**Massachusetts Autism Commission**

*Meeting Minutes*

February 27, 2025 – 2:00 p.m. – 3:00 p.m.

*Via Zoom*

**Autism Commission Members Present**: Undersecretary Mary McGeown (EHS), Michelle Harris (DDS), Carolyn Kain (EHS), Sarah Peterson (DDS), Tim Cahill (DDS), Rep. Joseph McKenna (HOU), Sen. Joan Lovely (SEN), Toni Wolf (MBY), Jen Chebator (DCF), Christine Hubbard, Iraida Alvarez (DESE), Aimee Smith Zeoli (EEC), Bronia Clifton (EOHLC), Emily White (DPH), Sacha Stadhard (EOL), Mary Price (DHE), Karen Wylie (EOEA), Lee Robinson (MassHealth), Jo Ann Simons, Faith Ambrose (EOE), Janet Barbieri, Laurie Anastopoulos, Ann Neumeyer, Joanne Flatley, Rita Gardner, Zachary Houston, Julia Landau and Jessica Sassi.

**Meeting Minutes**: Dianne Lescinskas (EHS)

**Review and Approval of the Minutes from December 9, 2024**

Undersecretary Mary McGeown called the meeting to order and welcomed the members to the meeting. She reviewed the agenda and discussed the feedback on the recommendations and priorities and that they are the core to advocacy and the work to serve ASD individuals.

Ms. Kain asked for a motion to approve the meeting minutes from December 9, 2024, Ms. Sassi moved the motion to approve, Ms. Simons seconded the motion. A roll call was made, and all members present approved the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

**Review of members selections from recommendations and priorities chart from subcommittees for addition to annual report**

Ms. Kain shared a PowerPoint presentation on recommendations and priorities chart that was shared with subcommittee co-chairs and the c-o-chairs made decisions on which of the priorities/recommendations would be included in the annual report.

**Member Selected Birth – 14 Subcommittee Priorities**

**Transition from Early Intervention to Special Education**That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will examine available information related to the transition of children with autism spectrum disorder from early intervention to special education, with a focus on the timeliness of this transition and the continuity of supports.

**Child Safety**That the Birth to 14 Subcommittee will facilitate the sharing of resources that might be available for communities, schools and individual households to improve safety for students with autism spectrum disorder, particularly aimed at addressing concerns such as wandering, bolting, accidental drowning, psychosexual health

***Discussion***

* It was asked if we could look at “newly arrivals” who may not have had the opportunity for EI and could face significant gaps in education.
* With these priorities/recommendations we can look at individuals through the lens of DEI
* EI data is on their website
* DESE collects data and reports to the Federal Government
* Are we able to look at the number of children, since COVID, who have not been in school? This work can be done in the subcommittee meetings
* Commissioner Peterson discussed work involved with OOCA and child water safety – she will share with the commission

**Member Selected Adult Subcommittee Priorities**

**Expand Access to Resources for Aging Autistic Individuals, including those who were not eligible for services prior to 2014, and their Aging Caregivers and Support Networks**

Encourage the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), MassHealth and other agencies to develop and disseminate a resource/information packet targeted to individuals aging with autism and their natural support networks and caregivers, including those who may not have been eligible for services prior to 2014.

**Examine Barriers to Accessing Services, including Healthcare Services, Created by Late Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)**

Explore ways to effectively reach out to those aging with autism who were not eligible for services prior to 2014 to provide information about eligibility and services.

***Discussion***

* The adult subcommittee is already working with DDS on these priorities
* Aging and professional diagnosis is a challenge – typically lack prior medical and school records
* There is some overlap with these priorities

**Member Selected Healthcare Recommendation and Priority**

**Recommendation**

Expand providers who can diagnose ASD for purposes of ABA medical necessity requirements.

**Priority**

Work with MassHealth, DMH and DDS to ensure that individuals with ASD and behavioral health (BH) needs have appropriate access to the full BH care continuum, inclusive of diversionary and hospital-level care.

***Discussion***

* *MassHealth is working on the recommendation of expanding providers*
* *The priority is related to inpatient psychiatric care*

**Member Selected Housing Subcommittee Priorities**

The Housing Subcommittee will develop case studies of existing state-funded housing projects for individuals with ASD to assist the affordable housing field in Massachusetts in planning and developing sound affordable housing projects for individuals with ASD. Case studies will provide information on public and private financing sources, costs, design features, development and operational innovations and challenges.

The Housing Subcommittee will track the implementation of the Affordable Homes Act with specific attention to the changes to state law regarding ADUs, the Home Modification Program, the Facilities Consolidation Fund, and other programs and legislative changes that could be leveragedto support affordable housing for individuals with ASD.

***Discussion***

* The priority will be “lessons learned” and “best practice” document – non-profits will be able to have a map of the projects – this will help to avoid barriers for others
* The Housing Bond Bill passed last year – during the past 6 months they have begun to implement the changes to the law
* ADU’s for family member and/or individuals - adjacent to a caregiver home – could also be used for older adult or caregiver
* Focus on the state law and leverage housing opportunities for ASD individuals

**Addition to Draft Annual Report – Workforce Shortages the lingering Impact of the Global Pandemic**

During the global pandemic, Human Service agencies experienced significant workforce declines from; 1) the shift to remote services when day programs were required to shut down in-person services; 2) personnel choose to leave direct care work for personal health and safety reasons; and 3) some direct care workers experienced “burnout” from the extended hours required at residential programs when day programs were unavailable. Despite significant investments by the Commonwealth to improve this workforce crisis with rate increases by MassHealth and the Department of Developmental Services, the workforce challenges persist to present day. Additionally, the number of individuals with Autism and an intellectual disability Turning 22 each year and exiting special education services has increased, including individuals who present with complex profiles and high behavior needs, which requires increased staffing beyond a 1:1 ratio. As a result, some individuals eligible for adult services are still waiting for appropriate day and residential placements. While others are waiting to return to their programs on a full-time basis because of staffing shortages.

 Ms. Kain will be adding the above addition to the Annual Report – it was asked that this issue be highlighted, and it will be at the beginning of the report.

* It was asked about data on the turnover rate in the workforce and the support for high acuity for individuals has not improved
* Some progress has been made but challenges do still exist
* The ADDP report has data on some providers and acknowledges the challenges
* The report will be shared with the Commission members

**Vote to Approve Draft Annual Report**

Ms. Kain asked for a motion to approve the draft annual report, Ms. Gardner moved to approve the motion, and Mr. Houston seconded the motion. Roll call was started and during the roll call MS. Stadhard, co-chair of the 14-22/employment subcommittee, asked about 2 recommendations from the subcommittee to be added to the report. There was discussion on the recommendations, and Ms. Kain asked for a motion to approve the annual draft report with the additional recommendations from the 14-22/employment subcommittee. Ms. Clifton moved the motion to approve, and Ms. Gardner seconded the motion. Roll call was done with all members present approving the motion. The Annual Draft Report of the Autism Commission was approved.

Undersecretary McGeown asked that Ms. Kain, and her team reach out to subcommittee co-chairs to schedule meetings.

**Closing**

EOHHS and all agencies are closely watching the work being done on the Federal level to see what actions will need to be taken. There is a lot of uncertainty right now and EOHHS is grateful of the staff who are here supporting families and individuals.

With no further business to discuss, the meeting was adjourned.