

Statewide Advisory Council Minutes

9/13/21

Attendees:

Myke Halpin*, Sarah Lockery*, Ken Mysogland, Dr. Irv Jennings, Chris Scott*, Deb Kelleher*, Regina Moller, Jennifer Nadeau*, Judy Eisenberg*, Samaris (Sammy) Rose, Stephanie Telford-Cotton, Elisabeth Cannata*

(* indicates a voting member)

Guests

Johanna Schmidt, Jonathan Jacaruso, Malcolm Blue, Rachel Levine, Sarah Gibson, Sergio Alvarez, Sharon Davis, Susan Cunningham, Stan Kasanowski

RAC Reports and System Development:

This meeting marks the beginning of a new agenda format, in which the beginning of the meeting is dedicated to RAC report-outs and discussions about developing the RACs.

Region 1: Susan

- Region 1 met in August and the youth gave an update on their work. The RAC approved a recruitment event that will be either hybrid or virtual.
- The youth are developing a training for foster parents that will address how to navigate their foster child's race, ethnicity, culture, and community.
- Region 1 is working on tackling the issue of bank account access for youth in care. C.O. is also working on this. Youth are not able to open an account themselves without a co-owner, and many foster parents are not willing to be co-owners. Ken explained that Linda and the Transitional Supports and Success (TSS) Division is looking at this issue too, which applies to youth under 16 years old.
- Region 1 also received updates about the Transformation Zone, as well as work happening with the courts to achieve timely permanency, prevent removal, and place children with kin.
- They updated their community engagement plan, recruitment tool, and anti-racist framework, as well as their youth activities.

Region 2: Judy

- Region 2's RAC met Friday, and it was an engaged and packed meeting.
- The SAC requested feedback regarding cannabis and folks shared their thoughts. New members did a great job of participating. This feedback is incorporated later during the DCF Report section of this meeting.
- The RAC will learn about the Integrated Care Coordination Initiative and Beacon's Voluntary Care Management in the next couple of months.
- Region 2 hopes to reconnect with the YAB.
- New Haven DCF is also seeking feedback from providers on how they have managed service delivery and accountability in a virtual environment.

Region 3: Regina

- Region 3 has changed their meetings to be monthly, and they are also changing their agenda and leaving space for family/youth issues. The meetings will open with Lisa (FAVOR) asking,

"What's on your mind?" This will allow for more family/youth voice. They will then discuss providers, then DCF last.

- The first "People's Meeting" will be in October.

Region 4

- N/A - did not meet in August

Region 5: Irv, Deb

- Region 5 has continued discussing the SFIT situation and what providers ought to do with the youth who are still in these programs.
- COVID-19 and the Delta Variant have been frequent topics.
- Deb thanked Johanna for sending contact information for the "Parents as Experts" participants who indicated interest in joining the RAC. All of them have responded.
 - o NOTE - Johanna has sent this out to all RAC Chairs. Please contact her (Johanna.Schmidt@ct.gov) if you need it re-sent.
- Region 5 will meet at the end of the month.

Region 6: Stan

- Region 6 has focused on RAC development, especially recruiting for a new chair. It is challenging to find a youth and parent representative.
- They completed the RAC self-assessment, which led to them discussing strengths, barriers, and challenges, as well as brainstorm solutions. They will continue discussing this and choose some strategies to implement.

RAC Development

Prompting question: What is important for a RAC?

- One person discussed their core membership that regularly attends meetings. DCF is consistent and attends often.
- It is important to balance the voices--in particular, it is important to ensure that families and youth have an active voice.
- Cross-network work, like learning from other RAC chairs.
- Better meeting times, family incentives, and community events.

Prompting question: What are the characteristics of a RAC that functions well?

- Virtual meetings can make meetings both more or less inclusive, depending on how it is facilitated and who is there. One person explained that it makes it challenging for caregivers to participate because it feels more structured and formal; however, another person felt it allows caregivers to speak up more than they could in person. Having control of the camera or using the chat can make things less intimidating.
- Good facilitators are important because they help navigate heated conversations and share resources. Families can get a lot of helpful information.
- Combining themes instead of just relying on one topic is also helpful.
- DCF being transparent and showing strong leadership is important.

Prompting question: What are the qualities/skills of a good RAC chair/leader?

- A clear vision, the ability to listen, and implementation skills are all vital.
- Those who discuss frontline workers and show their support in the pandemic are important.

- It is necessary for them to be hands on, in the community, show support, and host meetings there.
- One person pointed out that every region is different. For example, in their region, it is very rural with little public transit, so online meetings save time for everyone.
- Have the time!
- Make family and youth a feature on the agenda.
- Less DCF talking, more listening.
- One thing that can get in the way of a good meeting is when participants misunderstand what the purpose is and how much help can go to individuals. This is something a good facilitator will need to navigate.
- One person pointed out that DCF does not currently discuss RFP speculation or details. This means providers are excluded from planning initiatives. In their belief, this makes the RACs ineffective and not transparent enough. This makes DCF the strongest player in the conversation and hinders power-sharing.

Prompting question: In thinking about the vision for Family First, what are characteristics that might support those efforts?

- Sharon Davis responded that she will consider that question, but there does need to be some internal planning work first.
- The RAC could link resources or help advance Family First.
- Ken also pointed out that DCF is currently waiting for approval and will likely need to respond to the Children's Bureau's questions about the plan.
- Ken highlighted the fact that if providers inform the RFP process, this may disqualify one from bidding. For example, in the Family First planning work, many providers pulled out of certain conversations due to a conflict of interest. We should look at how they can inform decision-making and feel their feedback is being incorporated without jeopardizing the ethics involved in the process.
- Another person added that when the SOAC Committee goes through contracts and programs to comment on the outcomes, they can possibly refine some contracts. Also, DCF can put out Requests for Information (RFI) and invite comments on ideas, then build out of those conversations.
- Some terms were clarified:
 - **RFP (Request for Proposal):** When a model gets sent out and providers send information about their costs and implementation plan. DCF chooses one and compensates them accordingly.
 - **RFI (Request for Information):** When DCF requests information that can inform the model.
- One person pointed out that Melanie Sparks (DCF) has provided development trainings for grassroots providers about the FRP process. She wants to regularly offer community providers information about writing them. This would be especially beneficial to smaller providers.
- Another member emphasized that having the RAC influence services requires robust grassroots involvement. Currently, RACs often have large representation from big providers

and DCF, so more significant community representation is required. This often impacts why DCF is more conservative with their process.

- One member who still feels new to their RAC chair role commented that their co-chair's leadership in holding community conversations, bringing the RAC to urban spaces, and conducting personal outreach (calling people) is very motivating.
- A common challenge is that there are many professionals with statewide knowledge but who do not have as much local or regional information.
- "The community is ready to participate," said one RAC co-chair. Both in-person and virtually, there has been great involvement, and they have learned a lot.
- When engaging with individuals, we need to keep in mind that there is a lot of jargon that we forget about (acronyms, programs, etc.). We should not assume people are familiar with the terminology; language can be a barrier to access. This is especially important when discussing policy and reforms that have huge consequences--people need to understand what they are discussing.
- There should be a budget for parents who want to connect with other parents and bring them to the RACs. Hearing personal stories is so helpful to getting others involved.

Minutes

- Judy Eisenberg motioned to accept the August minutes and Sammy seconded. They were approved.

Membership

- Several members have not received confirmation of their appointment, while others have. Ken offered to close the loop.
- Three people are interested in joining the SAC: 1 youth, 1 caregiver, and Rachel Levine, who came to this meeting as a guest. Rachel is interested in the attorney spot.
- Rachel shared that she is an attorney who has worked for the AG's office as well as in private practice. She was in foster care as a child, which is why she centers her focus in every case on the best interest of the child. She was recently certified as a GAL. Her interest in joining the SAC/RAC stems from ensuring there are checks and balances in the child welfare system.

Legislative Report

- The SAC Legislative Committee will look over bills.
- DCF has until October 1 to submit any bills. It is important that the SAC testify on bills they feel are important so they can make their voices heard.
- Sammy is experienced in testifying. She and others that represent the family voice are very powerful. She is willing to coach and guide any SAC members interested in testifying.
- Ken encouraged the SAC to think about who each bill is in the best interest of. Your expertise will pay off. DCF has its own ideas about what is best, and the SAC should consider supporting both DCF and non-DCF bills that will support kids.

- One SAC member brought up Transfer of Guardianship (TOG) and how youth who undergo this do not have the support that they should. An adult may be trying to be supportive, but there are not enough resources for these youth to help them through college and with other funding. More legislation should tackle this issue. **Transfer of Guardianship should be noted as an issue of concern for the SAC and part of its Legislative Committee Report.**
- Some terms were clarified:
 - o **Kin:** People outside the immediate family (e.g., aunts, grandparents, etc.)
 - o **Fictive Kin:** People with no blood relation but who have a strong social bond
- The SAC member continued that fictive kin connections are sometimes not as strong as kin. In the specific case they brought up, in which a youth who underwent TOG, the youth was left with inadequate support. In that instance, it was fictive kin; however, this does not necessarily reflect national trends, as there has been less research on this.
 - o Ken offered to connect on this specific person's situation. It is important to review these situations and the decisions that were made to see whether this could have been predicted. DCF can learn from this situation.
- To this point, another member added that they saw a difference in the disruption rates of kin vs fictive kin placements. This is anecdotal, but in their experience, kin stick around longer than fictive kin.
- Sometimes the need is in policy or practice rather than legislation.

SAC Budget Reports

- Current balance: \$15,596.26
- The budget is currently very high; the SAC may not get CRP funds until some is spent down.
- Chris Scott will outreach to Jerry Milner to try to get an invoice for him joining the SAC retreat next year. As a reminder, Jerry Milner was the Assistant Secretary of the Children's Bureau under Trump. He pushed for Family First and is remarkably humble and polite. He advocates for youth/community representation, keeping families together, kinship care, and social justice. He will be the facilitator/keynote of the retreat. As we reflect on Family First, we will consider what we can build upon.
- The deliverables of the retreat will be productive conversation with action items.
- Jerry Milner has pushed for his vision of child welfare in a bipartisan way.
- His price will be fair, and we will push ourselves to do more than Family First.
- Sarah shared that we are aiming to hold the retreat around the end of June 2022. Any conflicts should be emailed to Sarah.
- Sammy will also be compensated for her legislative work and CRP invoices will be submitted. The RACs can use these funds for outreach but must submit invoices.

DCF Report

- This Wednesday (9/15) there will be a press event; Kevin Lembo is organizing a backpack drive and this will be used as an opportunity to highlight the pilot project in the Waterbury Schools led by Sergio. Social workers will be placed as support liaisons in several schools. Sergio added that this is intended for families who need support and services but not DCF

involvement. Three have been assigned to elementary schools and one to a K-8 school. This collaboration with schools will offer supports to families and the community in the form of consulting, advisement, referrals, and so much more. The Support Liaisons will educate and support families with needs (including chronic absenteeism). The goal is to prevent these youth from needing to come to DCF's attention. This is still a pilot, so we are early on in this project. Local providers are also being invited to learn more about resources, including for undocumented/uninsured youth. If this is successful, DCF hopes to expand it.

- On September 28th, the Lieutenant Governor will celebrate Family Day and the new Kid Governor. It is in New Haven, and Ken invited Sarah and Myke to attend on behalf of the SAC.
- In DCF's *Spotlight on What's Right*, DCF highlighted Transition Age Youth (TAY). One story [listed all the colleges and secondary education programs](#) that the youth are attending this fall. Another highlighted [Chris Scott and Sun Scholars](#). Chris added a few words about the importance of supporting higher education for foster youth. Sun Scholars does what it can to support youth. More college leads to more professionals and can change their trajectory.
- Another highlight is that DCF currently has less than 3000 youth under 18 in care and around 3,300 total—the lowest youth in care in DCF history!
- DCF is working to update the *Parents Right to Know* brochure, which currently is too wordy and jargon-filled, with more technical information than is needed. The brochure itself needs to be revised, as does the process around it. One SAC member suggested sending the brochure ahead of time (potentially as a link) and then using it to spark a broader discussion. They also recommended using the Parents as Experts model for soliciting parent feedback on the brochure.
- DCF has been monitoring the impact of legalized cannabis and using this as an opportunity to remind the public about the importance of safe use and safe storage. The Department continues to see substance ingestion of many types of drugs, not just cannabis. This is a serious issue and DCF asks partners to continue messaging the importance of keeping substances out of kids' hands.
- Sharon Davis updated the SAC that DCF is hoping to get feedback on the CT Family First plan soon. She has officially taken the reins on Family First, so all questions should go to her moving forward. Ken added that so many folks were involved in the Family First planning process and CT is unique in its attempt to include families way upstream.

SAC Advisement to DCF

- Sarah asked for any advisement from the SAC to DCF in terms of programs and policies.
- One person appreciated the Waterbury pilot and encouraged the Department to embed more service and increase care coordination for prevention/meeting needs.
- Region 2 has compiled a list of recommendations:

Cannabis

- o Need for training of stakeholders/providers re: what is responsible level of use, assessment considerations
- o Need for training for families re: same as well as warning signs for family members/youth

- Quality of life concerns for neighborhoods: need for designated smoking/non-smoking areas, impact of observed cannabis use in public on residents
- Importance of learning from other states with longer histories of legalization: what to avoid, what to replicate
- Opportunity for better integration of substance use treatment into behavioral health programs and services overall
- Concern for marijuana use masking trauma treatment needs and delaying/compounding same
- Concern re: mixed message legalization sends to youth/young adults (defined thru age 24) who are also targeted by messaging around the opioid epidemic
- Impact of legalization on substance misuse treatment considerations for youth/adults

Services/Programs:

- Increase understanding and utilization of existing care coordination programs
- Increase/expand care coordination services to be embedded in health/behavioral health care settings and schools
- Increase recreational programs/outlets for “tween” age youth (10-15 years), to include youth in care as well as youth at risk in the community. Great hardship over summer 2021.
- Increased endorsement/financial support for trauma competency training for school systems, in particular smaller districts with less budget. Making training programs more accessible and affordable to increase capacity of school districts to create trauma informed environments
- Support for recreational and adaptive sports programs for special needs and trauma-affected children and youth, especially in rural and/or suburban districts where youth sports are more competitive and less inclusive

Next Steps and SAC Assignments

- Sarah Lockery will send out the assessment tool before the next SAC and folks will review it ahead of time and provide feedback/revise. It will then be polished up for use.
- The SAC gave Sammy a shoutout for all her work organizing the Legislative Committee. She does need a co-chair in this effort.
- The SAC's next meeting will be on **Monday, October 4 from 9:30 am-12:00 pm.**