

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

Minutes of the April 9, 2020 Meeting

Present:

Richard Koubek, Chair
Ayesha Alleyne, Vice Chair
Legislator Sarah Anker
Legislator Sam Gonzalez
Peggy Boyd (Family Service League);
Christina DeLisi for Presiding Officer Robert Calarco
Barbara Egloff (Eastern Suffolk BOCES);
Don Friedman (Empire Justice Center)
Greta Guarton (LI Coalition for the Homeless)
Michael Haynes (LI Cares/Harry Chapin Food Bank)
Christian Limbach, (SC Association of Municipal Employees)
Traci Barnes for Commissioner Frances Pierre (SCDSS)
Michael Stoltz (Association for Mental Health and Wellness)
Donna Teicher for Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds (Family and Children's Association)
Jose Veliz (EOC-LI); Kim Gierasch (Suffolk County Department of Health);
Luis Valenzuela (LI Council of Churches)
Paola Arango for Beth Zweig, (Nassau Suffolk Law Services)

Excused

Arlene Jackson (Suffolk County Community College); Eric Lopez (SC Department of Labor);
Alicia Marks (Marks of Excellence Child Care Center)

Absent:

Rachel Seiler (Community Development Corporation of LI)

Guest: Ryan McGarry, Suffolk County Association of Municipal Employees

1. **Conference Call:** Chair Richard Koubek thanked the Commission members able to join the conference call for the April Commission meeting. The conference call format was used instead of an in-person meeting due to the coronavirus pandemic.
2. **Minutes:** A motion to accept the March minutes, made by Christian Limbach, seconded by Greta Guarton, passed unanimously.
3. **Public Charge Regulations:** Mr. Koubek noted that he sent Deputy Suffolk County Executive Vanessa Baird Streeter a copy of the Commission's Public Charge resource with a request that she share it with the Commissioners of DSS, DOL and DOH.
4. **IDA Scoring Tool:** Legislator Sam Gonzalez said that he is still working on securing an invitation for the Commission to present its IDA Scoring Tool to the IDA Board. Mr. Koubek noted that he was on a conference call with Roger Clayman, Executive Director of the Long Island Federation of Labor, who helped draft the tool and who remains very interested in meeting with the IDA Board. Legislator Gonzalez said he would reach out to Mr. Clayman.
5. **Covid-19 Impacts:** Mr. Koubek asked members of the Commission to share what they are experiencing regarding the coronavirus impacts on their agencies or communities. Legislator Sarah Anker reported that the most recent data revealed 18,602 positive Covid-19 tests in

Suffolk County. Of those who have died, 75% were over 65 years of age and 94% had pre-existing conditions such as hypertension or diabetes.

- a. **Legislative District 9:** Legislator Gonzalez said that his district has two communities very hard hit by the virus: Brentwood and Central Islip, with over 1,000 cases thus far reported. He said 80 percent of the cases in his district have been hospitalized, with Hispanics suffering especially hard due to their crowded housing conditions, denser communities, lack of health insurance and their work in non-exempt jobs. He stated that the International Academy of Emergency Dispatch has Protocol 36 which allows for triaging of cases during a pandemic. He is concerned that very sick constituents may be denied medical assistance under Protocol 36. Mr. Koubek stated that in his LI Jobs with Justice position, he worked with the Huntington Rapid Response Network and the County to establish a mobile test site in the Huntington Station Covid-19 “hot spot.” He said he and others were upset that the flyer they distributed contained CDC guidelines that one threshold for being tested was to have a temperature of at least 100.5 degrees. He said that this guideline indicates that there are insufficient tests available and that the County has been forced to ration the tests. Mr. Koubek concluded that this is a national problem which is compounding and possibly prolonging the Covid-19 pandemic’s effects.
- b. **Family and Children’s Association:** Donna Teicher stated that Family and Children’s Association also observed that Latinos are having difficulty getting tested, even though many live in Covid-19 “hot spots.” She reported that her agency has set up a Covid-19 helpline for Latinos to expedite their receiving Covid-19 resources and services.
- c. **Suffolk DSS:** Traci Barnes reported that DSS has seen an increase in SNAP (food stamp) applications. She stated that DSS is doing telephone assessments (for TA applications) to reduce the need to travel to the centers and that DSS is not imposing new sanction nor requiring work assignments at this time.
- d. **LI Coalition for the Homeless: LI Coalition for the Homeless:** Greta Guarton stated that the Health and Welfare Council of LI (HWCLI) has created an immigration subcommittee as part of its drive to encourage participation in Census 2020. She suggested that this group be used to disseminate County Covid-19 information to immigrants. Mr. Koubek stated that he is a member of this committee and that he would share this idea with HWCLI. Ms. Guarton also stated that homeless shelter providers have been informed of a screening tool to identify homeless people who have tested positive for Covid-19 that is included in the regional Homeless Management Information System (HMIS) they all use. This can help with logistical planning and mitigate against spread of the virus to congregate shelters. This practice is already underway with Nassau County’s DSS. Ms. Barnes stated that Suffolk DSS would also consider participating.
- e. **Association of Mental Health and Wellness:** Mile Stoltz reported that the Association is participating with VOAD toward a regional, collaborative approach to coping with the grief and disruptions caused by Covid-19. He stated that telehealth platforms have been established for people with behavioral-health challenges to speak with counselors by telephone or Zoom, the goal being to reduce their anxieties and keep them out of hospitals. He noted that congregate units are especially problematic because people with mental-health disorders find it difficult dealing with the social-distancing regulations. Workers in these units are receiving hazard pay. Mr. Stoltz stated that the Covid-19 crisis may result in more practioners being linked to patients via telephone which would be a desirable outcome long sought by advocates.

- f. **Family Service League of LI:** Peggy Boyd reported that her agency is placing some residents of congregate-care units in motels to reduce density and thereby enhance social distancing. She noted that undocumented people are presenting special challenges during this crisis, particularly where to shelter those who test positive. Mr. Koubek noted that Huntington is considering its own mobile test unit for immigrants but that there appears to be some uncertainty about where to house those who test positive. Should they be returned to their families where they will infect others? Ms. Boyd noted that her agency is exploring sites for quarantined people to be sheltered, such as hotels or the Catholic seminary in Lloyd Harbor. Paola Arango noted that quarantined people need food and supplies delivered to them.
 - g. **Nassau Suffolk Law Services:** Ms. Arango stated that her agency is concerned about illegal evictions of people who cannot pay their rent during the Coronavirus crisis. Mr. Koubek noted that there have been situations reported in Huntington where landlords are threatening to report undocumented immigrants to ICE if they do not pay their rent, which is a violation of Governor Andrew Cuomo's 90-day moratorium on evictions. Ms. Arango noted that the government has granted homeowners delays in the payment of mortgages but that no provisions have been made to help renters.
6. **Empire Justice Center Covid-19 DSS Recommendations:** Don Freidman from the Empire Justice Center submitted the following recommendations for consideration by DSS during the Covid-19 crisis. Traci Barnes' comments are noted in italics. Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission:
- a. Going in person to DSS offices can pose a hardship and health risks for clients and staff. We would urge Suffolk County DSS, if it has the WMS capacity, to allow TA applications to be completed online. New York City has exercised this option, which can be done at county discretion.
 - Mr. Koubek reported that Vanessa Baird Streeter may be raising this issue with DSS commissioner Frances Pierre. *Ms. Barnes stated that OTDA temporarily waived the face to face requirement for the eligibility interview*
 - b. If electronic submission is not an option, we urge SCDSS to accept scanned or photographed applications via email. If an advocate assists the client in completing the application by phone, DSS should allow the application to be submitted without a signature. The agency worker can then verify and review the application with the applicant by phone. This would serve to avoid putting more people (workers, clients and advocates) at risk by minimizing in-person interactions and travel.
 - *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.*
 - c. Question: Can applications (TA/SNAP et al) be scanned in, or photos taken and uploaded and sent to DSS without signature? Please provide email/ phone contact to ensure expedited processing of applications in each center.
 - *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.*
 - d. Given the severe difficulties low-income residents face, aid should be expedited whenever possible. This includes removing the usual mandatory waiting periods and shortening the time periods for processing Temporary Assistance and Medicaid applications.
 - *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and*

Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.

e. Another measure to assist those in severe need would be to issue additional emergency allowances for personal care and hygiene (pre-investigation and emergency needs grants) as appropriate.

- *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.*

f. In the best of times, sanctions cause serious hardship. During this crisis period, when all that can be done to limit such suffering should be done, we recommend that DSS lift existing sanctions and not impose any new sanctions.

- *Ms. Barnes again stated that no new sanctions are being imposed. She will confirm that the 4/1/20 sanctions were not imposed. Ms. Barnes also agreed to bring back to staff for consideration the proposal that sanctions currently in effect be lifted.*

g. Efforts to comply with work requirements can be difficult and can expose clients and staff to increased risk. Question: Have all work requirements been suspended, including for those who require treatment and care to become employable? For sites which remain open (e.g. Pronto), are those assigned through DOL excused? We propose that all work requirements be suspended during the COVID-19 crisis if this has not already been done.

- *Ms. Barnes again reiterated that work requirements have been suspended in accordance with Covid-19 regulations regarding non-essential workers. Donna Teicher asked if drug and alcohol requirements have been suspended. Ms. Barnes will review this requirement.*

h. We unfortunately anticipate many illegal evictions due to concerns about social distancing and because tenants are unable to pay rent. We recommend: a) That DSS waive cumbersome documentation requirements to prove homelessness; b) That DSS house homeless individuals and families, regardless of immigration status. Mixed status families should not be separated during this critical time.

- *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.*

i. Utilize hotel rooms and other non-congregate spaces to house the homeless, especially people who are disabled or medically fragile.

- *The department will continue to identify appropriate housing placements.*

j. We recommend that the County issue Pandemic SNAP (P-SNAP) or Temporary Emergency FAP(T-FAP) to address intensifying food insecurity during this crisis.

- *Ms. Barnes agreed to review the recommendations with staff at DSS noting some of the recommendations may require State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) approval or action, and report back to the Commission.*

7. **Next meeting:** May 14th