that they did not want them to volunteer in order to keep them safe. While it was the best decision it put a huge dent in their volunteer pool; however, they were fortunate that so many county departments and legislators stepped in to help and for that she is very appreciative. Christian Farrell and the Veterans Food Pantry has been a lifesaver by getting food to them as their meals have increased by 25% and they are fluctuating between 900 and 1000 meals a day. They have also temporarily taken over Newburgh's Meals-on-Wheels program because of health and safety reasons with the anticipation that the organization could take it over again in June. They were challenged with respect to isolation and working remotely because the kitchen must remain functional. They formulated a plan to have the kitchen staff come in on Mondays and Tuesdays to conduct massive cooking, packing and delivery with them socially isolating for the remainder of the week. They have started a virtual Elder Abuse Awareness Coalition which covers a variety of topics via YouTube every Monday and distributed to various social media outlets. They have also started a virtual Caregivers Support Group and NY Connects is now conducting those meetings 7 days a week as opposed to only 5 days a week.

Mr. Sassi emphasized that as someone who delivers these meals, he knows how much these seniors look forward to that food delivery.

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

Mr. Knob explained that his staff is working remotely but are still able to serve their customers with more individuals than ever on unemployment. Last year, they had approximately 1800 Orange County residents collecting unemployment insurance but now they have 30,000 residents collecting unemployment insurance. Even though the economy is not open, they have over 700 job postings on their website for various positions with most being for grocery stores and a manufacturer in Harriman is looking for forklift operators. Many employers are losing their staff because they are calling out due to the lack of childcare. In the beginning they were receiving between 70 and 80 calls a day with people having issues with their unemployment insurance with John Emminger, the Department of Labor manager in Newburgh doing a tremendous job in assisting these individuals. They are currently working on having their orientations and workshops on YouTube.

Mr. Sassi commented that he has had many conversations with constituents who are looking for direction and Mr. Knob has been great in dealing with their concerns.

On the agenda was a Departmental Update from Darcie Miller, Commissioner of Social Services and Mental Health.

Ms. Miller thanked the legislature for their ongoing support. Most of her staff is essential with 100% of their human service providers at the Department of Social Services mostly working remotely including child protective services, foster care services and adult protective care services. They are able to accomplish these services primarily through telephonic and/or telehealth resources. They are also conducting arranged visits between parents and children in foster care using the same measures. They have responded in person to child protective calls and home

interventions and she appreciates the incredible work her staff has done to ensure the community, children and vulnerable adults stay safe. They have seen a reduction in hotline calls, primarily because schools are not in session but in response to that they have put out media posts, shared marketing campaigns with "Fearless" our domestic violence agency in Orange County. To ensure that our youth have access to help, they have been in contact with school districts and have included the 311 call center number. They have also arranged with the Mental Health Association to add a safety line to Text 4 Teens so they can reach out in the mode that they are most comfortable communicating in. They are actively working on the Child Advocacy Center as some of the projects they were focused on have been halted through the pandemic and they have identified space on Matthews Street and look forward to the grand opening within the next few months. Applications for SNAP benefits have tripled as the numbers for those on unemployment insurance have increased. While that staff is working on an "A/B" schedule to maintain social distancing they do have approximately 150 staff members coming into the office on the eligibility side as they need 100% of their staff in the office in order to manage the workload. As a result, they have reassigned some staff to the Middletown office and the Matthews Street office. Due to them being on a state system it was difficult to do remotely, so they have used alternative office space in order to have staff in the office five days a week. They have not seen an increase in the cash assistance numbers and with unemployment insurance being what it is, but they do anticipate it happening. She has heard that businesses are looking to bring employees back; however, they do not want to go back due to fears related to COVID-19 and they are currently receiving their unemployment benefit and the \$600.00 federal benefit. In addition, daycare is a challenge and they have been in contact with Childcare Council who has done a good job on keeping them updated on what is open. The SNAP benefit has been increased to a full benefit for those that were not receiving a full benefit and for those with children receiving reduced or free lunches in the school system will get an EBT food benefit for \$5.75 per child for the number of school days from when the pandemic began to the end of the school year but schools will continue distribute meals. Homeless numbers remain consistent at around 500 and they have been working with their stakeholders to maintain social distancing, appropriately housing people in hotel/motels which has been successful and they are hoping to receive FEMA funds to reimburse the additional costs during this time. They continue to receive and process medicaid applications and the special investigation unit is conducting tele sessions for fair hearings as well as investigating fraud. In addition, the Orange County call center run by the Mental Health Association has been taking calls and connecting people to food pantries and assistance with delivery with about 30% of the calls they receive specific to the pandemic.

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

Mr. Sassi asked about the increase of calls related to mental health issues and the opioid epidemic. Ms. Miller replied that all services are open and active and the call center is available and answering those calls and they have moved to the 311 number and they did not make a big splash because they were concerned that it would be related to COVID-19 and forget that it was still active but they would be having a bigger marketing push when this is over. She has heard from the licensed providers that by using telehealth and telephonic service their show rates are very high. Typically, in the mental health system they have about a 33% no show rate but that no show rate has been reduced to between 10% and 17%. They have new clients coming in with prescription being prescribed telephonically and they can bill for all these services telephonically due to the waivers that went into effect. With respect to the opioid epidemic two weeks ago she would have reported a significant reduction in overdoses and fatalities as compared to last year; however, as

they monitor the opioid overdoses and fatalities they are now neck and neck with those numbers. They continue to work closely with hospitals, EMT's and service providers with last week being "Prevention Awareness Week" and to remind them that services are open, active and taking new clients.

Mr. Tuohy asked for the percentage of calls coming in. Ms. Miller replied that she does not have the overall percentage, but 30% more calls are specific to COVID-19 but she would look to see if there has been an increase in overall calls in the last two months.

The meeting adjourned at 3:59 p.m.