

Suffolk County Legislature



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WELFARE TO WORK COMMISSION

of the Suffolk County Legislature
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March 16, 2012

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 2011 activities and our 2012 goals.

Given the rise in Suffolk County poverty reported by the U.S. Census Bureau in the fall of 2011, the Commission is planning three public hearings (May 18, May 22 and June 1, 2012, "Struggling in Suburbia: Meeting the Challenges of Poverty in Suffolk County." The hearings will be followed by a report to the Legislature.

In 2011, the Commission pursued these major policy issues:

1. Staffing at SCDSS and SCDOL
2. Funding for Suffolk County's health centers
3. Employment Assessment policies at SCDSS and SCDOL
4. SCDSS-Child Protective Services and funding for child care
5. Sunday bus service
6. Sober homes regulations

The Commission, which consists of unpaid volunteers, meets monthly and has three 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
2011 Activities of the
Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature
March 2012

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 2012 and a summary of its activities for 2011.

Commission 2012 Goals

1. Conduct public hearings on the rise in Suffolk County poverty – including the increased number of “near-poor” people in Suffolk - and the resulting increase in demands for Suffolk County Department of Social Services (SCDSS) services.
2. Continue to focus on the quality, availability and affordability of child care for Public Assistance recipients and working poor families.
3. Assess access to SCDSS and Suffolk County Department of Labor (SCDOL) services and SCDSS and SCDOL staffing levels.
4. Continue to review the SCDSS and the SCDOL Employment Program with special attention to educational opportunities for clients as well as the new State policies and procedures for the employment assessment process.
5. Continue to work with SCDSS and SCDOL regarding mental health and chemical dependence assessments and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance in order to maximize client placements and possibly reduce the number of sanctions.
6. Monitor Suffolk bus service as it relates to the needs of welfare clients and working poor people.

7. Monitor the impact of federal and State changes in regulations and funding for Suffolk County social services and health-treatment services for poor people.
8. 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.
9. Consider the effectiveness for SCDSS and SCDOL of State mandated electronic information management systems.

Commission 2011 Activities

The Commission pursued each of its 2011 goals, as summarized below, as well as adding to its agenda the policy implications of the significant rise in Suffolk County poverty that was announced by the federal government in the fall of 2011.

Policy Implications of the Rise in Suburban Poverty

Federal TANF Policies: During 2011 the Commission heard reports from the Empire Justice Center on proposals to modify the federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) policy (the centerpiece of U.S. welfare policies) so as to (a) ensure that states comply with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) by providing accommodations to people with disabilities and (b) improve TANF recipients' access to education and training. The TANF law is due for reauthorization in 2012. The Commission learned that, while Congress is likely to continue extending the current TANF statute rather than deal with needed reforms, discussions are taking place with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) about liberalizing agency policies and practices within the current statutory framework.

Federal Definition of Poverty: Another report the Commission received from the Empire Justice Center outlined the inadequacy of the U.S. definition of poverty (\$22,050 for a family of four in 2012) that uses an outdated "family-food basket" U.S. Census Bureau formula adopted in the 1960s. This definition was compared with another formula released by the U.S. Census Bureau in the fall of 2011 that factors both government supports such as Food Stamps and regional differences in the cost of living into the definition of poverty. This new report found an additional 2.5 million people living in poverty. At the same time, the U.S. Census Bureau released yet another formula for defining the federal poverty level that included people with incomes above the official federal poverty level but below 150% of the federal poverty level (i.e., those earning between \$22,050 and \$33,075 for a family of four.) This recalculation yielded an additional 51 million people who could be characterized as "near poor." This formula was released at the same time that the media reported a rise in the number of people living below the federal poverty level both nationally and in Suffolk County. Finally, the Commission discussed the fact that many analysts believe that a more accurate count of Americans struggling to make ends meet would include those earning below 200% of the federal poverty level (\$44,100 for a family of four.) If this were done on Long Island, the number of "poor" would be about 20% of the

LI population rather than the 6.1% defined as poor using the original (1960s) federal definition of poverty.

Commission 2012 Public Hearings on Suffolk Poverty: Given what was viewed as a disturbing increase in Suffolk poverty, it was decided that the Commission should hold public hearings in the late spring of 2012, followed by a report to the Suffolk Legislature, on the rise in Suffolk poverty with the goals of:

- Documenting the number of Suffolk residents who are poor or near poor;
- Telling the stories of people living near or below the poverty line;
- Assessing appropriate definitions of poverty for Long Island;
- Analyzing public policies at the federal, State and especially at the County levels of government to serve and support poor people in Suffolk County.

Understaffing at SCDSS and SCDOH

The Commission's 2011 goal to "continue to assess staffing levels at SCDSS and the Suffolk County Department of Labor" was addressed throughout the year in light of the dramatic increases in demand for SCDSS services, 2008 to 2011 (ranging from a 39% increase for Medicaid to a 109% increase for Food Stamps.) Proposed cuts in SCDSS and SCDOH as well as the Suffolk County Department of Health (SCDOH) staff contained in County Executive Steve Levy's proposed 2012 budget were carefully assessed in light of the increases in demand for services. The Commission drafted a letter opposing these staffing cuts, which was sent to each County legislator and testimony was presented at the Budget Committee and Health and Human Services Committee budget hearings. Most of the SCDSS and SCDOH staff reductions were restored for the first half of 2012 by the Legislature. SCDOH sustained more cuts proportionally than did SCDSS and SCDOH. Staffing will be a priority in 2012 with special attention to how County Executive Steve Bellone addresses staffing at the mid-year when funding for some 650 County positions will require authorization.

Suffolk Health Centers

The Commission considers the Suffolk County health centers to be an essential service for Suffolk residents who have no health insurance or who are underinsured. When the State announced that it was seeking a \$12 million "clawback" from Suffolk County for health center services it deemed to be "unauthorized" dating back to 2008, the Commission invited Craig Freas of the Legislative Budget Review Office and Terry Smith, Executive Director of the Dolan Family Health Center in Huntington, to explain the clawback and how it will impact the health centers. In August, the State negotiated a \$10 million clawback reduction with the SCDOH. When County Executive Steve Levy announced \$10 million in proposed funding reductions to the County health centers in his 2012 proposed budget, the Commission took a position opposing these cuts, sending a letter to each member of the Legislature and testifying at the Health and Human Services and Budget committee hearings on the proposed 2012 budget. The Legislature restored most of the cuts in the adopted 2012 budget.

Employment Assessment

The Commission continued to pursue in 2011 its on-going goals to “to assess the SCDSS and SCDOLEmployment 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. Additionally, these discussions have led to personnel changes at SCDSS centers that will assign staff to evaluate an applicant’s or a recipient’s need for reasonable accommodations due to a disability. The “Did You Know?” flyer is close to final approval and will be released 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 Onondaga County’s DSS/ADA policy, 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 SCDOLE, which is contracted to provide and supervise the SCDSS work assignments, will be studied in 2012.

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. A letter announcing these new arrangements will be released in the coming weeks and the program will be monitored by the Commission throughout 2012.

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. One important aspect of quality child care identified by the Commission in 2011 was improved communication between the SCDSS Child Protective Services Division (CPS) and child-care providers. Another was the inadequate State funding of Suffolk County’s child-care needs, especially child-care subsidies for working-poor families who are not receiving Public Assistance.

CPS-Child Care Provider Communication: The Commission’s Child Care Committee continued meeting with the SCDSS - CPS staff on improving communication between providers and CPS. A series of meetings profiled for the Commission the complex laws and regulations – especially with regard to confidentiality - that govern how and when CPS can inform providers of abusive situations. CPS, on the other hand, learned from the Committee about the

providers' need to know when there are child-abuse situations such as Orders of Protection. While many gray areas remain unresolved due to the legal parameters imposed by confidentiality requirements, CPS did agree to reissue a statement notifying providers of transitional child care services for families released from CPS oversight.

PCAN Training: The Commission's Child Care Committee also continued to meet with SCDSS -CPS staff as well as representatives of the Child Care Council of Suffolk to consider ways to improve communication between child care providers and CPS regarding at-risk children. Having reached a consensus that additional training for child-care providers should be created on how to recognize the signs of child abuse and report suspected cases of child abuse, the Commission's Child Care Committee, SCDSS-CPS and the Child Care Council of Suffolk launched the PCAN (Prevent Child Abuse and Neglect) four-part training session that reached 87 providers. With very positive evaluations of this training, the Commission sought County legislative funding to expand the PCAN trainings, which, due to the County's budget crisis, were not available in the 2012 budget.

OCFS Funding for SCDSS Child Care: The Child Care Committee has had several meetings with SCDSS to discuss underfunding of Suffolk County's child-care needs by the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS.) The Commission raised specific questions about SCDSS use of rollover funds and federal ARRA stimulus monies, which OCFS is apparently using as their reason for reducing Suffolk County's Child Care Block Grant (CCBG.) The Committee will be studying this issue in 2012 with the possibility of approaching OCFS and State legislators to seek an adjustment in the formula used for Suffolk's CCBG funds.

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 which the Legislature adopted over an executive veto in February 2011. 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. Legislator Schneiderman is seeking federal funds to create Sunday service and is preparing a meeting with County Executive Steve Bellone on this issue, which representatives of the Commission will attend. Sunday Service will be pursued by the Commission throughout 2012 as will the impacts that may arise due to the consolidation of the six Suffolk private bus contracts into three contracts.

Sober Homes

Substance abuse is one of the disabilities that causes and perpetuates the need for people to seek Public Assistance. For this reason, the Commission took up the issue of sober homes in 2009. Largely unregulated, many of these sober homes, which house homeless people with substance-abuse problems, are breeding grounds for addiction, often undermining the treatments the residents are receiving. Since the majority of sober home

residents receive SCDSS housing grants, the Commission continued its efforts throughout 2011 to secure greater regulation of these homes.

RFQ: The Commission monitored the Request for Qualifications (RFQ) process that grew out of Legislator Kate Browning's 2010 resolution to provide enhanced SCDSS housing rates to sober homes that comply with the criteria in the RFQ which was created and circulated by SCDSS. The Commission shared concerns with SCDSS Deputy Commissioner Ed Hernandez that the criteria may have been too narrow, thereby resulting in very few qualified providers. Dr. Hernandez reported in the fall of 2011 that SCDSS would be revising the RFQ criteria and re-circulating an RFQ in the spring of 2012.

Sober Homes Oversight Board: The Commission's Sober Homes Committee met to develop membership and jurisdictional authority that might be included in a resolution to create a Suffolk County Sober Homes Oversight Board as recommended by the Commission. These recommendations were forwarded to Legislator Browning who used many of them to frame her resolution to create this board that was adopted by the Legislature.

OASAS and Sober Homes: The Commission's 2010 sober homes report stated that the New York State Office of Alcohol and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) has statutory authority to regulate Supportive Living Services homes which appeared to the Commission to be sober homes. The report noted that OASAS Council Rob Kent had previously stated that Supportive Living Services homes cannot be considered to be sober homes without the New York State Legislature adopting changes in OASAS regulations. In the fall of 2011, members of the Commission's Sober Homes Committee met with Governor Cuomo's Suffolk County representative Scott Martella to discuss on-going frustration with OASAS denying regulatory responsibility for Suffolk sober homes. Soon thereafter, following a major story in *Newsday* and on *News 12* about sober homes, Legislator Browning used the Commission's sober homes report to draft a letter to OASAS stating that OASAS Supportive Living Services homes could in fact be considered sober homes. In December, OASAS Council Rob Kent responded with a letter stating "Supportive Living services could be called sober homes," a position that he had long denied. The Commission is now arranging for a tele-conference call with OASAS, the Governor's representatives, members of the Commission and the new Sober Homes Oversight Board to pursue the implications of this revised OASAS position.

Conclusion

The Commission meets monthly, always with a quorum, and has created several committees that also meet to pursue issues such as Sober Homes, 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,

Legislator DuWayne Gregory, Chair, Human Services Committee
Richard Koubek, Ph.D., Commission Chair, Gerald Ryan Outreach Center
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