

West Region Advisory Council

Minutes

Via Teleconference

4:00 p.m.

March 17, 2022

Participants:

Sue Bastien, Chuck Bergamo, Marina Derman, Lori Chiappenello, Fritz Gorst, Mickey Herbst, Shannon Jacovino, Gil Kellersman, Karen Simon, Arlene Steinfeld

1. CALL TO ORDER –

The meeting was called to order at 4:03 pm

2. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF LAST MEETINGS MINUTES –

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the Council voted to approve the Minutes of January 20, 2022.

3. ROLL CALL –

Each participating member of the Regional Advisory Council introduced themselves.

4. SHANNON JACOVINO, DDS OMBUDSPERSON

Mr. Bergamo thanked Ms. Jacovino for joining the meeting.

Ms. Jacovino indicated that she has worked with several members of the Advisory Council prior to her assuming this new role. Prior to DDS, she was the Director of Advocacy for the ARC for 8 years. Her role is to help families to try to get the resources that they are requesting and to help resolve any issues that are brought to her attention. She is a neutral party between the agency and families.

She stated that her aunt has developmental disabilities, and she has witnessed the struggles that her aunt had living in different settings. Once her aunt was placed in an appropriate setting she has been much happier. It is Ms. Jacovino's commitment to help others to have choices and improve their opportunities.

She looks forward to working with families and DDS to improve things. She invited the RAC members to share any ideas that they may have. She would love to come to future meetings and will schedule to come to at least two meetings per year. She's unable to attend more meetings due to a scheduling conflict.

Ms. Jacovino can be reached at shannon.jacovino@ct.gov or at (860) 418-6047.

Members of the RAC presented questions to Ms. Jacovino. She was asked if she has been hearing from families about staffing shortages. She stated that yes this is an issue that has been brought forward by many families. DDS is well aware of the staffing crisis and is trying to do their best to address this problem. Ms. Jacovino encouraged the RAC members to reach out to their legislators to bring this to their attention so that can hear about how serious this situation is.

Another member mentioned that he spoke with his legislators about requesting that they lobby to bring Ukrainian refugees to Connecticut. The reason for this would be two-fold: 1. To help them with relocating to safety and 2. For them to possibly work with DDS consumers to help with the staffing crisis.

The group discussed how difficult it is for families to hire staff and that they aren't sure how to resolve this. It was also mentioned that other places are offering higher salaries (i.e. Target offering up to \$24/hr) to recruit employees. It is increasing difficult to fill vacancies due to these competing businesses.

A member of the Council stated that her organization has reached out to area Universities to see how a possible collaboration would help fill the staffing shortages.

It was also suggested that the Department follow up on trying to retain the exception of families being paid caregivers as they were during the COVID pandemic. It is understood that this is federally funded, but it would help tremendously if families had this option available to them if they are unable to hire staff.

Ms. Jacovino was asked what her workflow is like. She said that every day is different. She has been meeting with people inside and outside of DDS to get an understanding of who does what. Once she gets an understanding of what people do, she can have a better idea of how to assist families.

There was a discussion about upcoming DDS retirements. This will have a big impact on supports and services.

5. CHAIRPERSON'S REPORT –

Mr. Bergamo stated that he will continue to invite guests to speak to the RAC. He has reached out to the Chairperson of the North Region RAC (who is an attorney) to speak to the WR RAC to share what they are doing in their region. He suggested that the RAC members share ideas with him also.

6. REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S UPDATE –

- Mr. Gorst shared that COVID numbers across the state are down. The few numbers of individuals that had COVID are asymptomatic.

There have been changes to mandates of mask wearing. Masks are no longer required in state buildings, except settings where there are consumers (i.e. ICF, transportation in vehicles, etc.).

- DDS Retirements – there are lots of retirements ahead beginning 4/1 through 7/1. 7/1 is the date when benefits will change which is causing many staff to retire.

A memo from Commissioner Scheff was forwarded last week that shared some staffing changes at DDS. Elyssa Velardo will be replacing Peter Mason as the Deputy Commissioner. Stacy Silva-Gordon will be replacing Elyssa as the North Region Regional Director.

Some staff will be brought back on a per diem basis to help bridge the retirement vacancies.

7. NEW BUSINESS

Mr. Bergamo inquired about future Team's meetings. Since things are slowly going back to normal, will RAC meetings resume to in person. Fritz shared that staff are teleworking until 6/30. There are no RAC meetings during the summer. Therefore, in September we should have a better idea if meetings will continue via Teams.

8. OLD BUSINESS

No old business.

9. PUBLIC COMMENT

No public comment.

10. NEXT MEETING –

- April 21, 2022 at 4pm via teleconference; invitations will be sent out via Outlook.

ADJOURNMENT

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the Council adjourned the meeting at 4:55 pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

Eunice B. Rivera
Executive Secretary, DDS West Region