

DDS North Region Regional Advisory Council

March 16, 2022

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

Members Present: Kathleen Hayes, Chair; Annette Scully, Vice Chair; Donna Clauson; Kim Little; Ellyn Little; Mary Lou O'Connor; Rick Rothstein; Lori Sandora; Tammy Selinger; Elisa Velardo, DDS North Regional Director (ex-Officio member)

Guests: Norma LaMonaco; Cindy Lichtsteiner; Susan Prihar; Carol Scully; Michelle Baughman; Stacie Silva-Gordon (DDS NR Asst. Regional Director); Serginho Walker (NR Abuse/Neglect Liaison); Amber Burke (DDS Director of Employment & Day Services)

Meeting called to order at 5:04pm.

Meeting began with introductions.

- Serginho Walker was invited to attend to share information about what his primary role is within the North Region as the Abuse & Neglect Liaison. He shared that his primary role is to disseminate information between agencies regarding intakes for investigations that are coming in from private providers, CCH's, day programs, and family homes. The policy has been updated since January 3rd and can be found under the Manual on the website. All reports are now going to a centralized intake division for individuals 18 and older. For individuals 17 and under, reports will go to DCF and then DDS is notified. Food consistency violations are reported to the Abuse Investigation Division (AID) if ingested. If not ingested, incidents are reported to the liaison for each region.

Serginho is also the chair of the Human Rights Committee (HRC) which addresses concerns or complaints regarding the rights of individuals receiving services from DDS operated, funded, and/or licensed facilities or programs. It does not apply to individuals residing on their own, in family homes, or in long-term care facilities. The committee advises and makes recommendations to the regional director who makes a final decision. We are looking to recruit some family members who may be interested in serving on the committee. Currently there are a number of clinicians and providers on the committee but would like to make it more diverse and have some representation from families as well. Serginho shared his contact information (Serginho.Walker@ct.gov) if anyone would like further information.

A question was asked about requests from guardians to receive copies of investigation reports. DDS can only provide the findings and recommendations pages from an investigation report, not the entire report. A redacted copy of the findings and recommendations can be provided when a request is made in writing by the guardian to the attention of the Regional Director.

- Amber Burke, DDS Director of Employment & Day Services – Amber was invited to attend to share her role with Employment and Day Services at DDS. She shared a presentation about Employment beginning with the Strategic Plan.
 - She shared that everyone is welcome to attend the Strategic Planning meetings which are public meetings. DDS has engaged with a consultant, the State Employment Leadership Network (SELN), who did an assessment that pointed out some key factors that were very important to DDS. It allowed DDS to focus on how we can strengthen our capacity and work on training, as well as looking at interagency collaboration. Looking to enhance and strengthen what we currently have for employment options, but also where we can improve or modernize. Employment is important for those that want to work and earn a competitive wage and our goal is to make sure that anyone that comes in is ready to work.
 - Amber discussed the SELN E-Learning program and Employment Training and Customized Employment Training Curriculum – training is being offered to case managers who are supporting families directly. Training will also include staff from resource management, Transition Advisors, and Self Advocate Coordinators to provide tools on how to better have conversations about employment with families and to be able to offer more options that are available.

- Project Search Expansion – Amber explained the Project Search intern program for transitioning students who have not yet graduated. Currently they are in the healthcare field, such as hospitals (program at UConn), however DDS is looking at various ways to expand the program. Amber will send the link to Elisa who will share, for more information. Amber can also be contacted at Amber.Burke@ct.gov.

Amber also shared information about the Job Development Leadership Network (JDLN) and will also send information to Elisa to share.

- Approval of Minutes – Minutes from the February meeting were reviewed by council members. A motion to approve was made by Annette Scully; seconded by Tammy Selinger. Minutes were approved.
- Legislative Update –
 - Rick Rothstein shared that there was a public hearing held earlier this week on a variety of DDS-related bills. Two of them were technical in nature but not a lot of interest in them.
 - One eliminated the Family Support Council, which was really already eliminated a few years ago, but now has been taken out of statute.
 - The second was a proposal regarding Able accounts (SB376) – certain state benefits would be exempted that are not necessarily linked to federal dollars.
 - It was noted that unlike in years past, there as been no report issued about bills of particular interest to DDS (will check with Kevin Bronson).
- Regional Director’s Update – Elisa Velardo
 - Elisa introduced Stacie Silva-Gordon to the Council. Stacie will be taking over as the new Regional Director for the North Region, as Elisa will be moving to Central Office as Deputy Commissioner, effective April 1st. Stacie has over 20 years’ experience with DDS and is very skilled. She came through case management, has a resource management background, and really knows all aspects of the Department.

Kathleen welcomed Stacie and thanked Elisa, as this will be her last meeting, for everything she has done for the North Region and will continue to do for the Department in her new role. Congratulations, Elisa!

- Retirement - Elisa shared that she has been working with the other regional directors on reviewing the initiatives that the Department has been focusing on over the past two years.
 - “The Great Resignation” within DDS - One area is that beginning at the end of this month, the Department is looking at a large number of retirements. This will be the first of two waves and it is anticipated that there will be an additional number of retirements in June. It is expected that over 100 employees will be retiring as of the end of this month. Retirements are people at all levels of the organization, so one of the greatest areas of focus has been in planning and working with our human resources division around the hiring process, which takes some time within the state system. There has been a combination of coverage plans being developed, and positions are being prioritized for refill. Currently, however, the focus has been on refilling the direct support positions first, which means that other positions are taking a little longer to refill.
- COVID-19 Update - The numbers regarding COVID have been very good since the January surge and services have been able to re-open. Day programs and respite centers are up and running once again and Family Support Workers have been able to be out working with families and making visits.
- The \$5,000,000 in emergency funding that was given a few years ago resulted in a number of programs that were developed and have been working very well.
 - Step-Down Unit in Newington – designed to prevent people from staying in the ER for long periods of time; has supported 20 guests. Individuals have gone there to stabilize and transition back to their family home or community setting.

- Branches – The program is run by RMS in Meriden. It is emergency transitional housing similar to the Step-down Unit, however less clinical involvement. It opened in January of 2022. Referrals are accepted from all 3 regions and it has a capacity of 3. The program supports individuals who are in crisis and then transitions them planfully to a longer-term setting.
- Expanded Family Support Program – With the additional emergency funding, DDS was able to expand our Individual & Family Support services by adding Family Support Workers to provide support in family homes. Family Support Workers help support people that are in crisis to help maintain stability for the family. They assist with things like appointments and transportation, and community outings. They were also very helpful with supporting people to be able to get vaccinated. People who typically have a really hard time with medical appointments have been able to successfully be supported to get vaccinated with the help of the Family Support staff.
- As of January 1st, DDS is working with some private providers that utilize nursing consulting agencies to provide some guidance. Nursing consultant agencies now need to be qualified provider agencies.
- Assistive Technology – Pilot is continuing for remote supports. Two agencies have 20 individuals that are now living in their own apartments with remote supports in place. Meetings have been held regularly with the providers and things have been moving along well.
- Meetings have been held with agencies that provide Individual Home Support (IHS) services to look at how these services can be strengthened. These services are for people who live in their own apartments without a need for 24-hour continuous support. Some have a combination of in-person supports, some technology, and some on-call supports.
- Respite Centers – have been up and running. There will be a new center in Meriden which will be the first 24-hour respite center. This will be available when more longer-term support is needed.
- A second emergency housing program will be opened, designed to support people who are in crisis.
- Clinical Response Team – There will be one in each region that will be focused on clinical supports. They can help with needs where people are struggling either at home or with a provider agency that needs additional support. Oak Hill is the provider for the North and South Regions. Agency called We Do Life Together provides support in the West Region.
- 3 IDASH Supported Housing Developments are up and running and one additional setting is opening in West Hartford (not IDASH). The IDASH programs are apartment settings where up to 25% of the apartments are set aside for people with intellectual or developmental disabilities. They are generally low-income tax credit developments and are completely integrated settings. There is a focus on it being a community where people interact with one another. There are specific guidelines around IDASH to make sure that people are part of the community. The IDASH programs were part of a particular RFP that was issued about 3 years ago, however, there are other similar projects being developed throughout the state that are also Supported Housing settings.
- A question was raised about mask requirements. Elisa responded that at day programs masks are no longer required, but highly encouraged. Community Living Arrangements (CLA's) are considered health care settings, so the mask mandate is still in place.
- It was asked if the DDS acronyms that were used this evening could be identified. There is a list of some of the common DDS acronyms on the DDS website ([Acronyms \(ct.gov\)](#)).
- Public Participation –
 - A question was raised about a specific living situation for their family member that is in process and how things can move forward more quickly. Elisa stated that she can be contacted directly to have a longer conversation and discuss the situation more specifically.
 - A question was raised regarding vacancies and whether a list was available to parents to identify where the vacancies are. Elisa explained that a list is not provided because it most likely would not be very helpful as some already have people identified, some already have people visiting, and sometimes the vacancies are specific as to whether the person needs to be male or female. Families should work with case managers to identify providers and look at what opportunities these providers may have. Elisa stated that if there is more specific information they would like to discuss, they can contact either Stacie or Elisa who can assist.

- Motion to adjourn was made by Annette Scully; seconded by Rick Rothstein. Meeting was adjourned at 7:01 pm.

The next meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, April 20, 2022 at 5:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Claudia Neumann

Executive Secretary