

**DDS North Region**  
**Regional Advisory Council**

January 15, 2025

Meeting Minutes – Virtual Meeting via Microsoft Teams (meeting was recorded)

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Members Present: Kim Little, Chairperson, Cindy Lichtsteiner, Shannon Klenk, Adrianna Ramirez, Annette Scully, Tammy Selinger, and Stacie Silva, DDS North Regional Director (ex-Officio member).

Members Absent: Donna Cohen, Kathleen Hayes, Ellyn Little, Sue Prihar, Mary Lou O'Connor, Rick Rothstein, and Lori Sandora.

Guests: Joseph Carvalho, Senior Advisor

Mary Patricia DeCarlo, Executive Assistant 2  
Elisa Velardo, Deputy Commissioner

- Call to Order  
Chairperson Kim Little called the meeting to order at 5:06 p.m.
- Approval of Minutes – November 20, 2024

Motion to accept the minutes of the November 20, 2024 RAC meeting as presented.

The motion was made by Dawn Frey and seconded by Shannon Klenk.  
The motion carried unanimously.

- Regional Director's Update – Stacie Silva

Stacie Silva, Regional Director explained that at the November RAC meeting concerns were raised regarding wanting to know more about serving individuals with higher level of needs (LONs), workforce issues, and GTI concerns. Central Office administrators are joining this evening to touch upon those topics that were brought up in the last meeting. Director Silva encouraged people to tune in to the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday forums. The next one is scheduled for Tuesday, January 28<sup>th</sup> at 3:00 pm. These forums are also recorded and posted on the website. Director Silva also notified that she'll be sharing with the group the Self Advocate Coordinators end of year report which is phenomenal. They did an awesome presentation to the administration.

Mr. Joseph Carvalho was present this evening and introduced himself. He recently rejoined DDS back in August 2024 as the Senior Advisor to the Commissioner. His role specifically has been helping self-directed families and Case Managers to connect with GTI leadership with respect to the recent change of fiscal intermediary. Mr. Carvalho stated that he is available to help and welcomes anyone experiencing any challenges with GTI to reach out to him ([Joseph.Carvalho@ct.gov](mailto:Joseph.Carvalho@ct.gov)) / (860) 250-3676.

Mary Patricia DeCarlo, Director of Workforce Strategies for DDS was present this evening. She explained that she's been in her position for about 18 months and her focus is to work with the private provider sectors as well as Human Services, state agencies and workforce strategy agencies to take on the workforce crisis that they are in right now. She explained that she came from the private sector with over 40 years' experience working at various nonprofit, DDS contracted providers and spent a lot of time in those forty years advocating for staff; staff wages, staff training, etc. She has come to this position with a pretty good understanding of what the state is kind of going through when it comes to trying to hire and retain staff. Her focus is on what else can they do to develop a good strong Direct Support Professional (DSP) workforce. She explained that one of the things she found out when she first got into the position is that most of the people in the state, such as the Department of Labor, Department of Workforce and Strategies, and other agencies did not know what a "Direct Support Professional" was, they just assumed that the people that worked in group homes and day programs were all CNA's. It took several months to do some real educating as to what the difference is; what makes a DSP position different and special. There's no standard job

code for a DSP either in the state or nationally, said Ms. DeCarlo. A marketing campaign that DDS will be doing on behalf of the qualified providers will be doing advertisement to recruit staff for the providers. It is really educating the community as to the jobs that are available and needed. DDS is also working on developing a standardized training for the direct support workers and so by having a trained support staff where they have their entry level trainings all done before they get hired. The goal is to build a stronger workforce; and looking for people that have the compassion, the empathy and the patience and skills to work in the field. Ms. DeCarlo also explained that the marketing can be done via the job board. Also, they are in the process of filming a video about direct care work so that people have a good understanding of what it means and entails to be a DSP.

Is the job board through Rewarding Work or GTI, asked Arianna Ramirez. Ms. DeCarlo responded that is going to be separate from Rewarding Work. This job board will be specifically for DDS qualified providers that will be listing their job openings. However, they are going to continue with Rewarding Work for the PCA positions at this point. With no further questions, Ms. DeCarlo shared her email ([mary.patricia.decarlo@ct.gov](mailto:mary.patricia.decarlo@ct.gov)) in the chat if anybody has any thoughts or ideas to reach out.

Adrianna Ramirez expressed that there was a national survey that have gone out about ACL and the job categories discussing DSP. She asked if the results are available. Ms. DeCarlo will investigate that and share the information. Speaking of ACL, Ms. DeCarlo shared that they had the opportunity to be part of a peer learning collaborative with several other states. Illinois, California, Kansas, and Connecticut that spent time sharing information of what's is working and what isn't working regarding workforce development.

Deputy Commissioner, Elisa Velardo was in attendance this evening. She explained that their ARPA period ends in June 2025 and they are working furiously to make sure to utilize those resources effectively and invest in some of those things that they've been working on right along as follows:

AT and Me initiative assistive technology: They had 80 backpacks fully equipped with Chromebooks, iPhones, hotspots, and headsets; all the technology that we all use every day in our lives to just stay connected. Those have been distributed. They are in the final phase of the initiative.

Assistive Technology Assessments: DDS had issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) to increase their capacity to provide assistive technology assessments. The contract has been awarded to three providers in the North Region. They have been conducting and extraordinary number of assessments. They'll meet with the person and make recommendation in terms of what technology would be beneficial and upon approval they'll order the technology, install the technology and then they'll train the person on the technology. There are twelve respite centers across the state and each of those respite centers has been outfitted as a full smart home with all the assistive technology that there may be in any residential environment. Currently DDS is conducting demos of the respite centers so that people can come out and experience the technology.

Technology/Remote Supports: DDS have been working with recent grads is remote supports; to offer remote supports in their family home and what that allows is technology to be available in the home that can promote independence. They are at the very beginning stage of this. DDS is expecting to learn a lot from the remote support that they are offering, and they'll be looking for feedback from the individuals and families that are participating.

Supporting housing is another area that there's a lot of interest in. This is the season where developers are getting their applications ready to submit to CHFA and the Department of Housing for developments that will probably be built in and come online maybe two years from now.

Translation of Documents: The DDS Communication team (Kevin Bronson) has been working hard on getting the DDS documents all translated; that is part of this ARPA wind down as well. DDS received approval to translate documents. Mr. Bronson is working with a translation service to have that move along as quickly as possible, said Deputy Commissioner Velardo.

Community Engagement: part of ARPA there were funds available to enhance community engagement. Deputy Commissioner Velardo explained that during the pandemic, people were in their homes and didn't have the opportunity to socialize as much. Post pandemic, there were funds available to enhance community engagement and DDS put two RFP and had providers around the state submit proposals around how they could support people who live in their homes or in their family homes, get out and connect with their communities. Agencies have been providing those supports in the North Region. MARC of Manchester has done a really nice job, said Ms. Velardo. And DDS have a mechanism where that'll be able to continue past the ARPA period.

Employment: Deputy Commissioner explained that at the last RAC meeting the Employment Team presented information about employment. She added that they are an awesome team; she works very closely with that team. Not only enhancing employment opportunities for people, but micro enterprises has also been another area that's exciting in Connecticut. She was recently talking to the team that they are breaking ground as far as people who want to be self-employed or start a small business. DDS have these grants that are available for people who have a passion for that and want to start a small business.

GTI/Fiscal Intermediary: This evening Mr. Joe Carvalho talked about this. Deputy Commissioner added that they continue to meet very closely with the fiscal intermediary and things are trending in a positive direction.

Higher Level of Need: At the last RAC meeting there was a discussion around people with significant needs. Deputy Commissioner explained that they've had a work group for the better part of this last year; Mary Pat DeCarlo is facilitating that work group. Also, Shannon Jacovino has been very active, as have people from the DDS Children Services Division, the Clinical Supports, the Day Employment Services to look at how they can increase capacity for people who have significant needs. When talking about people who have significant needs that is defined as people who have 1:1 or greater support needs; and that may be behavioral needs that require 1:1 support or greater, or intensive medical needs that requires nursing assistance for specific tasks throughout the day. They've focused on several different areas. One thing that they did and have heard from families say that they have the funding, but they can't find a provider. This gets back to what Mary Pat DeCarlo talked about staffing. Staffing is at a low; having vacancies to find staff for 1:1 support need can be a challenge. They also have heard from families that they were having a hard time identifying services or if they had services, they weren't interested in portability. So, DDS developed a funding structure that incentivizes agencies to expand the number of hours for people who might be attending part time day or employment services. They have some people that left their program during the pandemic that had not return; agencies are incentivized to accept those folks back into services and for those people who had funding but were not able to identify a day program. There is an incentive for accepting new people, for expanding hours across the board, but that incentive gets progressively higher the higher the level of need is. The uptake on that has been tremendous, said Commissioner Velardo, and it's exciting to say that they are seeing an increase in capacity. Commissioner Velardo also explained that they have a Clinical Response Team (CRT); they have five spots per region; there are two agencies. Oak Hill is the agency for the North Region that can assist people who are at risk of hospitalization or who have been hospitalized, psychiatric hospitalization and are ready to be discharged to make sure that the supports that are in place hopefully can prevent hospitalization but

also make sure that people are reconnected and have the necessary supports in whatever their setting is. This is offered to families and offered to providers, said Ms. Velardo.

Deputy Commissioner Velardo explained that they are also focused on updating their website to have a training resource library for family and providers can utilize. The 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday Forum in February is going to focus on people with more significant needs. The forums have been a great way to highlight success stories where people who do have significant needs are living their best lives in the community, said Ms. Velardo.

Ms. Shannon Klenk expressed that she's been coming to the RAC meetings for a while and going to the Tuesday Forum meetings, but she can't even talk to any of the providers until a Case Manager is assigned to her son that's 20 years old. Her son is about to turn 21 and she's been told that a Case Manager will not be assigned until just before the June after his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. Her son doesn't currently live at home; he lives in a school for kids with intellectual disabilities. She's attending these meetings and taking lots of notes for down the road but can't even figure out what the next immediate step is until a Case Manager is assigned. Stacie Silva has been amazing, the North Region really has been a great partner in all this, said Ms. Klenk, but that is the current challenge and the challenge that she experiences when she talks to her fellow parents in the community. She will keep all this information for future reference, said Ms. Klenk.

Deputy Commissioner Velardo responded that she'll be happy to connect with Ms. Klenk offline to just gather a little bit more information and see if there's any other resources. Case Managers do get assigned closer to graduation, but she doesn't know the particulars. DDS does have a Children's Services division, but she does not know if there's been a connection there.

- Legislative Update

Chairperson explained that she was at a meeting where they were discussing things that were going to be discussed at the Legislative office. One of the things they discussed was managed care; the Medicaid waiver. Some people are very concerned about it. Also, they talked about House Bill 5002 and trying to make housing affordable. Chairperson also reminded everyone that the Legislative Office breakfast is on February 18<sup>th</sup> sponsored by DD Council.

- Open Forum for Public Participation

Adrianna Ramirez shared a couple of events for CT Family Support Network (CTFSN). One of them is on January 29<sup>th</sup> with Tammy Venenga, Director of the Children's Services Division to explain the updates on the program and about eligibility. CTFSN is also having a couple of workshops to set healthy habits, both in English and Spanish. Once a month CTFSN have a fun workshop with the DDS Self Advocates throughout the different regions. They are great presenters, said Ms. Ramirez and it's gotten now where' it's beyond families at home coming in, they also have providers like day programs, group home communities tuning into these self-advocate workshops. It is growing visibility, said Ms. Ramirez. Also, the CTFSN one voice conference will be on April 24<sup>th</sup>. This information is available on the DDS newsletter and on CFSN Facebook business page.

Ms. Shannon Klenk expressed that ultimately, she wants her son to manage as much of his own medical things that he can. She suggested for an Agenda topic she'll like to hear about how to help them on their medical journey and where does that fit within the DDS structure.

- Adjournment

Motion to adjourn the meeting at 6:06 pm.

The motion was made by Annette Scully and seconded by Tammy Selinger.

The motion carried unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,

Ether Diaz

Executive Secretary