

Statewide Advisory Council Minutes

4/4/22

Attendees:

Myke Halpin*, Sarah Lockery*, Ken Mysogland, Suprena Schuler*, Damien Grasso*, Elisabeth Cannata*, Judy Eisenberg*, Jennifer Nadeau*, Rachael Levine*, Dr. Irv Jennings*, Samaris Rose*, Stephanie Telford-Cotton*, Whitney Rodriguez*

(* indicates a voting member)

Guests

Johanna Schmidt, Sergio Alvarez, Maria Feliciano, Sarah Gibson, Susan Cunningham, Elizabeth Duryea, Taylor Ford, Sharon Davis, Malcolm Blue, Jon Jacaruso,

RAC Reports and System Development:

The beginning of the meeting is dedicated to RAC report-outs and development.

Region 5 RAC - Irv and Sergio

- Region 5 had a busy meeting in which they discussed training, Family First, the *Juan F.* consent decree, and the June 29 SAC retreat.
- There has been little discussion on Ukraine and its impact on youth. Irv highlighted the differential response in refugees of color vs white Ukrainian refugees and how this might affect kids viewing these images. They would like to discuss this in more depth and dedicate time to this issue.
- Sergio added that the RAC has given trainings on the LGBTQ community and on implicit bias. Some people from the elementary schools have attended.
- The RAC has been working to engage youth through the YAB. They spoke with the ODs and have also looked at the self-assessment tool and feedback.
- The group is excited about *Juan F.* and Family First and is looking forward to hearing the next steps.
- The RAC also hopes to continue having discussions and working with the community on racial justice. They have stayed up to date on DCF's journey towards anti-racism. Waterbury recently presented on their change initiative. The previous racial justice lead retired, and Glaister Gopie is the new lead.
- Anthony Gay is also heavily involved in Region 5's Fatherhood Engagement Work. They want to partner with them and do FELT meetings and provide quarterly FES reports.
- The region is also hoping to get the CRP up and running, meeting once a month.

Region 4 RAC - Sarah G

- The RAC did their self-assessment, and they also discussed racial justice and the ChildStat presentation on DCF data.
 - o They drilled down into Performance Indicator 2 on relative/kin placement, discussing waivers and follow-up. It is hard to get some data.

Region 3 – Jon J.

- The Region 3 RAC met with their new meeting format in which they asked questions to the youth ahead of time. Youth then have the choice of whether they want to attend and

respond in person or go through a provider and remain anonymous. At the last meeting, five youth spoke live about their relationship with their bio family and what DCF support and possible services might be helpful.

- Staffing vacancies can pose trouble here; turnover makes youth less likely to share because they do not want to have to repeat their story to new people when their workers are constantly quitting.
 - It is important to youth that DCF help cultivate a relationship with their bio family.
 - Providers found this helpful, they appreciated that there was a lot of youth feedback.
- This month, there was also a presentation on suicide prevention, substance youth, and DCF data.
 - This meeting had higher attendance than normal. The meeting lasted only one hour in order to try to retain folks' attention.

Region 2 – Judy E.

- In Region 2's last meeting, they focused on the consumer-driven portion of the assessment.
- They also got updates from the Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team (FELT) and Family Engagement Service (FES) providers.
- They also passed out the flyer for the retreat; folks are very excited about it.
- They have spoken with the YAB. Region 2 is trying to improve their focus on youth needs.
- They held presentations on the DCF change initiatives.
- Malcolm Blue gave an update on Juan F. and Family First.
- Region 2 is also working on updating their orientation materials and better reaching consumers.

Region 1 – Suprena S.

- The Youth Advisory Board (YAB) created sweatshirts and is working diligently.
- There will be a retreat at the Wilderness School to help recruit youth.
- They have also been considering holding a contest to design a logo, which they think may help in recruiting.
- On April 30, there will be a "Calm, Cool, Comply" training online. The first 50 people to register will receive a gift card.
- Region 1 also discussed the self-assessment. Their discussion was virtual, and they found breakout rooms to be helpful in promoting feedback.
- Susan added that they also learned about the Bridgeport Transformation Zone, where the Bridgeport leaders are working to ensure permanency through legal rapid reviews. They have been looking at the barriers and changes to the plan. So far, they have done these for 36 kids, and now 24 of them are to be placed with kin or the plan has changed from reunification.
- The RAC also discussed vaccine status, Juan F., and Family First.

Region 6 – Elisabeth Cannata

- The Region 6 RAC meeting also focused on the self-assessment.

- It was a bittersweet meeting because Lisa Lumbruno (New Britain Office Director) and Stan Kasanowski (Region 6 Systems Program Director) are retiring.
- They also had a discussion on voluntary care coordination and how to make information more available. There is an intervention matching tool in process that would assist with finding services for different needs—stay tuned.
- Region 6 is revamping its Network of Care. They have not been meeting as regularly and would like to boost their attendance.

RAC Self-Assessment: Consumer-Driven

- Most of the RACs have discussed this section as a group.
- A common note was that it is helpful to see agendas ahead of time. The SAC will try to do this as well and send the agendas well in advance.

Region 6

- The Region 6 RAC discussed their strengths, CRP, and family/youth engagement.
- They are considering increasing their stipends.
- Region 6 has struggled with consistent participation.
 - There has always been strong provider and grassroots attendance.
 - Representatives from the school system have been more irregular.
- They would like to re-envision the CRP aspects of their work.
- Region 6 feels they are strong in disseminating information.
- The chairs have other responsibilities and may have little time for planning.
- They also could improve diversity.
- They are considering whether meetings should be moved to the evening or afternoon to better accommodate youth and families.

Region 5

- Region 5 struggled with low turnout as well, and they are trying to improve participation of youth and families. They are also considered offering a better stipend.
- Members are mostly white and the region would like to improve the diversity of members.
- One person shared that they feel that a lot of the suggestions for improving youth/family involvement are not sustainable. They wondered whether we might need to consider other options like surveys rather than requiring attendance.

Group Discussion

- SAC members responded to this point. One person responded that something like a survey would not be sufficient because that is not really involvement. It is necessary to have involvement so that the group can generate a deeper relationship with the community. It is important to reach the right people.
- One person suggested trainings, especially youth-facilitated training. It is also important to ask them how they want to be engaged.
- Many families want to be involved but get burnt out after constantly being asked to show up at the table for someone else's agenda. Many of them are fearful of DCF and feel like they do not have a purpose at these meetings because the system is not build for them.

“You behave the way you’re treated,” said this person. It is important to make them a part of the meeting and ask what they bring to the table.

- Youth want to share and understand, but they do not want to repeat themselves to people who are not listening. We have to break the cycle of attending without a purpose. Guests should be able to understand what the goal is and whether it is worth their time.
- We must empower families that are DCF-involved. “That’s where sustainability comes from,” they added when describing members who are involved in the issues and work.
- It can feel “corporate” when DCF asks new families for input, i.e., more of a check box than a desire for actual engagement.
- Another person described an experience participating in a meeting where they felt they did not fit in. It is important to make folks feel welcome because participation is based on comfort. You cannot ask individuals to be vulnerable in spaces where they are uncomfortable.
- Ken added that it is important to define success; what would be a successful outcome of the meeting? He gave the example of the Parents as Experts conversations held for Family First. Families with lived experience were asked for input and afterwards, DCF sent information about how it influenced the plan. It is important to give back and show the impact of their feedback.
- One member felt that engagement is often a redundant conversation and feels like a standing agenda item, but despite constantly talking about it, we do not actually do it. They added that debating on the details of where to spend money and what stipend to give shows how little we value them (e.g., “Your input is worth \$__”). They questioned how many staff attend the meetings and invite families without really knowing what the meeting is about.
- We need to reconsider our meeting times. If it overlaps with the school day, then obviously it will be hard to involve youth. In that case, we should consider alternatives for those who want to participate but cannot attend. It is not always a matter of caring about it, it’s a matter of schedule.
- We need to be willing to step outside the system. They liked Region 3’s strategy of asking questions ahead of the meeting. We are still normally working within the box—we need to be willing to get uncomfortable.
- Videos or recordings are helpful for those who cannot attend.
- One suggestion was to have one large family group that sets the meeting agenda and includes participants from multiple regions. They could talk as a family, then bring that feedback to the SAC and RAC.
- Feedback from families and youth is going to be heavy because oftentimes telling their story is still difficult.
- It is helpful to offer mentorship to set the agenda. Families need to be supported so that they feel comfortable suggesting agenda items.
- On Region 6’s earlier note about the lack of school involvement, one person asked whether there was a specific role or position that participated? A Region 6 representative responded

- that it was people providing special education supports. They used to attend regularly but have recently been unable to.
- Other ideas include having better stipends and creating a welcome packet so that people feel comfortable speaking or remaining quiet.
 - When children are in care, they often feel unsure of purpose and lack a plan of action. A lot of the things we offer as solutions are not put into action.
 - Another important strategy is including services and making connections with those.
 - One member encouraged youth and families to take action when action is not happening.
 - To make meetings and follow-up more action-oriented, folks can consider ending meetings by writing out action steps for different members. This assigns specific tasks to specific people and clearly delineates responsibilities.
 - Families who are involved in the system (or those with past involvement) should be considered as resources. We must encourage them to come back to the table and help improve things; they then can see the ways their suggestions have made positive changes for future families.
 - It is also important to highlight moments where there were failures or issues. We need to be honest about those moments and hear from people who did not have a good experience.
 - We need to go back to families and try to get them involved. When they are in the *Spotlight*, DCF does invite them to join other tables, but there is often a gap from interest to actual attendance.
 - One DCF staff member also pointed out that participation ebbs and flows. Also, families are sometimes in very emotional states and if they are in the middle of a situation, it may not be a good time to ask this of them. It is important to figure out how to bring them back in at a later time and adapt their involvement so that it fits their needs and abilities best. First, it is important to take care of their needs, and then go back later to involve them.
 - Members did understand this point, but some felt that this can sometimes be a band-aid; even if they may not be fully ready, it is possible to connect them with resources like FAVOR or advocates who can relate to their story and empower them. We cannot only focus on success stories from people who have “gotten there,” but we also need to teach people who are struggling to be strong advocates.
 - Another suggestion is to treat families like consultants and ask them to offer what they have. We cannot expect them to always share their story, and their input is valuable regardless of whether it involves their personal story.
 - There are also so many avenues to participation, and it can be confusing because they do not serve the same functions. It may take some effort to determine the best time and way to participate.
 - It is important to have spaces that are made up primarily of families; when families are in meetings with mostly providers, they may feel more uncomfortable. Places that build solidarity are great ideas.
 - Direct interaction is always valuable. When someone makes direct contact with you, it is far more personal.

- It is also important to focus on solutions, not just discussion. We need to focus on how to make things different. In order to do this, we cannot just have venting—we need change-focused feedback.
- Discussing questions with youth and preparing them also helps them provide input.
- It takes time to learn the system, so staff need to get better at explaining things to families. One conversation may not be enough, so we need to build relationships. This is especially true because many of these groups meet only once a month.
- Sarah Lockery asked the group to bring one action step they took or are taking to put today’s discussion into practice. She also thanked Sammy for her excellent facilitation.

SAC Minutes

- There was one correction to the March minutes, as some members were not listed as voting members. The minutes were approved with that correction.

Membership

- Whitney Rodriguez’s application needs to be mailed in.

Member Advisement

- The SAC is considering doing a contest to create a logo for the group. Myke has already designed one, so he will connect with them about this idea.

DCF Updates

Legislative Updates

- Ken shared that Vinny Russo is still with the Office of the Governor. Ken has been working with Kate Dwyer and Johanna Schmidt on the legislation.
- There are two major bills in progress that make several changes, including:
 - Upgrades to emergency mobile crises, licensing reciprocity, enhanced 911, etc.
 - Increasing mandatory reporter requirements so that youth counselors are included.
 - Increasing the statute of limitations for failure to report.
 - Having law enforcement provide supports for folks experiencing intimate partner violence.
- There is also an adult sexual misconduct bill which would require DCF to work with other state agencies to develop framework for teaching about adult sexual misconduct, including bystander training. The training would address how to support individuals who are been subject to misconduct. DCF plans to update its existing training and incorporate this in.
- There is also going to be increased SBIRT training that would focus on schools, Youth Service Bureaus (YSBs), and health departments.
- DCF has a bill that would clarify that their new juvenile justice oversight unit will oversee education. It would also change the structure for background check releases so that providers requesting background checks will store the releases themselves rather than sending a copy to DCF. DCF’s licensing unit would then verify proper storage of these releases.
- The House and Senate sessions will be a sprint to May 4, with many negotiations in between. Many of the bills will involve a fiscal note.

- Legislation is usually well-intended, but there are often issues with unintended consequences.
- The vision for Sammy’s role in the Legislative Subcommittee will evolve. Sammy has a wealth of experience in community organizing and testifying. If members of the SAC are interested in testifying, Sammy can mentor them and help ensure their voice is heard.
- One member offered feedback that it can be hard to sort through the long list of bills listed in DCF’s legislative update emails. Ken explained that he sends those that DCF feels will impact kids, not necessarily just those that affect DCF. Some legislation may not impact DCF but might be important to the families that SAC members serve. He said that in the next session, they can try to determine a better way to sort them so folks have a better sense of the content. Others agreed that it would be helpful to see those that DCF is interested in and which sections. They explained that the way Ken goes over them in the meetings is helpful; something like that but written would be a good solution.
- Ken gave an example of one bill that does not affect DCF, which would expand Husky to more children regardless of their documentation status.
- The legislative process goes through the following steps:
 - Public Hearing: This occurs when the bill is still in committee and helps determine what the legislation should look like. This is the ideal time for the public to get involved in the process.
 - Joint Favorable language (JFS) is released, which updates the bill to the new language based on feedback from the public hearings.
 - The bill is then raised to the broader House or Senate. If you are a member of the public and still disagree with the bill at this point, then you would still be able to contact your legislators and ask them to support/not support the legislation.
- For the 2023 Session, it might be useful for the SAC to discuss 1-2 pieces of legislation to focus on so that it feels less like a sprint.
- Legislators are very open to feedback and changing legislation based on their constituents.

Family First

- The federal government has approved Connecticut’s Family First plan! Connecticut was a leader in the country for engagement.
- Sharon Davis has been and will continue working on implementation. She reports to JoShonda Guerrier. DCF hopes to provide a more in-depth breakdown of the implementation at an upcoming meeting.

Juan F. Lawsuit

- The Juan F. lawsuit and consent decree has lasted for seven administrations, but DCF recently exited it by joint agreement between the plaintiffs.
- Now what?
 - DCF will move forward with the strong QI/QA process that they have developed. These structures help to monitor process, identify gaps, and address issues. They continue to offer real-time reports.
 - DCF is not perfect but no longer requires the same level of intense federal oversight.

- Ken recommends that members read the joint motion that was filed. He highlighted the importance of system transformation that was made possible by accountability and advocacy groups, as well as a strong quality assurance system.
- DCF has received much support from the legislature, which has been important.
- DCF will continue to improve its practice.

Next Steps

- The SAC will meet on **Monday, May 2 from 9:30 am – 12 pm.**
- SAC members should come to the meeting prepared with one change that was implemented as a result of the discussion on engagement.