

STATEWIDE ADVISORY COUNCIL MINUTES

03/01/21

Attendees:

Myke Halpin*, Sarah Lockery*, Stephanie Cotton, Damion Grasso, Judy Eisenberg*, Irv Jennings*, Jennifer Nadeau*, Michelle Sarofin, Ken Mysogland, Amani Sehloui, Elisabeth Cannata*, Deb Kelleher, Quiana Mayo, Christopher Scott, Samaris Rose, Lisa Girard

(* indicates a voting member)

Guests:

Rachel, Sergio Alvarez, Malcolm Blue, Elizabeth Duryea, Sarah Gibson, Jon Jacaruso, Stan Kasanowski, Vincent Russo, Johanna Schmidt, Ann Smith

Minutes

- There were two corrections to the February minutes. Those revisions were made, and the SAC voted to approve the minutes.

Membership:

- There were a few new people at the meeting: Michelle Sarofin is taking over the Region 6 slot. Ann Smith is considering taking the attorney slot.
- Please reach out if there are any questions on flow.
- A document will be submitted to the Governor's Office that includes Chris, Sammy, Deb, Sarah L, Stephanie, Amani, Ann, and Elisabeth's information.
- We still have two slots available, including one for an adult caregiver of a youth involved with services.

RAC Reports

Region 2

- Judy shared that they had great participation at their meeting On February 5th and their last meeting on Friday.
- They have discussed how to take up the CRP function.
- On Friday, the meeting focused on fatherhood work and included videos, providers, and a DCF update.
- On April 9, they will meet again and look at the CRP and Racial Justice initiatives and see how they can bring those themes together and monitor them through a fatherhood lens.
- The RAC has been recruiting new members, especially men of color. They hope to increase participation.
- A steering committee has been created to bring together missions and support the work.

Region 3

- Jon shared that they will meet on March 10 and solidify family members.
- They will also take on certain trainings depending on interest, including trainings on implicit bias, psychosis, and educational neglect.

Region 4

- Quiana Mayo introduced herself as a parent from Region 4.
- Sarah G welcomed Quiana and shared that the RAC met on February 16, where they addressed the budget, the shift in fund management from Wheeler to CHR, money they have left over, and increasing stipends for voting family members.
- The North Central Network of Care review looked at membership vacancies.
- There was collaboration with the YAB, and service projects have been brainstormed.
- Presentations were held on the Family First focus groups.
- Region 4 has adopted Region 2's "Standing time for families" to provide space for family voices.
- Their next meeting is 3/13, where they will show a fatherhood video, work on updating their brochure (with help from Gary Kleeblatt), and consider targeted efforts to circulate the brochure.

Region 5

- Irv explained that Region 5 continues to discuss anti-racism, COVID-19, and vaccine refusal/hesitancy.
- Deb shared that on February 6, there was a CRP meeting that had a robust discussion and many topics, with lots of family inclusion. They discussed families with multiple 136 reports and how to handle this.
- They also want to discuss the Right to Know brochure and learn more about it - when it is handed out, what is contained, etc. They are very excited about this.

Region 6

- Michelle shared that the RAC met on February 4 and will meet again this Thursday. They have a new tri-chair.
- There have been a couple CRP meetings that had good representation. They are looking at program feedback from families.
- Zach Thorne presented DCF data, which was mapped to the CRP focus.
- Stan added that they are being updated on the racial justice change initiative. There is strong interest in the RAC in this initiative. They also have Family First as a standing agenda item.

SAC Member Updates

- Chris discussed the virtual 5K held by Sun's and organized by Amani. They have also become one of the first organizations to receive federal housing vouchers and have distributed some already. They are currently serving 24 students.
- Chris raised the issue of car accidents; they did an internal survey of their students and found that between 75-85% have had an accident, and 20% have had more than one.

They are currently analyzing this data and while it is very premature, Chris felt it was a serious issue. We may want to push more driver's ed. Ken noticed that people have been driving faster and wondered whether the issue is not that the students do not know how to drive but rather that they do not practice defensive driving. Chris agreed that this is a possible explanation, as the students are not usually at fault.

- For those who are newer to the SAC, the acronym CRP (Citizen Review Panel) was explained. RACs get about \$5,000/year to advise the Department about abuse/neglect.

Region 1

- Susan gave an update on Region 1's RAC. On February 19, they finalized their mission and vision. They will vote on adopting it at the March 19 meeting. They will also work on completing their community engagement plan. The RAC will share this once it is adopted.
- The YAB has asked them to think about whether or not we want to continue using the term "foster child" or perhaps a different term that is less stigmatized.
- The RAC wants more information about prevention work.
- They are working to start a peer mentoring program to help mentor youth in care.
- On May 22, the RAC will hold its annual event that will include implicit bias training and possibly a youth panel.
- They have continued working on foster parent recruitment/training, technology, preventions, and strengthening the relationship between foster and birth parents.

Legislation Subcommittee

- Sarah reminded the SAC that there is a new legislative subcommittee. Some SAC members wanted greater involvement with the legislative process, but not everyone did. Sammi and Amani have expressed an interest and will work with Vincent Russo on proposed bills and advocacy.
- Sarah shared that she cohosted a meeting with women that several representatives attended. They gave some advice: 1) people who have received services should be involved in the process since they have real experience; 2) representatives hear more opposition to legislation than they hear support - if you are in favor of something, it is important to testify; 3) Moore was mindful of racial justice and asks herself and colleagues what the racial justice impact is of legislation.
- Sammi shared that this is a new subcommittee, so there are no big updates yet; however, she is passionate about this work, familiar with legislators, and excited about this subcommittee.
- Amani wants to pursue a career in public administration and is also enthusiastic about this subcommittee.
- Vinny sends out legislative updates on a regular basis, and he has lifted a few opportunities (like DCF's bill) for folks to participate in. That bill includes a request from the SAC and some finalizing language regarding QRTPs. It will be voted on next Thursday.
- A recent bill on fatherhood engagement served as a chance for us to testify and share our work on this issue.

- There have been many children's mental/behavioral health bills and suicide prevention bills. DCF has been trying to assert our role in those initiatives/sphere, as well as trying to educate legislators on school-based mental health clinics.
- The budget hearing will be this Friday, and our portion is 10 am-12 pm. We will discuss DCF's budget for the next two years. Folks can tune in via CGTN or YouTube.
- On Wednesday, there will be a public hearing regarding the DCF budget; this could be an opportunity for the SAC to discuss the budget or regional updates. The DCF hearing is after the public hearing.
- SAC members are always welcome to call or email if they want help or information.
- Members can request to testify remotely or submit written testimony.
- Tomorrow (March 2) there is a public hearing for the Children's Committee. If you would like to testify, you can register and will receive a Zoom link. When it is your turn, you turn on your feed and testify. You can also submit written testimony.
- It could be a good idea for the SAC to submit testimony signed from the cochairs or do panel testimony since it is a body.
- Vinny shared that he has found it is best to submit written testimony before the hearing, as they are more likely to read it.
- Regarding the DCF budget, these are the major components:
 1. The creation of Quality Parenting Centers (QPCs) which will be supervised visitation centers that will reduce travel and staffing while providing a more family-friendly place for visits.
 2. The decommissioning of a cottage at Solnit North which will repurpose the unused bed space and turn it into a space for vocational training and additional supports.
- Aside from those components, there is some information about Family First and a prevention focus. DCF hopes to get families the supports they need upfront and avoid the need for further system involvement.
- The DCF budget is available online.
- Ken emphasized the need to champion prevention work - there may be pushback from the legislature. They only know so much whereas we live the work. This is a key moment.
- Another positive development is the CROWN Act, which bans discrimination for natural and ethnic hairstyles. This protects people and allows them to wear their natural hair. Commissioner Vannessa Dorantes has lived this and testified on it. It was important for the first Black DCF Commissioner to speak on this, and it passed in the House on Wednesday.
- Damien recommended that we compile the interests and expertise of SAC members so that DCF would know who to go to when requesting folks to testify.
- The SAC is required to discuss certain things by statute, so in April they will discuss the strategic plan, SPSR, and Child Service plan.

Budget Update

- The current balance is \$17,026.26, which does not include stipends owed for March. CRP money has come in.

DCF Updates

- Ken wanted to see if Natalia Liriano (Director of Foster Care) might be available to meet and give an overview of some of the work happening in her division.
- The Department held a Leadership Summit in February where divisions gave updates on their new initiatives. Everyone was impressed with the work to date, and Ken is trying to figure out how best to distribute this material.
- DCF is still open and triaging cases. We have tremendous people determining how to do the work safely.
- The vaccine distribution will now be based solely on age; DCF is not being prioritized. There were so many considerations about who is considered frontline staff and ultimately, it is less cumbersome to base it on age alone.
- Legislation-wise, there is a bill proposing an independent ombudsman. DCF is opposing this bill, as we have an Office of Community Relations which acts independently, as well as the Office of the Child Advocate led by Sarah Eagan, who serves as an external ombudsman to the Department. The Department is also proud of the SAC and other groups which advise them and keep DCF accountable.
- DCF is still developing its antiracist framework, where each division creates and implements one initiative aimed at reducing disparate outcomes. We have 26 initiatives that will "move the needle." The SAC was sent the general wording but will receive more detailed summaries of the initiatives.
- Vinny's initiative will be to discuss DCF's racial justice work with the legislature.
- Communications' initiative is to pay more attention to DCF's promotional materials and make sure the stock photos show families fairly - typically, stock images of white vs BIPOC families are very different, and DCF aims to show the full diversity of its families in these materials.
- The Office of Community Relations will begin tracking the race of the subject of the inquiry (they have not previously documented this). They will then have a per region/office understanding of disparities in inquiries. They have found that many men of color submit inquiries.
- DCF would like SAC and RAC feedback on these initiatives.

Spotlight on What's Right

- The SAC members are on the listserve for DCF's monthly Spotlight on What's Right newsletter, which highlights positive interactions. DCF is looking to build its collection of stories of families who stay together with supports and services. Adoption is the deep end, and DCF wants to emphasize its role as a Department that strengthens and empowers families.
- DCF also hopes to celebrate its community partners and emphasize the way the child welfare system collaborates.
- One person suggested that perhaps conversations around foster care and adoption should be separated more - the two have very different goals, and it may not be right to lump them together.

- Ken reiterated that DCF wants to highlight stories with birth families. It is better for kids and helps folks considering fostering a child because they better understand the importance of birth families. He also emphasized the language difference between "separation" and "removal."

Caregivers as Experts

- Ken thanked the SAC for their feedback last month - over 120 folks signed up for these sessions, and DCF had to add an additional session to try to accommodate. The sessions filled up quickly, but April sessions will be held too for those who were not able to participate.
- Sammi felt that the Department is moving in the right direction. DCF needs to focus on consistency across regions, as there is a lot of variation by office/region. This plays a big role in keeping consistent language. Sammi joined one of the sessions, and she hopes DCF will hone in on the feedback given. Ken replied that the sessions are being analyzed and these themes will be build into the Family First Prevention plan. Further, DCF commits to sharing a draft plan mid-April, and a carve-out will be sent to families to ensure that their thoughts have been captured.
- One member wondered whether there is a way to hear more from families and bring more to the table. Ken agreed that there is always room for bringing in youth/family voices to the table, and DCF continues to receive input via email.

Family First Update

- The Family First session was recorded and is available for viewing.
- JoShonda Guerrier and Ken went through this presentation.

What is Family First?

- Family First is federal legislation that focuses on prevention to keep more families together. Connecticut is developing a statewide plan to implement the legislation. As the state's Title IV-E agency, DCF is leading this work alongside our partners and sister agencies.
- Families need supports, not surveillance. While the Department is often the first call for families in need, DCF wants to be the last. The child welfare system needs to support families earlier. To accomplish this, the workgroups developed a community pathways track.
- Title IV-E reimburses states up to 50% for certain prevention services they provide, which incentivizes the state to use Evidence-Based Practices (EBPs). Further, states may develop a Kinship Navigator Program, which will bring in more supports for relatives raising children.
- Family First also has a QRTP component - some children may have treatment needs that require congregate care - this care should be temporary until the child can go back to their family. Family First raises the standards for these facilities.
- Connecticut has made a concerted effort to be broad and inclusive so that more families can be served upstream. The federal language and the state hopes to be more intentional about serving families in their communities.

What is this really about?

- DCF is realigning its resources to match its values. DCF hopes to collaborate to create sustainable partnerships that will result in system transformation.
- This is *not an initiative* - it is a shift in how we do our work.
- Over 350 individuals have been involved in the planning process, including folks from Chapin Hall, sister state agencies, contracted providers, community providers, parents, youth, and DCF staff.

Workgroups

- DCF has formed several workgroups that have taken on different parts of the planning process.
- **Governance Committee:** Discusses workgroup recommendations and makes final recommendations to the Commissioner
- **Candidacy Workgroup:** Defined candidates for Family First and created six groups who would be eligible for Family First services. The workgroup was intentionally broad in its definition. The did not imply that being eligible means a family is at risk of foster care, rather, they aimed to catch as many families upstream as possible.
- **Kinship and Foster Care:** Developing a Caregiver Practice Model and a Kinship Navigator Model.
- **Intensive Treatment 24/7 (QRTP):** Analyzed system readiness for congregate care facilities to become QRTPs. For the families who still need treatment in these facilities, they considered how facilities could meet the new standards and ultimately be better for kids.
- **Infrastructure Practice and Policy (IPP):** Began the work of turning the candidacy definition into actual practice. They looked at how eligibility determination, needs assessment, case planning, etc. could function. IPP imagined a system outside of the Department in the form of a public/private partnership that is empathetic and transparent. They intend for a system that is both standardized but also individualized and localized.
 - o **"Caregivers as Experts":** A series of three focus groups were held last week to get feedback on DCF and providers. These were held to provide more feedback for IPP, but the themes were overarching and will extend beyond IPP. Many themes were emphasized, including humility, partnership, families as experts, trauma-informed, personalization, respect. Families also spoke about risk-averse mandated reporters and the importance of individuals with lived experiences advocating and advertising these changes.
- **Programs and Service Array (PSAWG):** Working to dig into the current array of services. PSAWG has put forth several Tier 1 and Tier 2 services. If a service is not in the first plan submission, that does not mean DCF will not provide it, it just means that it will not be reimbursed through Title IV-E. Assessment is fluid, and DCF has many opportunities to revise the plan. DCF wants the best first plan possible, but they can and will amend the plan to enhance it after the initial submission.
- **Fiscal:** Beginning a fiscal analysis of the programs put forward by PSAWG.

Timeline

- After a first draft of the plan is created, it will be offered for public comment and go to the Governor's Office. After it has been revised, it will be submitted to the Administration for Children and Families (federal government).
- Phase 2 will be implementation. The Department will create additional workgroups to tackle the work ahead.
- The Family First website will continue to be updated.

Feedback and Questions

- One person recommended additional opportunities be created for families to speak to each other. Also, transparency is important, and families ought to know that services are voluntary. DCF and providers should improve their record-keeping to avoid duplicative services.
- Many families have specialized needs - the service should be tailored to fit the family, not the other way around.
- The slides and this presentation will be shared.
- The work does not end in April/May - we want to continue and continue asking ourselves about how we can align resources with our values.

Next SAC Meeting

- The next SAC meeting will be Monday, April 5th, 2021.