

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

**Minutes of the May 14, 2020 Meeting**

**Present:**

Richard Koubek, Chair  
Ayesha Alleyne, Vice Chair  
Legislator Sarah Anker  
Diana Torres for Legislator Sam Gonzalez  
Traci Barnes for Commissioner Frances Pierre (SCDSS)  
Peggy Boyd (Family Service League)  
Christina DeLisi for Presiding Officer Robert Calarco  
Barbara Egloff (Eastern Suffolk BOCES);  
Greta Guarton (LI Coalition for the Homeless)  
Linda Hassberg (Empire Justice Center)  
Michael Haynes (LI Cares/The Harry Chapin Food Bank)  
Arlene Jackson (Suffolk County Community College)  
Eric Lopez (SC Department of Labor)  
Alicia Marks (Marks of Excellence Child Care Center)  
Michael Stoltz (Association for Mental Health and Wellness)  
Donna Teicher for Dr. Jeffrey Reynolds (Family and Children's Association)  
Jose Veliz (EOC-LI);  
Luis Valenzuela (LI Council of Churches)

**Excused**

Paola Arango for Beth Zweig, (Nassau Suffolk Law Services); Kim Gierasch (Suffolk County Department of Health); Christian Limbach, (SC Association of Municipal Employees)

**Absent:**

Rachel Seiler (Community Development Corporation of LI)

1. **Guest:** Vanessa Baird Streeter, Assistant Deputy Suffolk County Executive; Anita Halasz, Executive Director, Long Island Jobs with Justice; Paule Pachter, Chief Executive Officer, Long Island Cares/The Harry Chapin Food Bank
2. **Conference Call:** Chair Richard Koubek thanked the Commission members able to join the conference call for the May Commission meeting. The conference call format was used instead of an in-person meeting due to the coronavirus pandemic.
3. **Minutes:** A motion to accept the April minutes, made by Greta Guarton, seconded by Donna Teichner, passed unanimously.
4. **Covid-19 Food-Insecurity Impacts:** Mr. Koubek noted that food insecurity has become a serious problem in Suffolk and throughout the Nation with the rapid and deep increase in unemployment due to the Covid-19 crisis. He stated that during a recent immigrant-advocates' conference call hosted by Vanessa Baird Streeter, Assistant Deputy Suffolk County Executive, DSS Commissioner Frances Pierre reported that SNAP applications in April 2020 had soared to 5,231 compared with 1,941 in April of 2019. For this reason, food insecurity would be a major focus of this Commission meeting.

- a. Paule Pachter – LI Cares/The Harry Chapin Food Bank:** Mr. Koubek welcomed Paule Pachter, Chief Executive Officer of Long Island Cares/The Harry Chapin Food Bank, who opened by stating that both his agency and Island Harvest have been hard pressed to meet the sudden surge in demand for emergency food.
- i.* Mr., Pachter noted that LI Cares provides food to 310 pantries in Nassau and Suffolk Counties as part of its COVID-19 response of which 72 closed in April, with 9 hoping to reopen in May. LI Cares has created 19 satellite distribution centers that served 9,400 people in March of 2020 – a 65% increase over March, 2019. Of those served in March, 2,200 were first-time pantry users. In April, LI Cares served 17,700 people at their satellite centers, of whom 12,046 were first-time panty users – a 445% increase.
  - ii.* LI Cares provided 78 home deliveries in March which rose to 233 home deliveries in April. Similarly, along with the Department of Health, LI Cares provided 939 home deliveries to seniors in March which soared to 9,100 senior home food deliveries in April. LI Cares has also been providing 547 Emergency Food Boxes in 33 school districts to children who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.
  - iii.* Mr. Pachter noted that a major challenge currently faced by his agency are delays in the food-distribution chain, with \$750,000 in open food orders due to 4 to 5-week delivery backups. He noted that LI Cares is due to receive \$640,000 from New York State for emergency food distributions. He stated that LI Cares will be purchasing \$140,000 in Long Island fish that will be processed by local restaurants for distribution.
  - iv.* Finally, Mr. Pachter pointed out that his agency is providing three-days of food to people who seek Covid-19 tests at county mobile “hot-spot” test sites such as Wyandanch and Brentwood. Mr. Koubek thanked Mr. Pachter for his report, noting that the food-insecurity data are staggering.
- b. Vanessa Baird Streeter – Suffolk County’s 311 Hotline:** Mr. Koubek thanked Ms. Baird Streeter for taking time attend the Commission meeting. He noted that he has been participating in Ms. Baird Streeter’s weekly Covid-19 conference calls for immigrant advocates that have been very informative.
- i.* Ms. Baird Streeter thanked the community-based organizations, LI Cares and Island Harvest for their responses to Long Island’s Covid-19 food-insecurity emergency. She stated that the Suffolk County 311 operators are English/Spanish bilingual, have access to updated food emergency resources, make referrals where appropriate for home deliveries via Long Island Cares/Department of Social Services/Department of Health and check with the caller to determine if the requested deliveries have been made. Home deliveries have been provided to homebound seniors, families with children under 7, people who are immune compromised or temporarily disabled.
  - ii.* Ms. Baird Streeter also stated that she is working with eight Suffolk towns to establish a contact person to facilitate food deliveries to the homebound within 24 hours of a request. Ms. Baird Streeter reiterated that Long island Cares is providing free food at the County’s 11 hot spot Covid-19 testing sites.
- c. Peggy Boyd – Family Service League Huntington Hotline:** Peggy Boyd described a hot line operated by her agency that has three English/Spanish bilingual operators prepared to facilitate calls for emergency-food assistance.

- i.* Ms. Boyd noted that there have been “pop-up” food services in Huntington and that her agency has updated the town’s list of pantries and other free food distribution sites to accommodate changes in hours caused by Covid-19. She also conducts a weekly conference call of providers to coordinate food distribution.
  - ii.* Mr. Koubek stated that Long Island Jobs with Justice, for whom he works, has been collaborating with the Huntington Rapid Response Network (HRRN) to provide emergency food distributions, particularly to immigrants. He stated that HRRN volunteers may be able to facilitate home food deliveries, particularly on weekends when some pantries are closed. There are RRNs in Babylon, North Brookhaven, the North Fork and Hampton Bays that are also providing emergency food distributions. Mr. Koubek stated that the Huntington model of a town hot line linked to the County’s 311 line and to local RRN volunteers might be replicated in other Suffolk towns.
- d.* **Unemployment Insurance Delays and Food Emergencies:** Mr. Koubek stated that one national commentator compared Covid-19 to an asteroid striking the American economy. He noted that state Unemployment Insurance offices have been overwhelmed, with on-line websites crashing and long delays in processing applications and issuing Unemployment checks. He asked if these delays might be a cause of the current food-emergency crisis. Michael Haynes of LI Cares, Eric Lopez of DOL and Peggy Boyd each stated that they believe this to be the case and that once Unemployment checks and federal stimulus checks begin to arrive, the food insecurity problem may abate somewhat. Linda Hassberg stated that the Empire Justice Center has an 800 number for people who need assistance accessing Unemployment Insurance.
- e.* **Undocumented Immigrants:** Mr. Koubek and Ms. Boyd pointed out that unemployed undocumented immigrants, who qualify for no federal, state or county funding, will continue to suffer from food and other economic insecurities during the Covid-19 crisis. Donna Teichner reported that Family and Children’s Association has created a Covid-19 helpline to assist immigrants.
- 5. Covid-19 Housing Insecurity Impacts:** Mr. Koubek stated that housing insecurities have also been caused by Covid-19 impacts on the Suffolk economy.
  - a.* **Sheltering Covid-19 Positive People:** Peggy Boyd stated that Family Service League has been providing temporary shelters to people who are testing positive for Covid-19. In many cases, these are immigrants who live in crowded homes where they are likely to infect other family members. Shelters have been provided in motels for people who must be quarantined. She also stated that her agency is having difficulty sheltering Covid-19 positive people discharged from hospitals who have no health insurance.
  - b.* **Rent Arrears:** Mr. Koubek stated that Governor Cuomo has issued a Covid-19 moratorium on evictions [extended to August 20<sup>th</sup>] and that Long Island Jobs with Justice helped secure strong statements from NYS Attorney General Letitia James outlining renters’ rights during the moratorium. However, there is a concern that once the moratorium ends, renters will be 2-4 months in arrears on their rents while still unemployed.
    - i.* Mr. Koubek shared with the Commission an advocacy letter on behalf of NYS Senator Michael Gianaris’ bill, S8125A, that would cancel rents for 90 days for people negatively impacted by Covid-19 and cancel the mortgages of landlord’s who lose their tenant’s rents due to Covid-19. Legislator Sarah

Anker expressed reservations about this bill which she thought would place undue burdens on landlords but noted that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi has proposed a second stimulus package that contains \$100 billion in assistance to renters. Mr. Koubek noted that the Republican-controlled Senate has expressed strong reservations about the Pelosi plan.

- ii.* Peggy Boyd and Jose Veliz expressed concern that HUD guidelines on payment of rent arrears require that the person receiving help be able to pick up payment of their rent after receiving one-month's rent-arrears assistance from an agency such as Family Service League or EOC. They noted that this regulation needs to be changed since many people unemployed due to Covid-19 may not be able to pay their rents in the foreseeable future due to reduced hours or continuing unemployment. Mr. Koubek stated that the Commission needs to follow this issue in the coming months.

6. **DSS Response to EJC Covid-19 Recommendations:** Mr. Koubek thanked Traci Barnes and the DSS staff for their prompt response to the Empire Justice Center's recommendations regarding policy and procedural changes during the Covid-19 pandemic. The recommendations and DSS responses are appended below. Mr. Koubek and Linda Hassberg agreed that discussion of the responses should be postponed since Cheryl Keshner from the Empire Justice Center who co-authored the recommendations was not present. Mr. Koubek stated that he would ask Ms. Keshner to submit written comments which he will pass on to DSS. [Note: on May 15<sup>th</sup> Traci Barnes emailed to Mr. Koubek Covid-19 work requirements guidance from OTDA:

“During the public health crisis and until otherwise instructed by OTDA, districts must not take negative action against applicants or recipients for noncompliance with an employment requirement that requires in-person contact. It is appropriate for districts to refrain from making new work assignments that cannot be completed at home and to provide good cause exceptions for noncompliance for infractions incurred during this public health crisis. Districts must continue to suspend all required in-person work activity assignments until further notice and are encouraged to provide assistance to those engaging in online educational or job readiness activities to prepare for further employment opportunities and to provide assistance to those seeking help obtaining a job to find work that is deemed an essential service (see [www.esd.ny.gov](http://www.esd.ny.gov) for the listing of essential businesses) as well as employment opportunities with other employers as non-essential businesses begin to reopen.”]

7. **Reopening the Economy:** Ayesha Allene asked if, when the Suffolk economy reopens, SWEP clients would be required to report to work sites that they consider to be Covid-19 at risk locations. Linda Hassberg stated New York state has prepared very specific guidelines by industry for safe reopening. Here is the link to “New York Forward: Industries Opening by Phase” - <https://forward.ny.gov/industries-reopening-phase>. Ms. Barnes agreed that employers should follow the NYS guidelines as mentioned by Ms. Hassberg. As far as work requirements; once the County reopens, DSS will follow the directive or regulations established by OTDA. Peggy Boyd stated that Family Service League has established reopening guidelines which she will share with the Commission.
8. **Next meeting:** May June 12th

## Empire Justice Center's Recommendations for Serving DSS Clients and Applicants During the COVID-19 Crisis with DSS Responses

- 1) 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.
- 2) 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.

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. OTDA's myWorkspace does not support the electronic submission of TA applications. TA applications can also be submitted via email (SuffolkTA@suffolkcountyny.gov). OTDA has waived the requirement of face to face interviews during the COVID crisis. Districts will conduct all interviews via telephone during the COVID-19 crisis.

- 3) 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. OTDA regulations with respect to processing timeframes/waiting periods for Temporary Assistance and Medicaid applications have not been modified. DSS is meeting emergency needs and processing applications as quickly as possible.
- 4) 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. Eligibility for Pre-investigative grants will be determined pursuant to OTDA directives/regulations.
- 5) 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. ABAWD requirements are suspended during the crisis – During the current public health crisis and until otherwise instructed by OTDA, districts must not take negative action against applicants or recipients for non-compliance with an employment requirement that requires in-person contact. It is appropriate for districts to refrain from making new work assignments that cannot be completed at home and to provide good cause exceptions for noncompliance for infractions incurred during this public health crisis. Districts must suspend all required in-person work activity assignments until further notice and are encouraged to provide assistance to those seeking help obtaining a job to find work that is deemed an essential service (see [www.esd.ny.gov](http://www.esd.ny.gov) for the listing of essential businesses) or engagement in educational or job readiness activities on-line to prepare for future employment opportunities.
- 6) 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 (eg. 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. Individuals are not required to report to worksites. During the current public health crisis and until otherwise instructed by OTDA, districts must not take negative action against applicants or recipients for non-compliance with an employment requirement that requires in-person contact. It is appropriate for districts to refrain from making new work assignments that cannot be completed at home and to provide good cause exceptions for noncompliance for infractions incurred during this public health crisis. Districts must suspend all required in-person work activity assignments until further notice and are encouraged to provide assistance to those seeking help obtaining a job to find work that is deemed an essential service (see [www.esd.ny.gov](http://www.esd.ny.gov) for the listing of essential businesses) or engagement in educational or job readiness activities on-line to prepare for future employment opportunities .

7) We unfortunately anticipate many illegal evictions due to concerns about social distancing and because tenants are unable to pay rent. We recommend:

That DSS waive cumbersome documentation requirements to prove homelessness. SCDSS will provide benefits in accordance with OTDA directives/regulations.

That DSS house homeless individuals and families, regardless of immigration status. Mixed status families should not be separated during this critical time. SCDSS will continue to provide THA for eligible families' and individuals. Regulations do not permit the department to provide THA for ineligible individuals.

8) Utilize hotel rooms and other non-congregate spaces to house the homeless, especially people who are disabled or medically fragile. The department will identify appropriate housing for any eligible homeless family or individual.

9) We recommend that the County issue Pandemic SNAP (P-SNAP) or Temporary Emergency FAP(T-FAP) to address intensifying food insecurity during this crisis. OTDA has advised that all active SNAP cases will receive a supplemental benefit for March and April. Any household that has not received the maximum benefit for March or April of 2020 will be issued a supplement that will be the difference between the amount of SNAP benefits the household received for the month and the maximum benefits amount for the household's size. Please see the chart below.

HOUSEHOLD SIZE	MAXIMUM ALLOTMENT
1	\$ 194
2	\$ 355
3	\$ 509
4	\$ 646
5	\$ 768
6	\$ 921
7	\$1,018
8	\$1,164
For each additional member	\$ 146