Autism Commission Meeting Minutes

January 12, 2016

10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.

1 Ashburton Place, Boston, MA

The chair, Marylou Sudders, Secretary of the Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS), called the meeting to order with a quorum at 10:08 a.m. and welcomed Commission members. Commission members introduced themselves.

Announcements

Amy Weinstock informed the Commission that Hilary Clinton has released an autism plan, and also discussed the release of the film, “Jack of the Red Hearts” which is about a consumer of the foster care system becoming a care giver for a family with a child on the autism spectrum. Secretary Sudders offered to explore hosting a screening of this film. Elin Howe, Commissioner for the Department of Developmental Services (DDS), informed the Commission that a hearing on the proposed regulation for the National Criminal Background Check was taking place until 2:00pm should anyone wish to provide comment.

Rocio Calvo moved to approve the minutes from the September 29, 2015 Commission meeting. Commissioner Howe seconded the motion and there was a unanimous vote to approve the minutes.

Secretary Sudders provided an update on the search for an Executive Director for the Autism Commission. The Secretary stated that there were 18 applicants, 4 of whom asked to interview, with the interviews completed. Secretary Sudders informed the Commission that the Nominating Committee met and voted to recommend two of the candidates to the Governor. Senator Barbara L’Italien stated that all of the candidates who were interviewed were very qualified and there was a quick agreement to recommend two names. Secretary Sudders announced that the committee was comfortable with either candidate as Executive Director; the candidates are Ann Guay and Carolyn Kain.

Dania Jekel mentioned that there was not a member of the Commission with autism present and that there should be more than one member with autism on the Commission. Secretary Sudders responded that there is someone who has just gotten through the background check and is about to be appointed, and she agrees that the Commission has a commitment for full inclusion. Senator L’Italien stated that she was a part of creating the statute and that there are ways to change the requirements either by proposed legislation or through outside language to the budget.

Commissioner Howe provided a presentation and update on DDS services and programs. (See attached presentation).

Regarding the Autism Waivers, Commissioner Howe explained the criteria and eligibility requirement. She will get information on those waiting for the DESE/DDS Program. Senator L’Italien provided some history, stating that this historically has been a budget issue.

Ayana Gonzalez asked about housing programs and FCF. Commissioner Howe stated that there is an inter-agency housing subcommittee working to gather data.

Commissioner Howe stated that DDS is tracking data on service and program needs for different age groups. Julia Landau suggested addressing linguistic and cultural barriers.

Marcia Mittnacht asked what percent of all DDS clients also have a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. Commissioner Howe replied that some programs have better tracking, and in the past, the intellectual disability has been tracked but not the specific autism diagnosis. 50% of newly eligible clients also have autism. Secretary Sudders asked for updated data on the percentage of those historically served at DDS.

Ms. Jekel asked if DDS has any agreements with the Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC) regarding employment issues. Commissioner Howe said yes, with MRC setting up funding and support and DDS providing long term services as needed. WIOA has a requirement to focus on transition age youth, and the agencies work with Project Search as it is important to provide individuals access to a range of skills and support. The Interagency Service Agreement (ISA) will be linked on the DDS website.

Senator L’Italien asked if there has been any connection between new clients and substance abuse. Commissioner Howe replied that DDS is not currently tracking this information, but will. Senator L’Italien pointed out that the IT Bond Bill has the capacity for assisting with data tracking.

Commissioner Howe informed the Commission that work will highlight the aging population at DDS and coordinating with EOEA. Secretary Sudders stated that DDS is not the only state agency servicing individuals on the spectrum and there is collaboration across EOHHS.

Cynthia Orellana asked if there is any outreach through DESE to the schools so that they are aware of changes within the 18-22 age group. Commissioner Howe and Marcia Mittnacht replied that MRC has transition coordinators in every school system, and that each school has an ISA with MRC regarding treating school age children so that they know who is in the transition age. Ms. Orellana asked if those working with people on the autism spectrum engage in any professional development. Ms. Mittnacht stated that many schools have identified professional development in the area of autism as a focus and are training both general educators as well as the special educators. Senator L’Italien stated that Section 24 of Chapter 226, the Autism Endorsement, is aimed at special education providers, but she has met with Commissioner Chester to discuss how to include all educators.

Chris Supple requested the Commission focus on reports on policy and procedures, as well as on employment and housing.

Secretary Sudders thanked Commissioner Howe for her presentation and reiterated that additional data is needed for the next Commission meeting and that links to the ISAs will be distributed.

Senator L’Italien requested that the Commission meet more than 4 times per year and that monthly meetings at least through June be scheduled. Rocio Calvo motioned for monthly meetings, the motion was seconded, and the Commission unanimously voted in favor. Ms. Phillips requested all material be sent to the Commission members in advance of the meetings, and Secretary Sudders stated that all items are posted online ahead of time and a link will be sent to the Commission members.

Secretary Sudders turned the floor to Alice Moore, Undersecretary, as her designee, who asked for any additional comments or if there are any requests for speakers at the next meetings. There was a request to hear from DMH and MRC, then DESE and Higher Education, as well as MassHealth for an update.

Senator L’Italien provided an update on the ABLE Act, stating that the federal government must finish regulations first and there is a legislative ABLE group in the State House. Treasurer Goldberg is involved and engaged in conversation with other states to explore regionalization. Senator L’Italien will be sending a formal write-up of the update to the membership.

There being no further business, upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, Undersecretary Moore adjourned the meeting at 12:02 p.m.