

**DDS West Region
Advisory Council
April 17, 2025
Via Microsoft Teams
4:00 p.m.
Minutes**

Participants:

Susan Bastien, Lori Chiappiniello, Marina Derman, Mickey Herbst, Gil Kellersman, Shannon O'Brien, Karen Simon, Arlene Steinfeld

Guests:

Ivonne Pantoja, DDS Program Manager

Call to order and approval of the Agenda

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the meeting was called to order at 4:01 pm and the agenda was approved.

Review and Approval of Minutes

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the Minutes of March 20, 2025, were approved.

ABLEnow Presentation (Ivonne Pantoja)

Ms. Pantoja gave a general overview of the Ablenow savings program. She explained that it is the achieving a better Life Experience Act, which is a tax advantage savings program for individuals with disabilities. It allows individuals to save and invest money without it impacting their state and federal benefits.

Eligibility in Connecticut is for individuals whose disability began before age 26. Individuals can qualify if they're receiving SSI or SSDI, or they meet Social Security's disability criteria of a disability. The program allows for earnings to grow tax free. Withdrawals are tax free when used for a qualified disability expenses (i.e. education, housing, healthcare, transportation, or anything that has to do with an individual's medical needs). Funds are exempt from SSI. The balance for an Ablenow account can be a maximum of \$100,000. Anything above the maximum is considered a resource and the Able account will be suspended and it resumes when the balance goes back below \$100,000. She explained the different ways an individual can use their account. There are some rigid limitations on what the individual can spend their money on and there is also a good amount of flexibility with an Ablenow account.

There also is no Connecticut residency requirement, meaning that they don't have to be a

resident of Connecticut to open an account. Individuals can open an AbleNow account in another state.

An ABLENow account does not reduce accountable income when determining Medicaid eligibility. Ivonne explained how this determination is made. She also shared that funds can be used to establish a burial account.

She also explained that in Connecticut there is a payback provision which means that the state Medicaid agencies are to be repaid from that account for benefits that the individual received before they passed.

The group asked questions and information will be made available via email to them on the presentation as well as some more information concerning criteria for eligibility.

Ivonne explained that she is taking a course to get certified in Medicare and that she would send the information via email to the RAC if anyone is interested in also taking the training. The cost is \$125.00.

Chair's Report

None

Regional Director's Report

- *Supported Housing:*

Shannon reported on a new supported housing opportunity in the region. A flyer was shared. The location is going to be in Cheshire on Highland Ave. (Route 10). The supporting agency will be Southington Arc. Marketing is beginning for this location. The application process will begin in June 2025 for anyone interested in this housing opportunity. Individuals that are interested should speak to their case manager. Requests will be reviewed through the Planning and Resource Allocation Team (PRAT). DDS is looking for individuals that are ready to move out of a group home or are currently living at home. Individuals do not need to fall in the category of having money or being an emergency. This is an initiative that the department has agreed to fund.

This site will provide assisted technology. There will be 71 units in this project, 12 of them are going to be dedicated single bedrooms dedicated to DDS individuals. There will be 3 two-bedroom apartments available so in total there will be 15 units.

Shannon asked the group for ideas on how to market this out to families. The RAC offered several suggestions that she said she will explore. The group agreed that social media platforms are a great way to reach many families. This information will also be made available at the CTFSN conference taking place on 4/24/25.

- *RFP*
 The West region is facilitating an RFP for 10 Community Living Arrangements (CLA) group homes that are statewide. There will be 3 in each region, and one centrally located for a total of 10. The RFP was posted on April 7th on the Connecticut Source. Letters of intent were requested from any vendor that was interested in coming to the Proposer's Conference, which was held on April 14th. Some providers showed interested and attended. Proposals are due by June 13th. At that point, the committees for the different regions will be reviewing the proposals. Selections and recommendations will be made to the Commissioner.
- *ID Partnership Date*
This event will be held at Camp Harkness for individuals and families on May 23rd. A flyer will be forthcoming. There will be vendors, food, and music.
- *House Bill 6487*
This is a bill put forward to do a cost analysis between public and private. Representative Dathom toured the Lower Fairfield Center with Shannon last week. There is a concern from public families who are supported by public that there will be highlighted cost differences.
- *Public Programs Transition*
DDS is still transitioning public programs back into the regions. The West Region absorbed the Northwest Regional Center and the Lower Fairfield Center and one group home in Watertown.

- *Budget Impacts* -

Shannon explained that we are in a partial freeze. The Department is only hiring seasonal positions (i.e. camp positions/lifeguard positions) and direct care positions. We're also under constraints in certain accounts (i.e. office supplies, maintenance repairs, etc.).

- *Emergencies*

There are 30 emergencies right now. They are in desperate need of placement that we're struggling through. This is due to a shortage in manpower and not enough vacancies.

Shannon explained how we handle emergencies and what roadblocks we encounter which result in emergencies not being placed.

The group discussed concerns about the caregiver crisis. Shannon mentioned the Department will be promoting hiring in an upcoming campaign for hiring direct care supports. At the next RAC meeting, next month, we will be having Mary Pat DeCarlo present to the group on that.

Shannon shared an example of a community companion home (CCH) that has been successful. This is an option for individuals as well.

There was a question concerning whether any recent federal cuts have been impacting DDS and Shannon explained that we have not yet experienced any effects.

- There was a question concerning what developments have been occurring on the recent study of individuals graduating out of the school system and how intellectual disability is defined in the state of Connecticut. Is there any movement on that? Shannon answered that she hasn't heard anything on that.

Opportunity for Public Participation:

Adriana Ramirez from the Connecticut Family Support Network (CTFSN) is having an upcoming One Voice Conference that is still open for registration until the end of tomorrow. The conference is taking place next Thursday in North Haven at the Clarion Inn. She shared that there will be one keynote speaker as well as two breakout sessions (1)

"Parenting Styles" and (2) "Compassion Fatigue Burnout". There will also be a self-advocate panel talking about resilience and building inner strength. The conference will include vendor tables and resource tables. The conference will be held both in English and Spanish at the same time.

Adjournment

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 5:20 pm