Massachusetts Autism Commission

Meeting Minutes

July 16, 2020– 2:00 p.m. – 4:00 p.m.

Via WebEx

Present: Mary Lou Sudders, Secretary (EOHHS) Katie Mick, Undersecretary (EOHHS), Carolyn Kain (EOHHS), Jane Ryder (DDS), Elizabeth Morse (DDS), Janet George (DDS), Rep. Christine Barber (HOU), Johanna Wakelin for Sen. Joan Lovely, Ann Reale (Undersecretary EOE), Sacha Stadhard (EOL), Samantha Aigner-Treworgy (EEC), Mary Price (DHE), Katherine Downes, Kate Ginnis (MassHealth) Theresa Schirmer, Christine Hubbard, Russell Johnston (DESE), Amy Weinstock, Bronia Clifton (DHCD), Michele Brait, Joan Butterfield (DPH), Toni Wolf (MRC) Katherine Canada (DCF), Dania Jekel, Judith Ursitti, Elizabeth Zwick, Roccio Calvo, Ann Neumeyer, Emma Vazquez for Rep. Barber, James Vander Hoover, Rita Gardner, Julia Anderson, Dan Burke and Kathy Sanders (DMH)

**Welcome - Review and Approval of Meeting Minutes from February**

Secretary Sudders called the meeting to order and welcomed the Autism Commission members to the first commission meeting during this pandemic.

She asked the Commission members for a motion to approve the minutes from the meeting in February. Christine Hubbard moved the motion and Dan Burke seconded the motion. The members of the commission used the chat box on WebEx to vote by roll call their approval and the minutes were approved unanimously.

**Presentation from State Agencies**

Secretary Sudders began with a comprehensive presentation that reflects the events and the actions taken by the state in response to the Covid 19 pandemic. She highlighted the major dates and actions including financial assistance, and she said that each state agency would present more detailed information on what their respective agency had been working on. After the presentation is completed, she asked to hear from Commission members on what has worked during the pandemic, current challenges, and priorities for the commission as the work moves forward.

**Key Dates**

* Timeline from March 10, 2020 – July 10, 2020 on the work that has been done by each state agency (refer to PowerPoint)

**Financial Relief Package: Residential Congregate Care**

* EOHHS announced $95 million for residential service providers and include residential services and rest homes – in home services include Elder homecare, Family Support, and other health and human services providers delivering essential services to keep members/clients safe in their home or residences and out of the hospital
* EOHHS announced $44 million of additional funding across residential care service providers

**Early Education and Care (EEC)**

Ann Reale presented on the work that has been done at EEC

* Child-care closed (midnight of March 22) including all 8,200 licensed providers across the Commonwealth
* As of July 7, 2020 – 4,510 programs have been approved to re-open, 3,258 have indicated to EEC that they have resumed operations, 1,051 programs are in the process of submitting their reopening plans for approval.

**Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE)**

Russell Johnston presented on the work that DESE has been doing since mid-March.

* Schools closed on March 16th, 2020
* July 9th DESE released a Comprehensive Special Education Guidance for the 2020-21 School Year.
* Resource guides can be found on DESE’s website along with guidance documents (incudes summer and re-opening guidance).
* DESE is pushing for more in-person learning for students with more complex and significant disabilities
* Focus on in-person learning, hybrid of in-person and remote learning and planning with families
* Throughout the pandemic, special education residential schools remained opened to support students’ unique challenges
* Schools incurred unanticipated costs related to PPE, infection control measures, increased staffing costs and enhanced cleaning protocols

**Department of Public Health (DPH)**

Joan Butterfield presented slides with updates on the work being done by DPH.

* DPH issued EI telehealth guidelines
* DPH revised the policy to allow for all EI billable service to be provided via telehealth and align with the MassHealth timeline of March 12, 2020
* Updated telehealth policy on June 5th allowed for children over three years to continue to receive early intervention services when potentially eligible and referred to the LEA
* Children who turn three during the time period of 3/15/2020-8/31/2020 will be allowed to extend their services in EI up to October 15, 2020

**MassHealth Updates**

Kate Ginnis presented updates on MassHealth

* Current MH members will not lose eligibility during the COVID 19 emergency and there is increased flexibility to get onto MH during the emergency.
* Expansion of telehealth coverage in Provider Bulletin 289, extended this month in Provider bulletin 298
* Issued guidance for resources to obtain low-cost or free phone or internet service based on MassHealth eligibility so members can access telehealth
* Increased rates for ABA providers
* Expanded coverage for children who tuned 3 between March 15 and August 31
* Development an implementation of ASD/ID crisis consultation (not just for MH but anyone in MA under the age of 26)

**Department of Developmental Services (DDS)**

Commissioner Ryder presented updates on the work being done by DDS

* DDS established a command team to address issues during the pandemic
* Used social media to connect with families, providers and to share guidance
* Connected with families through the MA ARC and Citizens Provider Board
* All DDS residential programs continued to serve individuals throughout the pandemic
* Remote services were provided by residential staff and day program staff using technology for day services
* Autism/Family Supports Centers connected to families using remote services
* DDS continues to collaborate with providers
* Children’s Autism Waiver raised the maximum age to include children through age 9 (up to 10th birthday), increased individual budgets, waived limits on services
* Waived requirement for bachelor’s degree for Direct Service Workers

**Department of Mental Health (DMH)**

Dr. Kathy Sanders provided updates for DMH.

* All DMH services are deemed essential
* DMH offices remained open with rotating staff and all services are accessible throughout the emergency
* Community service delivery modified to include virtual capacity to meet health and safety requirements – virtual modality facilitated lower no-show rates and more frequent contact with clients, given reduced travel time.
* DMH is developing hybrid approach to most services - Virtual and in-person
* 24/7 care provided with infection control practices in place
* Clubhouse services provided virtually – locations used for food preparation with food delivery to clients
* Some essential support provided in-person(clubhouse)
* Virtual care worked well for some youth and families and not so well for others
* Access Centers provided broad array of virtual peer support

**Department of Children and Families (DCF)**

Katherine Canada was having technical difficulties, Undersecretary Mick presented on her behalf.

* DCF staff moved to mostly virtual operations - responses to emergencies continued in-person
* DCF Area Offices remained open to provide key social work support functions with strict health and safety measures in place
* DCF coordinated its guidance with EOHHS to develop specialized guidance for social workers, parents, foster parent, and child serving agencies
* Deployed mobile COVID-19 testing for congregate care sites and helped providers source PPE for children and staff
* Worked to provide children in group care with chrome books for virtual visits and remote care with providers

**Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission (MRC)**

Commissioner Toni Wolf provided updates on the work done by MRC.

* On March 18th, MRC launched a Consumer and Family Warm Line for consumers and family members with questions and concerns
* There were early challenges with Pre-ETS services but they are going well and being done virtually
* MRC conducted a remote Job Fair with employers – of the 366 calls to date, 115 were applicants or people looking to receive MRC services
* MRC sent out a consumer survey and has compiled 18 pages of executive summery – Commissioner Wolf will share the summery with commission members

**Open Discussion**

Undersecretary Mick and Commissioner Ryder opened up the meeting for discussion, an opportunity to respond or comment on the presentation and discuss the priorities of the Autism Commission as we move forward.

* Autism Insurance Resource prospective – telehealth is working well, 1:1 ABA services remain a challenge, but overall thigs are working better than expected
* Many families are under stress – loss of job and insurance
* One big issue is MassHealth coverage of AAC devices – there is no way for families to get the device in a systematic fashion – there needs to be discussion on a better way to get the device as the current process makes it difficult for families
* MH is re-engaging in this work and will follow up on this conversation of AAC devices
* DESE is thinking more about the technology requirements and has encouraged districts to apply for a technology grant (DESE). Mr. Johnston has a list of ideas to share with special education directors on this topic and asked commission members to email him with any ideas. He would like to explore “next steps”
* Question on opening of Day Programs and onsite COVID-19 testing – it is critical for them to have access to testing to remain open. Undersecretary Mick discussed that this is a significant priority and they are exploring long term congregate care testing. It is a work in progress and we will hear more in the near term
* Discussion on the students that are leaving school and going to adult services – Turning 22 – what are the plans for these students? DESE is set to send out new guidance regarding compensatory services and there is a section on Turning 22 with guidance on what students are entitled to if they have turned 22 during the pandemic. MRC has seen a decrease in 688 referrals and would like to collaborate with this group – they are also concerned with employment due to the state of the economy. DDS service coordinators are reaching out to individuals on their T22 list and offering supports
* AANE reports that clients are experiencing tremendous isolation and depression with heightened mental health issues. Parents of children are also overwhelmed, stressed and have increased anxiety. There is a silver lining – adults love online services and coaching services can be done in a much shorter time period
* Commissioner Wolf asked if subcommittee work would resume and wanted input of priorities for the next three months. Discussion on thinking about the work through a virtual lens, how to provide support and services virtually
* Discussion on virtual diagnosis of ASD and is there flexibility for individuals to get a diagnosis virtually to ensure they are getting services. This discussion came up at MH and they do not dictate the battery of testing to be used – you can use a modified battery to diagnose as clinically necessary. Some providers have done remote testing and the Autism Insurance Resource is seeing insurance carriers rejecting ??
* Racial disparities and diversity on the Autism Commission was discussed. In the past there was intentional work to increase diversity and this topic will be the starting point for discussion for the next Autism Commission meeting. The commission should define what we are looking for when we talk about diversity – commit to a focus on an action plan. This is a conversation that many are having and merits a deep dive and clarity on goals and intent. The work needs to be intentional and action oriented – define the actions and commit to sustain. Workforce issues were brought up and equity issues in pay rate.

Undersecretary Mick asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting, Kate Ginnis moved the motion and Janet George seconded the motion. The meeting was adjourned.