

**Welfare to Work Commission
Of the Suffolk County legislature**

Minutes of the March 30th, 2009 Meeting

Present: Richard Koubek, Chair; Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair; Jack Caffey; Ellen Krakow; Don Friedman; Linda O'Donohoe; Frederick Combs for Joan Grant; Michael Stoltz; Ken Zone; Gwen Branch; Kathy Malloy; Nina Leonhardt; Peter Barnett; Pam Killoran; Judy Cahn

Excused: Idania Aponte; Bridget DePasquale; Peggy Boyd; Rob Greenberger; Eric Lopez; Jane Devine

Guest: Ali Nazir for Legislator John Kennedy

1. **Minutes:** The minutes of the February 23 meeting were adopted unanimously, with minor changes, on a motion by Kathy Liguori, seconded by Jack Caffey.
2. **Commission Goals for 2009:** The Commission discuss the following goals for 2009 which were approved on a motion by Jack Caffey, seconded by Peter Barnett: Yes: 13; No: 0; Abstentions: 3 (Pam Killoran; Linda O'Donohoe; Kathy Malloy)
 - a. Continue to monitor Suffolk County Department of Social Services (SCDSS) reimbursements to child care providers and focus on the quality, availability and affordability of child care for working poor families, with the possibility of holding a public hearing on child care for the working poor and creating a pilot program that addresses these concerns.
 - b. Continue to explore opening SCDSS centers one evening a week.
 - c. Continue to assess staffing levels at SCDSS and the Suffolk County Department of Labor (SCDOL,) including the chronic pattern of unfilled, authorized SCDSS and SCDOL staff positions.
 - d. Continue to assess the SCDSS and the SCDOL Employment Program with special attention to the work rules in the federal Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and, where appropriate, make recommendations to each Department and to the Suffolk County Legislature and to the Suffolk County congressional delegation.
 - e. Work with SCDSS regarding intake assessment forms and procedures, in conjunction with the possible release of a new Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) assessment tool, so as to improve mental health and chemical dependence assessments, compliance with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act requirements and ultimately, reduce the number of sanctions at SCDSS.
3. **Annual Report:** The Commission discussed a draft of its 2009 annual report to the Legislature and made a minor change on the recommendation of Nina Leonhardt, deleting from the report a reference to a line in the Suffolk County Community College budget for the education/training program. Reference to the program was changed to an "activity" of the College, not a budget line. The amended report was adopted unanimously on a motion by Ellen Krakow, seconded by Mike Stoltz.

- 4. SCDSS Evening Hours:** Commission Chair Richard Koubek announced that Legislator Kate Browning, who had planned to attend the meeting for the discussion of SCDSS evening hours, was called away the morning of the meeting to attend to a matter in her district. Chair Richard Koubek reminded the Commission that talks were still underway between the Legislature and the County Executive regarding a pilot of evening hours in one center that would also include morning hours. There remained some confusion as to whether face-to-face interviews are required for Food Stamps because, if they are not, then Food Stamps applicants would have no need of evening hours. Linda O'Donohoe agreed to provide an answer to this question at the April meeting. The Commission discussed a number of additional questions related to evening hours and agreed to table the issue while these questions and questions raised at previous meetings (below) were submitted to Legislators Kate Browning and John Kennedy as well as to Linda O'Donohoe and Deputy DSS Commissioner Greg Blass:
- a. What center will conduct the all day pilot and who is overseeing the study?
 - b. Can not-for-profits participate in the study by being asked how evening hours are affecting their clients (e.g., parish outreach centers, Family Service League, etc.?) if so, how do we get them involved?
 - c. Does SCDSS really need a full staff for evening hours? How does NCDSS have evening hours without a full staff, yet comply with State regs?
 - d. How many people continue to get turned away in the mornings that the centers close because they are open in the evenings?
 - e. What are the services provided to people in the evenings? Particularly, can "emergency services" be broken down to show specific services such as EAF and other "emergencies?"
 - f. Can clients enter the centers that remain open between 3PM and 6PM? Do they close at 7PM on the evenings that they remain open, or are they open until 8?
- 5. Permanent Meeting Date for the Commission:** The members present agreed that the best permanent meeting date would be the second Friday of each month, at 9:30 AM, beginning in May. The Chair agreed to poll the absent members for their input.
- 6. Understaffing at SCDSS and SCDOL:** The Commission had an extended discussion of understaffing.
- a. Richard Koubek distributed a memo sent to Jack Caffey by Diane Dono of the legislative Budget Review Office (BRO,) responding to these questions raised on behalf of Presiding Officer William Lindsay: (1) Whether Staffing at DSS centers is rising or falling; (2) Whether workloads/caseloads are rising or falling. Ms. Dono's response showed what Mr. Koubek called a "disturbing" staffing trend: (1) Client Benefits staff vacancies for March, 2009 had increased by 21% over March, 2008; (2) Client Benefits caseloads were up 14% to 19%, December 2008 compared with December 2007. These Client Benefits staff vacancies do not include the 17 new Food Stamps positions approved by the Legislature for 2009. Jack Caffey agreed to ask that these questions be posed to BRO on a monthly basis. Ellen Krakow asked if these increases in staff vacancies and caseloads were affecting the time required to

process applications. It was agreed that Richard Koubek would e-mail Linda O'Donohoe and Greg Blass with the following two questions:

- i. How is the Department coping with the parallel increase in staff vacancies and demands for services?
 - ii. What effects are the vacancies having on the time required to process applications?
 - b. Peter Barnett asked if the BRO staffing report could identify the State and federal reimbursement rates for each of the vacant positions, since the Commission's report to the Legislature on understaffing, as well as the BRO assessment of the 2009 budget, both called for the immediate filling of all positions which are 100% reimbursed. The Chair agreed ask Legislator Browning to request this information from BRO.
 - c. Jack Caffey reminded the Commission that the SCDSS Commissioner reported to the Legislature in November a \$700,000 surplus in the 2008 personnel budget, that she termed a "reasonable cushion," which apparently became a "rollover savings" that was applied to the General Fund. He noted that the Commission should monitor these unspent funds on a monthly basis, rather than addressing the problem in November. There was consensus that the Commission should use monthly staffing reports to remind both SCDSS and the Legislature that understaffing which results in "rollover savings" undermines the quality of services provided by SCDSS and has a very negative effect on staff and clients.
 - d. A review of the February BRO staffing report showed a staff vacancy rate of 9.8%. Kathy Malloy reminded the Commission of a SCDSS memo received in the fall of 2008 which showed that late-in-the-year hires reduced SCDSS understaffing from 10% to 5% for the final three months of the year. Chair Richard Koubek and other Commission members asked why the vacancy rate rose again to nearly 10% at the beginning of 2009 if it was 5% at the end of 2008.
 - e. Kathy Liguori stated that there is some evidence that child care providers are again experiencing delays in receipt of their payments from the County. Some Commission members asked if understaffing at SCDSS could be a reason for these alleged delays.
 - f. It was agreed that the April meeting will include an extended Commission analysis of the monthly staffing reports, responses to the staffing questions raised above, and a full discussion of next steps regarding the rise in both SCDSS staff vacancies and demand for services.
7. **Child Care Committee:** Kathy Liguori invited Commission members to attend an 11Am press conference on March 31st at the Child Care Council of Suffolk to address the under funding of child care services by New York State. She will convene a meeting of the Child Care Committee to address the lack of child care funds for working poor families and the possibility of creating a Suffolk "think tank" to address on-going funding problems. The Committee may recommend a Commission public hearing on this issue.
8. **Employment Assessment Committee:** Don Friedman provided the Commission with an overview of proposed changes in New York State Public Assistance work

requirements. He also stated that Federal TANF reauthorization would be taken up by Congress in 2010. Richard Koubek reminded the Commission that the meetings with Congressmen Steve Israel and Tim Bishop, held in the spring of 2008, had raised concerns about the negative impacts that the TANF rules were having on SCDSS. The Commission representatives were told by both Congressmen that changes in these regulations might follow a Democratic Party victory in the 2008 presidential and congressional elections. It was agreed that the Employment Assessment Committee should reconvene with the purpose of reviewing proposed changes in the State work rules as well as possible recommendations for changes in the federal TANF regulations imposed in 2006. The Congressmen would again be visited for the purpose of moving these recommendations to House Ways and Means Committee Chair Charles Rangel, as recommended by Congressman Steve Israel.

9. **Commission Membership in HWCLI and SCC:** The Commission again discussed membership in the Health and Welfare Council of Long Island (HWC-LI) and the Suffolk Community Council (SCC). One reason for this membership would be to engage the Commission in the professional activities of these two umbrella organizations that represent social service agencies on Long Island. It was agreed that Commission membership should in no way substitute for individual agency membership in HWC-LI and SCC by organizations that sit on the Commission. There was consensus that the Chair and Vice Chair should be members of both umbrella organizations, but that the Resolution creating the Commission may not permit the use of Commission funds for this purpose. This issue will be clarified and addressed again at the April meeting.

10. **Next Meeting: Wednesday, April 15, 9:30 AM, SCDOL One Stop Center**