

**HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
MINUTES
(REMOTELY)**

**TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 15, 2020
3:30 P.M.**

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

ALSO

PRESENT: L. Stephen Brescia, Chairman
Katie Bonelli, Majority Leader
Barry J. Cheney, Legislator
Thomas J. Faggione, Legislator
Kathy Stegenga, Legislator
Antoinette Reed, Legislative Counsel
Harold J. Porr, III, Deputy County Executive
Darcie Miller, Commissioner of Social Services and Mental Health
Todd Craner, Fiscal Director, Department of Social Services
Gretchen Riordan, Budget Analyst

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.

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

Mr. Sassi expressed his concern with the 25% increase in Child Protective Services (CPS) cases as kids are home and abuse rates have gone up. He knows of several pediatricians who have seen a decrease in the number of children coming into their offices. Teachers are often on the frontline and if they are not seeing kids in school and noticing the signs of abuse it is not being reported. While the nation battles whether kids should go back to school, stress at home and the increase in opioid use what is happening to those children and why is that not being reported by the media. He asked if Ms. Miller could enlighten them on what she is seeing on a county level with respect to child protective services, homelessness and abuse; however, if she does not have that information available today it can wait until next month's meeting.

Ms. Miller replied that they have been closely monitoring their Child Protective Services (CPS) numbers that come through the New York State Child Abuse Hotline. Three months ago, they implemented a campaign with the Orange County Mental Health Association's Text 4 Teen helpline that added child protective factors and safety concerns to the messaging. They are also concerned with children not being in the gatekeeper's presence such as teachers, bus drivers and other ancillary supports within the school districts. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) is also aware of the decrease in numbers and they are reporting that the number of child fatalities across the state has decreased which is good news. As a result, they are auditing the work they are doing knowing that many of their staff were working remotely with limited face to face contact. With respect to those high need cases of allegations of physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or parent (s) using substances they have to do a special report showing that their child protective

workers have continued to be active in the field, saw children, investigated cases and that safety plans were in place for those children. They are all on the same page with monitoring those numbers and they have maintained contact with their school districts and school districts have maintained contact to the best of their ability with children. It is always a different experience when they are trying to make decisions about safety when it is a snapshot versus them being in school five days a week and they are able to see patterns of behavior and the ability over time to build trust that allows a child to disclose neglect or abuse. The overall average for Traditional Response and FAR reports in 2020 thus far is at 294 as compared to 333 in 2019; however, they anticipate an increase in reporting now that schools are active again. The Multidisciplinary Task Force (MDT) numbers remain consistent if not a little high which involves law enforcement, medical and casework staff at child protective services. These are child advocacy center cases and their most severe abuse cases.

Ms. Sutherland asked about the status of foster care placement and do they have enough families to accept children during this time. Ms. Miller replied yes, they do have foster families and institutions willing to take children and on occasion a COVID-19 test is required, and they will do whatever is necessary to give children a safe place to stay. During the height of the pandemic they were unable to conduct face to face training because there was not an acceptable model to be used but new foster family training did start again approximately four weeks ago. In previous years the average number of children in care was between 370 and 380 with the average number in 2020 at 329.

Ms. Miller added that in July they had zero families and thirteen singles in hotel/motel. In the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic they saw an increase in hotel/motel because they were being used to social distance as HONOR was not taking families; however, Transitional Housing, Bridges, CHI and Project Life were still taking referrals as temporary housing options as they could social isolate. Homeless numbers have decreased as they are averaging 292 homeless served in 2020 as opposed to the 338 served in 2019 and they believe that is related to the eviction moratorium which has been extended through December 2020. They are working with the funds received through Community Development to prevent homeless and to assist with rapid rehousing relative to COVID-19. While the moratorium was extended through December if someone has not paid their rent for many months the \$1.6 million they have in reserve for that purpose will be consumed quickly by very few families. In addition, that does not apply to evictions for non-COVID-19 reasons, but they would be assisted through rent assistance. They continue to be challenged with the increase in SNAP benefit applications being received; however, many do not qualify because of the increase in the unemployment benefit but they anticipate that when that increased benefit ends, they will see more people become eligible for SNAP benefits. Due to the number of vacancies in the department they are trying to be creative in how they support their staff by prioritizing what work needs to be done. She appreciates the efforts of her staff as they worked throughout the entire pandemic with larger caseloads and less staff to support that work.

Mr. Sassi thanked Ms. Miller for her time and assistance with respect to the concerns expressed by several constituents on the new warming station in their community.

Ms. Miller explained that warming stations are part of New York State's Code Blue planning with some funding coming from the state for those individuals that for whatever reason do not want to come to the Department of Social Services for housing. They appreciate the generosity of the Middletown Interfaith Council and volunteers as it takes more than government to make this happen.

Mr. O' Donnell asked if Ms. Miller's department was having any issues with receiving supplies, making requisitions or spending funds for supplies. Ms. Miller replied no.

Ms. Miller added that on the Mental Health side they receive their money as an advance and when the state withholds 20% from the advance that 20% gets spread amongst everyone with contracts that use those state funds to provide services throughout the county. The 20% withhold of the \$18 million across the provider systems. On the Department of Social Services side, they fund and then submit claims for reimbursement from New York State but they have only released from January and February of 2020 so every other payment they make from March to the end of the year has a 20% withhold connected to it which then becomes local taxation to cover the withhold.

Mr. O'Donnell asked if on a county level Ms. Miller received any new instructions on requisitions. Ms. Miller replied that to her knowledge everything was being held and they were not to make any purchases unless emergent; however, she does believe they received it in writing.

Mr. O'Donnell asked if a monetary value was placed on that restriction. Ms. Miller replied no.

Mr. O'Donnell explained that he went into the office to reorder business cards and was advised of the process. A requisition form must be completed, then sent to an agent in purchasing for approval, then sent to Commissioner Burpoe for approval, then to the County Executive's office for approval and then back to the office. It goes through approximately five or six different hands to order 500 business cards at a cost of approximately \$10.00; however, it is probably a cost of about \$200.00 minimum of county workforce hours. This should be investigated because it is ridiculous to go through six steps to get business cards. In the end he just went to Chester Printer and will have them in three to four days. However, it is good to know that Ms. Miller can get the supplies they need.

The meeting adjourned at 3:53 p.m.