

West Region Advisory Council

Minutes

Via Teleconference

4:00 p.m.

January 20, 2022

Participants:

Chuck Bergamo, Marina Derman, Lori Chiappenello, Fritz Gorst, Gil Kellersman, Karen Simon, Arlene Steinfeld, Cindy Stramandinoli

Public guest: Melissa Kremmel

1. CALL TO ORDER –

The meeting was called to order at 4:06 pm

2. REVIEW AND APPROVAL OF LAST MEETINGS MINUTES –

Upon a motion duly made and seconded, the Council voted to approve the Minutes of September 16, 2021.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S UPDATE–

- Mr. Bergamo advised that he received guidelines for State of Connecticut Public Meetings. He explained that at each meeting participants are required to state their name and the role of their participation in the meeting (i.e. Charles Bergamo, Chairperson). He also indicated that whenever there is a vote on anything, there will be a roll call if the entire group is not unanimous in agreement. In the case that someone on the RAC votes differently from another Council Member, the Chairperson will do a roll call and request each member's vote.

He also shared that the meetings are approved to be held virtually until April 2022. If after that date the group meets in person, the group is required to tell the public where the meeting is held and also provide teleconference capabilities for anyone in the public that would like to participate. If a member from the public expresses interest in participating the department is required to provide equipment for that individual to participate remotely. This person would need to notify the department several days before the meeting is going to be held.

- Mr. Bergamo started the roll call by introducing himself as Chairperson and parent of a DDS consumer.
- Marina Derman: Co-Chairperson
- Arlene Steinfeld – volunteer participant/parent
- Cindy Stramandinoli –volunteer participant/parent
- Karen Simon – volunteer, parent of son with autism utilizing services in the Self Determination program. Son just turned 28 years old yesterday.
- Gil Kellersman – volunteer/daughter served by DDS
- Melissa Kremmel –public participant/Connecticut Family Support Network

- Mr. Bergamo indicated that he has invited the new Ombudsperson, Shannon Jacovino, who replaced Edward Mambruno to attend a future meeting. She'll be getting back to the group with a date given that her meetings at CO conflict with the dates the WR RAC meets.
- The DDS 5-year Plan was adopted and The Developmental Disability Council accepted the 5-Year Plan. Mr. Bergamo will provide grantee information shortly.

4. REGIONAL DIRECTOR'S UPDATE –

- Mr. Gorst reported that we continue to deal with COVID. The cases are not as severe. Individuals that has been vaccinated are experiencing milder symptoms. There are a couple of deaths of individuals who were not vaccinated.
- 51k N95 masks were distributed this week. Kits will be mailed out to employee of record for individuals served through Self Determination.
- It was suggested that the Department save money and not distribute gloves as part of the emergency packet since they already have enough gloves. Fritz said that he will share that with CO.
- DDS staff continue to telework. Some staff are working 80% telework 20% in office; some are doing 50% telework and 50% in office. The Department can require staff to come in should there be an urgent need for staff to report to the office. At this point, most business is conducted via telework with meetings being held on Microsoft Teams.
- Providers are struggling with staffing issues. Hiring is problematic with many providers. Another issue complicating staffing is COVID positive staff. This continues to be a nationwide problem. During Fritz's meeting with the providers, they reported that they've had interviews lined up where candidates have backed out of interviewing leaving providers with no one to interview for their vacancies.

Providers have asked DDS to allow them to waive some reporting and training requirements due to their staffing shortages. At this point in time, some staff that do the reporting for agencies are doing front line work in the group homes. There aren't enough staff to do all of the paperwork.

Mr. Bergamo inquired if there are any task forces looking at this to explore offering higher salaries or incentives to hire. Fritz shared that he's not sure what agencies are doing in this regard. DDS did offer a rate increase of \$14.75 which seemed to have helped and then COVID hit resulting again in staff shortages.

- There was a discussion on Appendix K and how guardians were being paid to provide care for their family members. The Appendix K rule was terminated but is being relooked at due to staff shortages problems. This might be reinstated, but that would be a decision made by the Federal Government who funds this. DDS is waiting for further direction.
- DDS staff COVID weekly testing was put on pause several weeks ago due to testing shortages. However, testing requirements will resume on 1/18/2022.

It was suggested that incentives be offered to staff so that they agree to get vaccinated. It was shared that Ability Beyond did this.

- A question arose concerning the upcoming wave of numerous retirements. Presently, there are staff working double and triple shifts. With the expected number of retirements, staffing issues are anticipated to become more problematic. Fritz shared that there is a task force working on reviewing the large number of expected retirements. At this point, we have not been given any formal direction on what will happen when there are massive vacancies. However, we are continuing to hire staff as positions become vacant. The Department is also looking to possibly bring back some staff on a temporary basis to bridge the gap.

Fritz explained why many staff are opting to retire. There will be a change in benefits and cost of living adjustments if staff decide to retire after July 1, 2022. Therefore, many are going to leave so they don't lose certain benefits and COLA adjustments.

- Another question came up about hiring and why do we seem to be behind in hiring. DDS Human Resources has been centralized. The interview process is lengthy and there is a lot of oversight in hiring. Positions are posted and approved for posting. Once candidates are vetted interviews take place and then hiring happens. We are not behind in hiring. COVID has also impacted DDS staffing.

5. NEW BUSINESS

- Marina stated she is on the Statewide Committee known as the Strategic Employment Leadership Network (SELN). This is a multi-state organization that is working on rebuilding employment opportunities. She will be sending Eunice the information so that it can be forwarded to the RAC.

6. OLD BUSINESS

No old business.

7. PUBLIC COMMENT

Melissa Kremmel stated that she is a representative from the Connecticut Family Support Network (CFSN). This agency has a contract with the State of Connecticut. Laverne Moore attended past meetings to represent the CFSN. She is no longer with them. Ms. Kremmel said that she is here for advocacy and support. CFSN is a statewide agency and available for services. Her phone number is 860-965-4953. This is the best telephone number to reach her at. Mr. Bergamo suggested she send any pertinent information to Eunice Rivera so that the information can be shared via email with the RAC. She agreed to forward said information. Ms. Kremmel's email is: mkremmel@ctfsn.org.

8. NEXT MEETING –

- March 17, 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 4:45 pm.

Respectfully submitted by:

Eunice B. Rivera
Executive Secretary, DDS West Region