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State of Connecticut Department of Developmental Services West Region - Advisory Council Meeting

January 8, 2009

In attendance:

Mickey Herbst, Jeanne Braude-Magi, Marie Bennett for Fritz Gorst, Gil Kellersman, Arlene Steinfeld

Guest:

Christine Pollio, Director of Legislative and Executive Affairs

Excused:

Mark Cooper, Alec Vlahos

Approval of Minutes

The minutes were read from the last meeting and approved.

Legislative Process Overview - Christine Pollio, Legislative Liaison

The Advisory Council members and Christine Pollio introduced themselves. Ms. Pollio shared that she been with the Department since 2002 as our Legislative Liaison. She has an expanded role now as the Director of Legislative and Executive Affairs in the Commissioner's Office. Last year, the department added another position to assist with legislative affairs. Rod O'Connor was hired as a Legislative and Regulations Analyst/Legislative Liaison.

Ms. Pollio explained her role as Legislative Liaison. Her job is to solicit ideas/input from staff, families, providers, etc. regarding potential proposals to change laws that impact our agency. This usually consists of non-budgetary policies. She will review the suggestions/ideas/issues that will be presented as a bill for potential changes in statutes. The bills are internally approved and will then be forwarded to the Office of Policy and Management and the Governor's office for review and approvals. Ms. Pollio meets with the Committee of Cognizance (Public Health Committee) to discuss the proposed bills. The Committee of Cognizance is Co-Chaired by Senator Jonathan Harris and Representative Elizabeth Ritter. The names of the new ranking member's were also shared and included in the packet.

The Council continued to review the packet that Ms. Pollio distributed. The packet consisted of:

1. An overview of the Division of Legislative Affairs;
2. a breakdown of contacts, frequently asked questions, etc.;
3. a document explaining "How to find your representative" via the website;
4. a flowchart on "How a Bill Becomes a Law in Connecticut";
5. a DDS Legislative Update dated January 5, 2009;

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6. a Budget Update memo from Commissioner Peter H. O'Meara.
7. an outline of DDS Bills that are proposed for the 2009 Legislative Session.

Ms. Pollio explained that last year all of this information on legislative affairs was posted on the DDS website. She gave the members the website address for future reference.

Our contact information is included on the website as well as weekly updates, information on proposed bills, issues, testimony, etc.. Once on the website, a user can access previous year's information as well. The website includes a comprehensive summary of legislative activity. Ms. Pollio invited the Council to share any ideas with her regarding information that might be useful to put on the website.

She reviewed some of the names of the committees that the department does the most work with. There are links that one can click on for more detailed information. Agendas, public hearing notices, etc. are also included on the pages. Detailed contact information on committee members, etc. is also available on the site.

Question from Mr. Kellersman: When do committees form? Christine explained how members from all four caucuses (House and Senate Republicans and Democrats) are appointed to committees.

Ms. Pollio also explained how a bill number can be typed in and looked up. The site will automatically link you to the page that has detailed information on the bills, etc. The General Assembly website includes information on "How to testify on a bill" and other items of interest in the section entitled "citizen guide".

She invited the Council to visit the Legislative Office Building at any point. The public is free to stop in and see how the process unfolds. The General Assembly website has a calendar and list of events. The website (www.cga.ct.gov) was shared with the Council.

The budget for the next two fiscal years is underway.

Ms. Pollio stated that she receives and refers to the legislative bulletin that includes the schedule for all meetings held related to bills – each state agency has a mailbox in the legislative building. The public can go in and ask for copies of any bill and it will be provided to them.

The Advisory Council reviewed the non-budgetary proposals...included in the packet that Christine shared.

One example shared was the bill for DDS to be able to access the abuse/neglect registry of DCF. Presently, DDS does not have statutory authority to review this information.

Question from Mr. Herbst: What was the resistance on this bill? Ms. Pollio explained that time constraints prohibited a decision during the last session. A potential DCF concern is related to the man-power associated with providing this access to our agency, etc. We would like access to their abuse/neglect registry so that we do not hire anyone that may be on their registry. Our position is that they have access to ours so we would like this to be reciprocated.

Mr. Herbst stated his position on videotaping interrogations. He hopes that the department's position would be in favor of videotaping interrogations.

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Ms. Pollio indicated that this is a broad overview of the process. For more information, feel free to contact her at christine.pollio@ct.gov.

Budget

The Governor is expected to give her budget address on February 4th.

A copy of the Governor's State of the State address was reviewed.

Presently, there are severe economic issues going on in the state. As a result, we need to be prepared to deal with cuts and any other changes that the Governor and legislature adopts that may impact our agency. Mr. Herbst stated that he knows that federal Medicaid reimbursement goes back to the State of CT's General Fund. Ms. Pollio gave a quick explanation of how DDS is affected by the budget (i.e. affect of upcoming retirements, recruitment, refills, etc.) Governor Rell has stated that all options/agencies will be reviewed for cost savings.

Question: Mr. Kellersman asked whether the budget proposal would include union concessions? As of this moment, we do not know any specifics on this issue. All we know is that every agency will be impacted by the budget cuts and unions may be affected as well. There are contract issues involved.

The Governor's address will be available on the Governor's website after the address on February 4th. You can also view the address on the CTN website or on CT-N network (available on some cable TV networks).

Question: Mr. Herbst asked "How will the federal stimulus package impact the State?" Will we be a part of this? Will Connecticut benefit from the proposed stimulus package? Will we be seeing "new" money? Ms. Pollio stated that the Department has not yet heard any specifics on the federal economic package.

Mr. Herbst went on to state that it is anticipated that 1/3 of stimulus package would be going to current programs, health services, Medicaid, etc. He indicated that he would like the Department to be in favor of the private agencies benefiting from this. He shared how staff are out in the field working every day and how the department can approach resisting the acceptance of cuts. The Department should look at efficiency and union contracts. The Department should transfer direct care from state to the private sector as a cost saving measure. Presently, there is a dual working class system in place. State employees get paid much more for performing the same tasks the private agency staff do for a much lower rate of pay. "The time has come to review this class system" and make adjustments to save the State money.

Mr. Herbst also asked if our Department is able give input in regard to advocating for programs that we are trying to save, etc. He would like the Commissioner to have this topic on his radar to bring this issue to the forefront and advocate for private agency staff pay to be equivalent to the state staff pay. (There was a parent rally in Hartford and Jonathan Harris spoke and supported the parent group). His fear is that the Department may not take the position of the families who have advocating for the "equal class working system". Why is there such a difference in working pay rates? Mr. Herbst shared an example of how two products can be made (with the same outcome). However, the costs involved can be substantially different. He compared this to our present system with state employees and private sector staff. He feels that it's a perfect time to meet with the unions and renegotiate. It is his opinion that we are entering a period where we should be negotiating and making change in this area.

He stated that he will be putting this information together and sharing with others. Christine agreed to share this information with Commissioner O'Meara as requested.

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The Council thanked Christine for her presentation and found that it was very helpful.

Miscellaneous - Council Issues

Ms. Pollio explained that the Advisory Council minutes, agenda, etc needs to be posted on the website. This is regulated by statute. She will be forwarding directions to the region on how to proceed in the future so that we are in compliance with the statutory guidelines for this Committee.

Family Group

Marie explained to the Council that we will be forming a family group in the region. The mission of the group is for individuals/families who self-direct to come together in a forum where they can share ideas, address concerns, etc. It is hoped that we can have a "northern" group and "southern" group serving in this capacity. We will be writing to families who self-direct and are interested in participating in the family group. This group will be a "Support Network".

The Council requested that Ms. Bennett draft a letter and share it with the Council via email for final approval. Mr. Herbst voiced a quick sample of what he felt the letter should include. Ms. Bennett asked the group if they would be willing to participate on this committee.

Council members asked: Where will the meetings take place? That has yet to be determined. A survey letter will be sent out to families to solicit interest. One of our staff will facilitate the first meeting. We will be available to offer support, but the families will meet to support each other.

Once persons have been identified details can be formalized.

Mr. Herbst stated that he would be interested in participating for the Southern part of the region.

The Council felt that if there is interest then they can proceed to the next step.

Mr. Herbst added that there should be two groups :

1. self directing group
2. group for the non-self directing families that do not have the resources that self directing families have

Ms. Bennett advised the group to give the second group some thought. This was agreed upon.

Governor's State of the State Address

A handout was distributed to the Council for review.

Meeting adjourned at 6:45 pm

Next meeting: Thursday, March 12, 2009 at 5:00 pm – 250 Freight Street, Waterbury, CT