

Suffolk County Legislature



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WELFARE TO WORK COMMISSION

of the Suffolk County Legislature
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March 8, 2013

To: Member of the Suffolk County Legislature

Pursuant to Resolution No. 181-2003, the Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature is pleased to provide you with our annual report of the Commission's 2012 activities and our 2013 goals.

Given the rise in Suffolk County poverty reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in the fall of 2011, the Commission conducted four public hearings and two focus groups between May and October, "Struggling in Suburbia: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty in Suffolk County." The hearings led to a report on Suffolk poverty – we believe the first comprehensive report on Long Island poverty – presented to you in December, 2012.

In 2012, the Commission also pursued these major policy issues:

1. Staffing at SCDSS, SCDOH and SCDOL
2. Funding for Suffolk County's child care and a correction of the flawed State formula that underfunds SCDSS
3. Employment Assessment policies at SCDSS and SCDOL with special attention toward compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act
4. Sunday and evening bus service
5. Sober home regulations

The Commission, which consists of unpaid volunteers, meets monthly and has several standing committees that also meet on a regular basis.

We hope you find this report useful.

Yours truly for the Commission

Richard Koubek

Richard Koubek, PhD, Chair

Kathy Liguori

Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair



Annual Report
2012 Activities of the
Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature
March 2013

As required by the 15th Resolve of Resolution No. 181-2003, the Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature is pleased to submit its annual report containing the Commission's goals for 2013 and a summary of its activities for 2012.

Commission 2013 Goals

1. Disseminate the findings of Commission's report, "Struggling in Suburbia: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty in Suffolk County," through formal presentations to relevant Suffolk County legislative committees as well as the Newsday and News 12 editorial boards, distributions to professional and academic organizations and other educational activities.
2. Pursue these prioritized recommendations in the Commission's poverty report:
 - a. Continue to focus on the quality, availability and affordability of child care for Public Assistance recipients and working-poor families and coordinate with the County Executive and Legislature for a unified lobbying campaign to change the Office of Children and Family Services block grant formula that penalizes Suffolk County.
 - b. Create a County task force to coordinate child-care services with the economic-development plans of the County.
 - c. Assess staffing levels and access to services at the Suffolk County Department of Social Services (SCDSS), Suffolk County Department of Labor (SCDOL) and Suffolk County Department of Health (SCDOH).

- d. Review the SCDSS and the SCDOL Employment Program with special attention to educational opportunities for clients.
 - e. Monitor the privatization of the County's health centers in conjunction with their possibly becoming Federally Qualified Health Centers under Hudson River Health Care.
 - f. Monitor Suffolk bus service as it relates to the needs of welfare clients and working-poor people.
 - g. Continue to assess implementation of the recommendations in the Commission's 2010 sober homes report regarding policies and procedures to improve the oversight and delivery of services at sober homes in Suffolk County.
 - h. Continue to assess implementation of the recommendations for the creation of affordable housing contained in the Commission's 2007 report.
3. With SCDSS and SCDOL, monitor implementation of the new SCDSS Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) policy as well as the use of the ADA "Did You Know?" brochure and the new nonprofit liaison communication lines crafted by the Commission's Employment Assessment Committee in cooperation with SCDSS and SCDOL.

Commission 2012 Activities

The Commission pursued these 2012 goals, as summarized below.

Suffolk Poverty Hearings and "Struggling in Suburbia" Report

Between May and October of 2012, the Welfare to Work Commission received over 20 hours of testimony on poverty in Suffolk County from 102 government officials, academic experts, agency representatives and the public during four public hearings (May 18th, May 22nd, June 1st and August 13th) and two focus groups. Among the facts about poverty in Suffolk County uncovered by the Commission's hearings were:

- The Federal Poverty Level (FPL) is a woefully ineffective measure of poverty because it is not regionalized to account for high-cost-of living areas such as Long Island.
- Suburban poverty has increased at a faster rate than urban poverty in the past decade, with suburban poor and near-poor people largely invisible and isolated compared with the urban poor.
- The 178,000 struggling near-poor working people in Suffolk, earning between 100% and 200% of the FPL (between \$23,050 and \$46,100 for a family of four) are ineligible for most government supportive programs because their incomes are too high.
- Since the Great Recession began in 2008, many Long Islanders are now considered the "new poor," having slipped from the middle class into poverty.
- Poor, near-poor and new poor people can be found in just about every Suffolk community.
- Poverty takes an especially heavy toll on people of color as well as on people with special needs and vulnerabilities, including children, senior citizens, and people with mental and physical disabilities.

The Commission found that too many federal, State and County programs to help struggling Suffolk residents are underfunded or are the first to have their funding cut or are wrapped in strangling regulations that discourage people from applying or deny them access to these supportive services.

Understanding that Suffolk County Government is itself boxed in by these rigid federal and State regulations, unfunded mandates and underfunded programs, the Commission nevertheless reported that the County can take action to provide needed supports to Suffolk's working-poor people. The report commended the important role that private charities play in providing these services, but recognized that the County does not always sufficiently fund these private agencies for the services they provide poor and vulnerable people.

The report also recognized that at this time when the County is struggling with a serious budget deficit, new funding streams must be found. The report therefore supported the legislative Budget Review Office's (BRO) 2012 call for a ¼ cent sales tax increase in 2014 and, in light of the BRO's criticism of the County's overreliance on the sales tax as well as the fact that the General Fund tax has not been increased in nine years, the report also recommended that the General Fund tax be increased to the 2% State cap in 2014.

Both of these modest tax increases would yield \$71 million in new County revenues. The report recommended that 21% or \$15 million of these new revenues be dedicated to programs that address the unique qualities of poverty in Suffolk County. Among the report's recommendations are:

- Restore Department of Social Services and Department of Health staffing to 2011 levels so that these departments can adequately provide for the dramatic increases in demand for their services that began with the Great Recession in 2008.
- Continue the partnership with nonprofit contract agencies but provide them with sufficient funds in their contracts to meet the demand for their services.
- Prioritize education and training for college and STEM (science, technology, engineering and math) training programs to prepare SCDSS and SCDOL clients for skilled jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.
- Work with SCDOL contract agencies to ensure that education and training programs meet the special needs of persons with disabilities.
- Add \$2 million in County funding for subsidized child care for working-poor families and continue advocating with the State for a restoration of child-care funding cuts and a change in the State's inadequate funding formula.
- Create a County child-care task force to coordinate child-care services with the economic-development plans of the County.
- Extend bus service beyond 8PM and provide Sunday service.
- Oversee County Industrial Development Agency (IDA) grants to ensure that recipients are creating local jobs that pay family-sustaining wages.
- Provide the Suffolk Human Rights Commission with a full-time attorney to ensure enforcement of fair-housing laws.

- Continue County policies to support safe and effective sober homes and to expand the stock of affordable housing.

One major goal of the poverty hearings and report was to raise public awareness about the significant number of poor people – especially working-poor families – who struggle to make ends meet in Suffolk County, one of this country’s wealthiest suburbs. These public-education efforts were quite successful with:

- Several *Newsday* stories on both the hearings and release of the report, as well as a *Newsday* editorial at the time the hearings were held.
- A July 7, 2012 *New York Times* lead editorial on the hearings titled, “Struggling in Suburbia.”
- Coverage of the hearings and/or report by News 12, NPR station WSHU’s “Morning Edition” and “All Things Considered” segments, December 21, 2012, and National News Services story that included the report in January, 2013.

Child Care

The Commission has long argued that people on Public Assistance who are preparing to transition from welfare to work, as well as working-poor people – especially single mothers –require quality child care. The Commission has been alarmed by the \$3.5 million in State funding reductions since 2009 that took full effect in 2012 when SCDSS had to reduce the eligibility for subsidized child-care for working-poor families from 200% of the FPL (\$46,100/family of four) to 100% of FPL (\$23,050/family of four) causing some 2,200 Suffolk children of working-poor parents to lose their child care.

- The Commission’s Child Care Committee, Chaired by Kathy Liguori, created a report and a letter sent to County and State officials in April documenting how the flawed New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) Child Care Block Grant (CCBG) formula had unfairly penalized SCDSS for having used federal stimulus (AARA) funds to provide child care to additional working-poor families who had been wait listed.
- In August, the Commission drafted a letter to Governor Andrew Cuomo that was signed by each member of the Suffolk County Legislature asking the Governor to intervene with his OCFS to restore subsidized child-care funding to Suffolk County and to revise the OCFS/CCBG funding formula so that SCDSS is no longer penalized. No action was taken by the Governor or OCFS.
- Members of the Commission’s Child Care Committee met with key State legislators including Senators Owen Johnson, Dean Skelos, Lee Zeldin, Kenneth Lavallo, Carl Marcellino and John Flanagan and with Assemblymen Fred Thiele, Phil Ramos and Robert Sweeney to urge their intervention with Governor Cuomo regarding the funding cuts to Suffolk County. These three Assemblymen crafted a sign-on letter to OCFS urging a change in the CCBG formula.
- At the suggestion of Suffolk County Legislator John Kennedy, the Child Care Committee prepared a report documenting the impacts that the child-care cuts were having on the Suffolk County economy. The report was released in October and received media attention in *Newsday* and News 12.

- In December of 2012, County Executive Steve Bellone announced that amending the OCFS/CCBG would be one of his State legislative advocacy priorities in 2013.

Understaffing at SCDSS and SCDOH

The Commission received periodic reports on staffing at SCDSS and SCDOH. SCDSS Commissioner Gregory Blass addressed the Commission at the March 9th meeting to express his serious concerns about projected mid-year cuts in SCDSS staff, on top of the 2012 staff reductions already implemented to meet the County's deficit crisis. SCDOH Commissioner Sammy Chu addressed the Commission on April 8th at which time the issue of staff cuts to his Department was raised. The Commission closely monitored staffing during this difficult period and was informed that, in the end, neither SCDSS nor SCDOH suffered the drastic mid-year cuts that had been proposed. The Commission also reviewed the vacancy rate for SCDSS at the end of 2012 and noted a disturbing increase in vacancies, again due to the County's budget deficit. Understaffing at SCDSS and SCDOH were addressed in the Commission's poverty report, with recommendations that staff restorations to 2011 levels be made in both departments.

Employment Assessment

The Commission continued to pursue its on-going goals to "to assess the SCDSS and SCDOH Employment Program" with special attention to SCDSS intake assessment forms and procedures so as to improve mental-health and chemical-dependence assessments, compliance with the requirements of the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and ultimately, to reduce the number of sanctions at SCDSS and better prepare clients for lives of self-sufficiency when they leave Public Assistance.

- **ADA "Did You Know?" Flyer:** The Commission's Employment Assessment Committee met repeatedly with SCDSS staff and together designed a "Did You Know?" flyer that contains the rights and accommodations available to persons with disabilities. The "Did You Know?" flyer was approved and released for all incoming SCDSS clients in the spring of 2012.
- **SCDSS-ADA Policy:** Again, working closely with SCDSS staff, the Employment Assessment Committee and SCDSS are close to finalizing a new SCDSS Americans with Disabilities (ADA) policy, based on the Onondaga and Chautauqua Counties' DSS/ADA policies, that will clarify and make more efficient SCDSS procedures for identifying clients with disabilities, informing disabled clients of their ADA rights and making appropriate accommodations in work assignments that serve the special needs of these disabled clients. Ultimately, both the Commission and SCDSS hope these new policies and procedures will better serve the needs of disabled clients while reducing unnecessary and costly sanctions. The application of these policies and procedures to SCDOH, which is contracted to provide and supervise the SCDSS work assignments, will be studied in 2013.
- **SCDSS Communication with Nonprofit Agencies:** The Committee also worked with SCDSS to create lines of communication for case managers at nonprofit social-services agencies, schools and health care professionals to work more closely with SCDSS staff to serve the needs of their clients. This new procedure was implemented in 2012 and its effectiveness will be monitored in 2013.

Sunday Bus Service

Understanding that public bus service is essential for poor people living in Suffolk, the Commission continued to work with Legislator Jay Schneiderman to support his resolution creating a pilot project for Sunday bus service on the East End. The Commission and Legislator Schneiderman remain committed to securing countywide Sunday bus service, despite a \$1 million bus funding shortfall in 2012 that has required a 50 cent increase in the basic fare.

Sober Homes

Commission member Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds co-chairs the County Sober Homes Oversight Board which was created in 2011 on a recommendation contained in the Commission's 2010 sober homes report that called attention to the problems caused by these unregulated and unsafe sober homes in Suffolk County. Commission members participated in a conference call in April with State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) representatives as well as representatives from Governor Cuomo's staff. While OASAS Chief Counsel Rob Kent acknowledged, as he had done in a late-2011 letter to Legislator Kate Browning, that OASAS "Supportive Living" houses could indeed be considered sober homes, there was no movement from OASAS to do so in 2012 nor was there any effort by OASAS to take responsibility for sober homes in Suffolk.

Conclusion

The Commission meets monthly, always with a quorum, and has created several committees that also meet to pursue issues such as the Suffolk Poverty Hearings and Report, Child Care and Employment Assessment. The Commission members have worked tirelessly, and will continue to do so, to fulfill our legislative mandate to "evaluate and make recommendations of federal, State and county policies and procedures to move people from welfare to work." Finally, the Commission wishes to express our gratitude to SCDSS Commissioner Gregory Blass and his staff who have worked cooperatively and constructively with us on achieving each of the Commission's goals outlined above.

Respectfully Submitted,

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Richard Koubek, Ph.D., Commission Chair, Gerald Ryan Outreach Center
Kathy Liguori, Commission Vice Chair, Tutor Time

Marjorie Acevedo, For Presiding Officer William Lindsay
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Michael Stoltz, Clubhouse of Suffolk