

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

**Minutes of the June 13, 2019 Meeting**

**Present:**

Richard Koubek, Chair  
Ayesha Alleyne (Wyandanch Homes and Property Development Corporation)  
Christina DeLisi (Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory)  
Charles Fox (EOC-LI)  
Don Friedman (Empire Justice Center)  
Kim Gierasch (Suffolk County Department of Health)  
Jenn Hann for Legislator Sammy Gonzalez  
Gabrielle Fasano for Greta Guarton (LI Coalition for the Homeless)  
Jeanne Durso for Arlene Jackson (Suffolk County Community College)  
Richard Krebs, (SC Department of Labor)  
Traci Barnes for Frances Pierre, (Commissioner, SC Department of Social Services)  
Kathy Garneau for Michael Stoltz (Association for Mental Health and Wellness)  
Luis Valenzuela (LI Council of Churches)  
Beth Zweig, Nassau Suffolk Law Services

**Excused**) Peggy Boyd (Family Service League); Barbara Egloff (Eastern Suffolk BOCES); Michael Haynes (LI Cares/Harry Chapin Food Bank); Christian Limbach, (SC Association of Municipal Employees); Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair; Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds (Family and Children's Association/LICADD);

**Absent:**

Rachel Seiler (Community Development Corporation of LI)

**Guests:** Ann Marie Csorny, Director, Suffolk County Department of Health, Division of Community Mental Hygiene Services; Linda Hassberg, Empire Justice center; Destiny Wise, Office of the Presiding Officer

1. **Minutes:** Chair Richard Koubek stated that the May meeting had been cancelled due to the Health and Human services presentation of the Commission's supportive Housing report as well as several pending committee reports. A motion to accept the April minutes, made by Friedman seconded by Beth Zweig passed with three abstentions abstention.
2. **Immigration Issues:** Mr. Koubek noted in the April minutes that the Commission tabled discussion of follow-up actions regarding the 2018 report on the impacts that federal immigration policies are having on Suffolk residents pending an anticipated major *Newsday* story on this topic. That story, "A Climate of Fear," was published on June 9<sup>th</sup> and shared with Commission members by the Chair. Mr. Koubek pointed out that the Commission's report had been shared in December with *Newsday* reporter Victor Ramos, the primary author of the *Newsday* story, that the *Newsday* story closely paralleled the Commission's December 2018 report to the legislature. The main difference was that the *Newsday* reporters were able to interview undocumented immigrants directly whereas the commission received testimony from service providers. In advance of the meeting, Mr. Koubek consulted with Peggy Boyd who had brought the immigration issue to the Commission's attention in 2018. Both agreed that, given no new evidence in the *Newsday* story, the Commission should

take no further action pending the federal government's decision on the public charge issue which is anticipated sometime in late 2019 or in 2020.

3. **New York State Legislative Actions:**

- a) **Green Light:** Mr. Koubek reported that the Green Light bill granting licenses to undocumented immigrants is likely to pass in the Assembly but may be in trouble in the Senate due to the uncertain positions of the six Long Island Democratic senators.
- b) **Sanctions Bill:** Don Friedman reported that this bill was endorsed by the Commission in a June 3<sup>rd</sup> electronic vote of 15 Yes; 0 No; two abstentions (Arleen Jackson and Richard Krebs). The bill passed both the assembly and senate and is awaiting the Governor's signature. The key provisions of the bill are:
  - Before imposing a sanction, districts must determine whether the alleged failure to comply was related to a disability, a child care problem or transportation difficulties.
  - Instead of mandatory durational sanctions, the individual can avoid a sanction or have it lifted by demonstrating a willingness to comply with the work requirements.
  - There can be no sanction for a single infraction, such as one missed appointment.
- c) **Home Stability Support Bill:** Mr. Friedman reported that the fate of this bill, which would extend the 2018 provisions which applied to New York City and Rochester to the entire state, remains uncertain,

4. **Supportive Housing Report and SPA:** Mr. Koubek reported that he, Greta Guarton and Michael Stoltz presented the report to the Education and Human Services Committee on May 7<sup>th</sup>. The presentation lasted over an hour with the Committee members engaged in the presentation, asking questions and making comments. Mr. Koubek had electronically reported to the Commission that the Committee members were most interested in the larger issues related to the lack of affordable housing in Suffolk County than in the technical issues related to supportive housing for mentally-ill people. He noted that the report made clear this population- especially the mentally ill who are chronically homeless - is very difficult to house because these disabilities cause people to resist both treatment and housing and because placement in SPA supportive housing requires a physician's diagnosis which is difficult for some mentally-ill homeless people to obtain. Mr. Koubek noted that the chronically homeless, who in 2018 numbered 117, consume 80 percent of the funds devoted to homeless programs. Mr. Koubek then introduced AnnMarie Csorny, Director, Suffolk County Department of Health, Division of Community Mental Hygiene Services, who oversees the SPA program in Suffolk County.

- a) **Difficulties with Placements:** Ms. Csorny noted that the majority of State funds for supportive housing go to New York City despite the fact that Suffolk County is the fourth largest county in New York State. Ms. Csorny and Gabrielle Fasano of the Long Island Coalition for the Homeless stated that many of the mentally-ill turn down housing placements during intake, often because they are uncomfortable living in group or supervised settings. Ms. Csorny suggested that clients bring advocates or counselors with them during the intake process. It was noted that some providers refuse to accept people with certain mental illnesses or substance abuse conditions. Ms. Fasano pointed out that any provider receiving Continuum of Care funds can no longer turn away clients under a Housing First Model adopted in 2017.
- b) **Inadequate State Funding:** Ms. Csorny described the various types SPA housing choices which are outlined in the Commission's supportive housing report. She and Mr. Koubek noted that at one of the Work Group's sessions with State officials, the

Long Island attendees pointed out that the State does not provide sufficient funds to meet Long Island's high construction and operational costs. Ms. Csorny suggested that agencies should apply for funding with a budget that reflects the funding/costs needed to meet local costs, that way the state is aware of the interest of the provider, the need of the community and the actual costs of the service, even if they know they may not receive it, so they are on record.

- c) **Need for Greater Coordination:** Mr. Koubek noted that the Work Group encountered concerns about the wait list for SPA services. Regarding SPA data on homeless applicants, Ms. Csorny stated that on average the SPA office has approximately 260 applications for all level of housing for persons who are homeless. It is estimated that each person with an active SPA application who is homeless is contacted and offered a placement minimally bi monthly. Vacancies for all level of housing range from 10 to 15 per week, an average monthly total of 54. The SPA office estimates that they outreach about eight (8) persons per vacancy. Ms. Fasano noted that sometimes homeless clients are served by several agencies each of which has a different aspect of the client's application. Linda Hassberg stated that she has seen geographic concerns in which housing choices are far removed from a client's doctor and other treatment services. Kathy Garneau of the Association for Mental Health and Wellness stated that when some clients leave a shelter they are lost to the system, some even choosing to live in the woods rather than accept a SPA housing choice. Ms. Garneau stated that clients need multiple services: housing; counseling; healthcare; substance abuse treatment, etc. She noted that SPA is doing a wonderful job placing clients in supportive housing given these difficult circumstances. Ms. Hassberg stated that there is a lack of a central coordinating agency that could deal with these overlapping issues. Ms. Csorny suggested a pilot project to improve coordination of the application process among different agencies.
- d) **Reconvene the Work Group:** Mr. Koubek suggested that the Supportive Housing Work Group reconvene in the coming months to address the coordination concerns raised at this meeting. He thanked Ms. Csorny for taking time from her busy schedule to attend the meeting.

5. **Family Violence Option:** Don Friedman presented on a report he developed for the Empire Justice Center on implementation of the federal government's Family Violence Option in New York State (see FVO report summary below.) This program was part of the 1996 federal "welfare reform" law. The FVO allows for public assistance clients to be asked, when they first come to apply for welfare, if they have been the victims of domestic violence and, if so, to be referred for supportive services, and to have certain application requirements waived. Mr. Friedman's report found that the FVO program often works reasonably well in New York State, but also raised a number of areas of concern and proposed recommendations to address these concerns. Mr. Friedman noted his follow-up assignment to the report is to develop a guide to services and benefits that Domestic Violence (DV) victims might access, or special programmatic rules that pertain to DV victims. He indicated that he would appreciate Suffolk input on this guide. Mr. Koubek suggested that this should be a Commission agenda item for a future meeting.

6. **Next Meeting:** Friday, July 12

## **POVERTY AND VIOLENCE:**

### **DOES NEW YORK'S FAMILY VIOLENCE OPTION MAKE A DIFFERENCE?**

**Report by Don Friedman, Empire Justice Center, April 2019**

It is estimated that one in four women experience domestic violence, but 50 to 60% of women receiving public assistance have been victims of domestic violence. The potential impact of abuse is all too well-known, in terms of physical and mental well-being, the capacity to secure and retain employment, and to successfully care for one's self and a family.

With the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996 – Welfare Reform – Congress created the Family Violence Option (FVO). States had the option to offer a range of services to public assistance clients with domestic violence problem. The process:

- New welfare applicants can voluntarily be preliminarily screened for domestic violence;
- Applicants claiming domestic violence are referred to a Domestic Violence Liaison (DVL);
- The DVL does an assessment as to whether the claim of domestic violence is credible.
- If credible, the client is given referrals for services and can be given a waiver of certain welfare requirements, such as engaging in work activities or pursuit of child support.

This report examines the FVO process in NYS in detail, provides we believe to be a representative, statewide overview of the key issues. We do not rate, compare or name counties, but rather observe what appear to be patterns and possible problems, and then make a series of recommendations.

The report discusses the steps in the FVO process, and highlights areas of concern:

1. *The client's arrival at DSS – Information received:* An often-raised issue concerned the adequacy of information provided to clients as they begin the public assistance application process.
2. *The initial screening for domestic violence:* We increasingly believed that many DV do not acknowledge the problem and thereby forfeit the benefits of the FVO.
3. *The assessment of credibility and the granting of waivers:* This is the central role of the DVL. Our interviewees were generally quite positive about the DVLs, observing that many seem to have a passion and dedication to the work that they do. On the other hand we were troubled by the significant number of domestic violence claims that are found not credible. For example, one DVL quoted her agency's informal motto, "begin by believing." But statewide data indicates that 40% of domestic violence claims statewide are found not credible.

**Recommendations:** The report concludes with a substantial number of recommendations, ranging from those requiring major funding or significant legislative changes, to those that might be accomplished by a supervisor at a local DSS office. We highlight here a few of our key recommendations.

1. **Housing and public assistance:** The success of anti-domestic violence efforts is seriously diminished if safe, stable housing is not in place. There is a critical need for more affordable housing and for an increase in the rent portion of the welfare grant. This can be accomplished by enactment of Home Stability Support, an initiative in the New York State Legislature that would significantly increase the public assistance rent allowance, enabling households to pay up to 85%

of the local Fair Market Rent (as defined by the Federal Department of Housing and Urban Development).<sup>1</sup>

2. **DSS staff training #1:** Our interviews repeatedly indicated too many DSS staff members were not sufficiently aware of the significance and the details of the FVO process. We recognize that training poses logistical and staffing challenges, but it is critical that staff be well-trained in the rules of the process and in recognizing domestic violence problems that may not have been acknowledged. Training should be provided that also focuses on how information can best be conveyed to and elicited from clients managing with severe stress and anxiety.

3. **Training #2: Disclosing a domestic violence problem:** Many interviewees expressed concern that many DV victims fail to advise DSS of their domestic violence problems. Staff should be provided with trauma-informed training that helps workers to create a setting where a client can feel comfortable engaging in this difficult conversation.

4. **Training #3: Immigrants and other marginalized communities:** Virtually every challenging aspect of the FVO process is all the more daunting for immigrants and members of other marginalized communities. Immigrants, people who are LGBTQ, people of color, and people with disabilities face barriers in terms of language, cultural norms and fear regarding their legal status in this country. Too many members of these communities struggle with poverty, and discrimination on many fronts, employment, housing, interaction with law enforcement. There is an urgent need to address these issues on a societal level, but the effectiveness of the FVO also requires a determined effort by local Departments of Social Services to better understand the needs of all who come to them for assistance.

5. **More staff needed!** In a number of locations there was a marked shortage of trained, qualified DSS staff, and also the need for advocates. Interviewees repeatedly asserted that, simply stated, positive outcomes were much more likely when an advocate was involved.

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<sup>1</sup> We really need an increase in the entire welfare grant, which has not remotely kept up with the cost of livings, especially in high-cost areas like New York City and Long Island, but our most critical need is for adequate funds for housing.