

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

**Minutes of the November 14, 2019 Meeting**

**Present:**

Richard Koubek, Chair  
Jenn Hann for Legislator Sam Gonzalez  
Ayesha Alleyne (Wyandanch Homes and Property Development Corporation)  
Peggy Boyd (Family Service League)  
Don Friedman (Empire Justice Center)  
Christina DeLisi (Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory)  
Kim Gierasch (Suffolk County Department of Health)  
Arlene Jackson (Suffolk County Community College)  
Richard Krebs, (SC Department of Labor)  
Traci Barnes for Commissioner Frances Pierre (SCDSS)  
Jose Veliz (EOC-LI)  
Beth Zweig, Nassau Suffolk Law Services

**Excused)**

Barbara Egloff (Eastern Suffolk BOCES); Christian Limbach, (SC Association of Municipal Employees); Greta Guarton (LI Coalition for the Homeless); Michael Haynes (LI Cares/Harry Chapin Food Bank); Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds (Family and Children's Association/LICADD)  
Michael Stoltz (Association for Mental Health and Wellness); Luis Valenzuela (LI Council of Churches)

**Absent:**

Rachel Seiler (Community Development Corporation of LI)

**Guest:** Jennifer Rojas, Executive Director, Child Care Council of Suffolk; Vincent Rothaar, Suffolk County Department of Social Services

1. **Minutes:** A motion to accept the October minutes, made by Peggy Boyd, seconded by Don Friedman, passed unanimously.
2. **Child Care Presentation:** Chair Richard Koubek introduced Jennifer Rojas, Executive Director of the Child Care Council of Suffolk, for a presentation on how child-care funding is now included in the New York State and Long Island Regional Economic Development Councils plans.
  - a. **State Funding:** Mr. Rojas reported that she is a member of the new Governor's State Task Force on Child-Care Availability. The Task Force is recommending an increase in State funding for the 2020 budget. The goal is to secure \$100 million in State funding: \$40 million for the Workforce Stability Fund and \$60 million for the child-care subsidy for families earning under \$200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In addition, the New York State Regional Economic Development Council (NYSREDC), which awards State-wide \$750 million in competitive grants to local councils, including the Long Island Regional Economic Development Council (LIREDC), has now included child-care as a local funding priority. This led to the LIREDC creating a Long Island Child-Care Task Force that is developing a proposal to use LIREDC funds to supplement State budget allocations so that no Long Island

family pays more than 10 percent of its income for child care (which is the federally recommended formula).

- b. **Financial Strains on Child-Care Providers:** Ms. Rojas described a Long Island child-care industry in crisis. Currently it costs between \$13,000-\$20,000 for a family to pay for regulated child care; 80 percent of a child-care provider's costs are devoted to staffing and regulatory requirements. In recent years, Long Island has lost 1,000 child-care slots and 80 child-care providers have gone out of business, largely due to financial strains. The new State minimum wage requirement has further burdened providers since they must pass the increase staffing costs on to parents with increased tuitions. Because of low pay, many child-care workers are leaving the industry for more lucrative jobs. And parents are losing their State child-care subsidy for families earning under 200% of the Federal Poverty Level because their wages are increasing in the current booming Long Island economy. She noted that the number of middle- and upper-class children is declining while the number of low-income children is increasing on long Island. While most of the NYSREDC grants are awarded for capital projects, the Long Island Child Care Task Force is hoping that the 2020 grants can be applied to child-care operating costs to alleviate some of these financial stressors.
  - c. Mr. Koubek and Ms. Rojas concluded that the inclusion of child-care as a NYSREDC priority is a major step forward. Each hoped that Governor Andrew Cuomo follows through with appropriate State funding as well when he announces the 2020 State budget.
3. **Mental Health Assessments:** Mr. Koubek noted that the Commission's 2019 goal exploring "mental health services available to social services clients to help them attain self-sufficiency" would be taken up at this meeting. He welcomed Vincent Rothaar from SCDSS who agreed to address this issue and thanked Don Friedman for his research on the topic.
- a. **DSS Mental Health Assessments:** Mr. Rothaar stated that DSS interviews every applicant for the purpose of detecting barriers to employment which might include alcohol and substance abuse, learning and educational deficiencies, criminal backgrounds as well as mental-health problems. The intake workers use an OTDA employment assessment tool to identify barriers during the 30-45 minute interview. Applicants with perceived or possible mental- health problems are referred to IMA for more thorough diagnoses. Similarly, clients seeking DSS housing are assessed for barriers including mental health problems, alcohol and substance abuse that might prevent them from being housed in a DSS facility because they may not be able to comply with DSS housing rules and regulations. Mr. Rothaar agreed with comments by Peggy Boyd and Richard Krebs that despite the screenings, some clients fall through the cracks and that their mental-health problems are not detected, either because they are ashamed to admit they have them or are unaware that they have mental illness.
  - b. **OTDA Modified Mini Mental Health Screening Tool:** Don Friedman shared with the Commission a three-page mental health screening tool known as the Modified Mini Screen, which was validated by academic researchers in 2013, and recommended by OTDA for use by local DSSs. The OTDA Administrative Directive for this tool was distributed by Mr. Rothaar and Traci Barnes. The tool is optional for local DSS districts. Mr. Friedman expressed regret that OTDA did not mandate the screening tool. He did not express an opinion about the tool currently used in Suffolk

County, but felt that a statewide, validated screening might most effectively identify mental-health problems for people who might otherwise fall through the cracks. The ability of the screen to assess the likelihood that a person has a mental illness could help DSS to understand limitations in their ability to comply with program requirements, and thereby avoid adverse actions such as sanctions. Mr. Friedman also emphasized that the-intake screening at DSS should do more than evaluate for employability, but should examine the person's capacities with regard to all interactions with DSS. Mr. Friedman then explained the various components of the OTDA screening tool. Several members of the Commission stated that they could benefit from using this tool. Mr. Friedman noted that community agencies can feel free to use the tool. Mr. Koubek said that he will share the tool electronically with the Commission.

- c. **Next Steps:** Mr. Koubek stated that he had hoped the Commission could convene a committee to further examine use of the Modified Mini Screening tool. However, due to a pending lawsuit filed by Empire Justice, this committee's formation may have to be delayed since it could interfere with the litigation. Mr. Rothaar stated that DSS will consult with counsel on this matter.
4. **SCCC/SWEP Pilot Report to the Legislature:** Mr. Koubek stated that he, Don Friedman, Arlene Jackson and Richard Krebs will be presenting the Commission's report on the SCCC/SWEP Pilot to the Education and Human Services Committee of the Legislature on November 19<sup>th</sup>, 12:30PM in the Hauppauge legislative auditorium.
5. **IDA Scoring Tool:** Jenn Hann stated that Legislator Gonzalez is working with IDA board member Josh Slaughter on whether the Commission can be placed on the IDA Board's agenda to present the scoring tool.
6. **Public Charge Presentation:** This topic, related to a new federal regulation that would make it more difficult for documented immigrants to receive permanent legal status if they ever used a public benefit such as Food Stamps was tabled because three federal court injunctions issued in October halted the implementation of the new regulation. The Administration is appealing these decisions.
7. **Next Meeting:** Thursday, December 12th