

Advocacy Committee Minutes

February 10, 2021

Welcome

Brenda Jackson, Chairperson, called the meeting to order at 8:30 AM. She recognized those on the phone and welcomed Adam Sotak, Director of North Carolina Child Public Engagement, for joining us. We had 24 members virtual.

Minutes

Minutes for January 13th will be approved at our March meeting.

Brenda began by stating that advocacy has been inviting stakeholders to our meetings to share their legislative agenda and for advocacy to share our legislative priorities and what we are focusing on as a director association and DSS board association. Brenda shared a high-level overview of our priorities with Adam Sotak of NC Child.

- One of our long-standing priorities has been an increased focus for adequate funding to enhance our capacity to serve the elderly and vulnerable and disabled adults. We know that NC Child focus on children; those children turn into adults and we see through new legislation like expanded age for juvenile justice and expanded age for foster care, those children are young adults and as a system we are serving more and more young children. We are the only disinterested public guardian and when mental health divested, we inherited all of those mental health guardianship cases. We have an awful lot of middle-age adults with mental health challenges and we serve those individuals much longer than we serve our elderly population who tend to have unfortunately end of life quicker. Those are still up there for funding and training. We have an Adult Services Road-Map with lots of good recommendations and partnering with our aging community around those issues. We would be interested in conversation about those foster children that are now young adults and who transition that we are seeing in terms of adult services population. We also have some efforts to go back to those experts who work with behavioral and mental health to serve those citizens better.
- Another agenda item we have is around Medicaid transformation and eligibility. As you know a few years ago the General Assembly took a hard stand on Medicaid error and increased the error rate from 3% federal error rate to 0% which means zero tolerance for any errors; and any error related to Medicaid that are county responsible, the county is now responsible for paying those funds back. So, there is a lot of information and priorities on that issue and appeal process. That is a huge fiscal burden on counties and so we have priorities around those charge backs and those audits.
- Another priority and a long standing one, is protecting our block grants (several block grants). This is our bread and butter in terms of funding the operation of county social services across the state and provide quality services across the spectrum from our adult services programs, our child welfare programs, our eligibility programs, and how we manage our operation. As you know the state puts very little dollars into the social services system. So, while we are state supervised and county operated, there are very few state dollars, the majority social services operation is county and federal dollars. We want to protect those block grants.
- Final priority is around Medicaid Transformation with the tailored plans and looking at greater protection for our foster children and vulnerable adults as it relates to high intensity behavioral health needs. We have had several issues with kids with chronic and complex mental health having to spend the nights in hotels, DSS offices, inappropriate level of care and needing high level like PRTF. How to better serve them and make sure they are in timely appropriate services.

Adam Sotak from NC Child introduced himself. He stated they were a statewide policy advocacy organization for children. They advocate on multiple issues from anything from juvenile justice issues, foster care system, health needs of children, K-12 education and early education. I was asked by Sharnese to share our 2021 legislative agenda. In listening to your priorities, I do think there are crossover especially around Medicaid Transformation. We are trying to keep an eye on too. On Friday the 19th at 11:00 am in our weekly legislative call, we are going to have Doug Sea, Attorney for the Charlotte Center for Legal Advocacy. Doug really knows his stuff around the transformation issues. We

are going to have him answer some questions and talk about transformation and tailored plans. This is a point of interest for everyone. Sharnese stated we have had a conversation with Doug and we will invite him back as he gets a little down the road as Ombudsman. Adam stated he would love to get an update on regionalization, transformation efforts within social services and council, and our perspective on that and how NC Child can help move it along. Brenda stated it has been a little slow in terms of what we are seeing. The department is trying to build capacity around quality assurance and performance management and is dependent on budget in moving it forward. Adam presented NC Child's 2021 Legislative Agenda highlights:

- Early Childhood- main item is the changing of the market rate allocation for subsidy and modify that it meets the realistic cost that providers and families have at the county level. They have heard about this issue for many years that counties are not getting a fair shake as far as their market rates and want to see more equity in that formula so it better meets their needs. Work very closely with NC Early Education Coalition on this issue and they have other things such as teacher compensation, childcare provider compensation and trying to bolster the awards and wages program. Because we know that an issue with early education is teacher compensation is low, benefits are often not provided and they go uninsured. If we ever are going to have sustainability in this sector, we have to make improvements there. Truth is the pandemic has blown the childcare system and made it worst. Expecting a big federal boost in funding to come in the next COVID relief package.
- Health Care- One thing we are advocating for is merging CHIP with Medicaid and have talked to DHHS. Several states are doing this. All children under the age of 6 receive Medicaid and children 6 to 17 can get either base on parent's income. If we merge this program, it will reduce administrative duplication and help with the coverage for children by allowing them to get more services the way they do with Medicaid. We want to push to extend postpartum coverage for women on pregnancy Medicaid. Right now, they lose their coverage; they are not eligible for Medicaid. You have to have a very low income in order to qualify and be under 45%. What we feel this will help with is the health of new mothers and babies if we are able to extend it from 6 weeks to a year. There is a federal bill that would potentially do this.
- Increase funding across the state so schools can hire more nurses, psychologists, social workers, counselors because the state does not meet the ratio in any of these areas. There are so many needs coming out of this pandemic and we are hoping to get a boost in funding to help support children as they come back to school even more.
- Lastly, is our age-old advocacy for expansion of Medicaid in our state-NC remains one of twelve states in the country who has not expanded Medicaid. We are one of the largest that still have not done so. We have 750,000 people who could benefit if we could expand and close the coverage gap in the state of NC. We think this is the right thing. We know about one third are parents who are uninsured and if covered will help improve their family health. The legislature still remains stubborn on that point. We will continue to be active around COVID relief. The next big sector of things is family economic security. We want to improve our pregnancy accommodations for pregnant workers. NC is one of the states that does not have strong accommodation rules around this. We want to improve upon that and help working expecting mothers to be safer and Tom Vitaglione will lead the charge. We believe we should re-establish the NC Earn Income Tax Credit. This would put a few hundred dollars back in low-income family's pocket. A few Child Welfare issues we are advocating for. You may be aware of this move to prohibit child marriage in NC. We think that will pass. There is a national organization that putting resources around this to change the law. We want to banish the use of corporal punishment in schools. It is not being use, but it is not against the law.

Brenda stated that we were hoping they had the same concerns on the expedited permanency bill, HB918, in the termination of parental rights. We have real concerns and appreciate you guys supporting that. It will come back up. Adam stated they were right there with us. They applauded the work of Senator Gladys Robinson. Adam will continue to work with her on this legislation.

Status Report on the General Assembly

Jennie Kristiansen, Children Services Committee Tri-Chair- She has been a part of a workgroup (Attorneys from Cumberland and Alamance) on how to make improvements on HB910. Jennie stated she has been part of a couple of meetings and the aim is to create a bill that is in line with federal regulations around permanency. One concern is around changing the status of foster parents to be equal to that of kin or relatives. We want to make sure we don't limit the standing of families in these types of presiding. Jennie stated that work is underway and I am hopeful we will have a better outcome.

Brenda stated that the state has the same concerns that we do. So, we would let the state take the lead and support them through the workgroup and provide feedback and be present. Legislators want it to remain confidential and we know Jennie has to be careful on what she says. Brenda thank Jennie and all the attorneys and thank her for all of her work on this.

Sharnese reported on SB36- She stated the focus has been on vaccination of schools. The extra credit grant with the one-time payment of \$335 for families for virtual learning was extended. \$2.2 billion dollars was appropriated for vaccination preparedness, rental assistance, utility assistance and housing crisis. Sharnese hasn't heard of immediate plans to put more dollars out there for DSS. She stated that the funding was going through NC Hope.

2021 Social Services Consortium Priorities

Brenda reported that the advocacy committee has been working with Sharnese and she will be working on the bill tracker. Brenda moved us into the consortium priorities. She stated that the Executive Board did approve the priorities. Panelist will go back and clean it up. Brenda stated the only thing that has changed is she is waiting for Division of Aging to provide data on public guardianship. Under #1 (second bullet) that has been re-phrased to align with NC Coalition on Aging and capture the need for state investment of funds for Adult Protective Services. Brenda stated Jan and Trish were working on #2 and haven't been able to get a straight answer on the charge back. Brenda talked about discussion on the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) and concerns of the congregate care portion of that legislation effective October 1 and any new kids going into congregate care would only be eligible for 14 days of Federal IV-E funding and the fiscal impact of that federal legislation. The state hasn't gone on record in terms of how to fill that gap and project the financial burden on the county. We wanted to throw out having a conversation with Benchmark. This will be big for them as well. We know that providers will have to meet that therapeutic level and we don't know what QRTP will look like. Tracie Murphy stated we had to leverage and partnership around this and the state hasn't provided any guidance around this. It is going to have large implications, so yes. Jan stated at one point they were saying 3 million dollar estimated loss. Brenda stated they haven't given us a loss. She stated counties will have to do their own projections. Brenda stated we may hear more about that tomorrow at board meeting.

Cansler Collaborative Resources, Inc.

Sharnese reminded us that last month we talked about doing something differently than employing a lobbyist for the next two years. Many organizations are shifting their focus more to consulting firms, to position papers, and more advocacy work as the yield at the General Assembly has not been great for many of us across the spectrum whether you are non-profit or for-profit organization. We decided we would look at a different approach for the next two years. More on how do we advocate our priorities? How do we develop position papers to help advocating across the spectrum whether it is the congressional level, state level, county management and commissioner level and DSS board level? We researched and only found one that knew our business and help us think strategically. We held a meeting with the Cansler group and the advocacy group to talk about what we wanted to achieve in the next two years. Sharnese sent to the membership the proposal from the Cansler group base on our meeting and interaction with them. Sharnese believe they could help us in putting together an advocate paper for us on those priorities we would be able to use and tailor it to our specific county needs. What we have learned is that our stories in our communities' matter. We want you to continue doing that advocacy work. We will take action on the proposal at the board meeting on Thursday. Brenda stated who will be leading the effort are Sherry Bradsher and Rebecca Troutman who we all know and both

come with a lot of experience and Rebecca is a steep lobbyist. They have the ability to connect us. If you can see, you have Adam with NC Child and Heather Burkhardt with NC Council on Aging and she is a lobbyist. This will strengthen our lobbying as we partner. Brenda put this to the committee members as a vote. With no opposition, the advocacy committee supported the Cansler Collaborative Resources, Inc and will recommend this to the board tomorrow. Betsy Wells thanked the committee for all the work and she will present it to the Board in March.

Federal Legislative Updates

Brenda stated Tom Joseph sent out a NACHSA alert on February 5th and it has the president rescue plan for COVID.

Other Discussion

There were no further questions or comments and the committee adjourned at 9:40 AM.

Minutes submitted by:

Yvette Smith