Autism Commission

Sub-Committee for Three Years Old - Fourteen Years Old

Meeting Minutes –January 11, 2017

500 Harrison Avenue

Members present were Carolyn Kain, Dianne Lescinskas, Christina Fitanides and Zackery Houston.

Members accessing meeting remotely were Laurie Gobeil, Julie Kelley, Laura Conrad and Sue McCarthy.

Carolyn Kain, the Chair, called the meeting to order at 11:05am and welcomed the members to the meeting of this Sub-Committee. Ms. Kain stated that the meeting was subject to the Open Meeting Law and that the Sub-Committee members present would need to vote to approve the remote participation of some members because of their geographic location, whenever any members were utilizing video and/or tele-conferencing. Remote access was approved unanimously. Minutes from last meeting in December were reviewed and one minor change to the minutes was addressed. The amended changes of the December meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Carolyn started the discussion with an update on her meeting that took place in December, with Russel Johnston from DESE. He has taken over the responsibilities of Marcia Mittnacht at DESE, she retired in December. Carolyn explained that her conversation with Russell revolved around the work being done on the sub-committees and the concerns around language access, quality of services, standards of training for paraprofessionals and ABA. Mr. Johnston said that these concerns on his radar and he sent Carolyn the specific language on translation services that DESE provides to local school districts. The issue is that the information is not getting down to the district level, and we need to identify ways for districts to be consistent and effective on their efforts. Carolyn said that the meeting went well and she believes it was a good start of conversations with DESE as this is a major transition at DESE give Marty was in her position for over thirty years. We, as a sub-committee, should identify what our priorities are with DESE. This is an on-going process and Carolyn said she will share any information that Mr. Johnston shares with her.

It was mentioned that Amy Weinstock seems to think there is a backlog of BCBA’s getting their licensure. Zack said that it can take 3-4 months to process the application and that could be the backlog that she is referencing. Currently, BCBA’s are grandfathered without the new requirement to take additional courses. The previous 6 course sequence is no longer sufficient and there are 3 additional courses that are required for anyone seeking to become a BCBA. It was asked if someone came from another state would their license transfer. Zack said he is not sure if it would transfer but he does think they would have to do the additional course work. Currently, most people are opting to take the additional courses to receive their masters’ degree. Carolyn asked how can we incentivize people to get this degree in this field given that it is not a competitive salary compared with other professions at the same level of education. BCBA and ABA therapist are more direct service providers than some teachers but the salary is not similar. Is it a teacher’s union issue? Zack responded that teachers in Boston salary can range from $76k-$106k – most start on the low end unless they have years of experience. He said that most Boston Public Schools BCBA’s, that are not program directors, get paid very similar to teachers. Tina commented that Boston’s salaries are on the high end for all positions. We should work with DESE on the job comparison and completive rate of pay. Zack said this is an equity piece – maybe have the license exist within DESE – similar to SLP, OT and other providers – they are paid in comparison to teachers. Sara from DESE is not present but Carolyn can bring this to her attention – we should move this issue along and look at the licensure of teachers with DESE and could BCBA/ABA licensure also exist within DESE. Carolyn commented that BCBAs are essentially taking on the job of a teacher but paying them a third of the salary – it’s an equity issue.

Workforce Development is looking at the BCBA and ABA workforce issues, as well as, the possibility of bundling of courses in college to create a career pathway. They are also discussing loan forgiveness – if we don’t figure out how to entice more into this field it could become a crisis beyond what it currently is. Tina commented that teachers in Massachusetts are paid more competitively now than compared to 20 years ago so the hope is that this field continues to get recognized and respected and the salary will reflect the work.

Zack commented that there are currently 1,786 BCBA board certified individuals in Massachusetts – this is noted on the BCBA website, and Massachusetts is in better shape than most other states.

Laurie commented that they have a similar struggle in the mental health field in terms of workforce. In 2009 CBHI had a high need for clinicians and 7 years later they still are having a difficult time with the workforce issue, it is not unusual.

Carolyn said that ACO’s could address some of these issues but they serve more adults than children. Laurie commented that they are getting mixed results on ACO’s.

Sue said that there is a waitlist for ABA services of one year with over 100 kids – the scheduling is a challenge. Carolyn asked about the age group and Sue responded that they are mostly school aged and teens but the age can go up to 40 years old. She said they hire college students who are looking to into psychology or other related fields to do the work.

The next steps for this sub-committee will be to discuss the licensure issue with DESE. The group asked Zack about training direct therapists and he responded that one mistake is focusing on the number of hours instead of the “competency” hours. We discussed RBT but its 40 hours plus competency criteria. Some ABA therapists can do good work with little supervision but others cannot.

Julie talked about competency and the need for onsite supervision. Are the teachers being trained? If you move to licensure consider the teacher and the job structure. There needs to be someone in the classroom to demonstrate and give feedback – if that is not happening in the program it won’t work. You need onsite daily supervision and it should be done by the teachers. Zack said it happens at variable levels but there are teachers who don’t get it. Carolyn said the level of competency is not to scale and we should move towards the Boston model of an ASD strand specialist with a teacher and para. It works because you can build capacity with the staff and with teachers supporting the staff. The strand specialist (BCBA) gives feedback to the teachers and the teachers train the paraprofessionals. This is a model that is scalable. Principals of schools do not have time to supervise the ABA but with a middle layer of an that is a BCBA, there will be a layer of someone in the building who can teach and manage the staff. You build it through regulation and expectation. Carolyn commented that it is a good model with BCBA overseeing the teacher and also overseeing the direct service provider. Zack said there are multiple layers of supervision, he will also do a walkthrough with a team and give feedback and a score.

Carolyn asked if there was any friction under CBA on responsibility – this is a new model and untraditional. Boston has a strong teachers union; is there any argument over who reports to whom. Zack responded that this is addressed by using the co-evaluation model and the principal is the primary evaluator. He is not aware of any push back. It has been a 6 year process; it is not perfect but has a lot of bright spots. It could be the model for the rest of the state and teachers are more effective when they see positive results of their work. Effective teaching is reinforcing.

Tina asked a follow up question from the Commission meeting in December on how we want the working groups (sub-committees) to function. What is our role and she asked if Carolyn got clarity for the bigger picture. Carolyn responded that our overall charge is to come up with long and short term recommendations. We meet again in March as a full Commission and we can expect that some sub-committees will have specific recommendations. It depends on the respective committees. We should look at what we want to prioritize prior to March 6th and this can be a struggle without all of our sub-committee members present. We should focus on putting input into recommendations for our next meeting and talk about certain areas – it should include DESE and Carolyn said she will loop in Sara and Russell Johnston. We should think about recommendations that are doable and reasonable.

Next meeting we will discuss the priorities for recommendations – it should include improving educational services for kids with autism –including both low and high functioning. Districts are not doing enough for kids who have higher functioning ASD – they need to do more around social skill, executive functioning etc. – we see the impact with the adults because of the lack of services in the early years. There are good laws and requirements for ASD individuals but it is not making it into the IEP meetings. Failure to address the needs in a timely fashion is going to create a steady stream of adults with high needs.

Laura said we need to look at the big picture for the state agencies. Some take direction from the Federal Government, including DESE and with an administrative change coming; it may impact the state agencies. Carolyn said the recommendations now have more to do with the current landscape that exists- we need to close the gaps to make sure we have a complete picture.

Laurie said that DMH is seeing more families that are also served by DDS – many times they are not meeting the criteria of DMH but they believe that DMH will provide them with services and are saying that DDS is not providing them with the services they need. Families are calling them to try and register with DMH but they do not qualify for services. They are looking for family support resources and they do not know where to get these resources – they are calling DMH and feeling very overwhelmed. Carolyn said that there needs to be written material for families that can walk them through their services. DDS just got a 5 million increase for family support. Laurie asked how we can get the message out about resources – the agencies live in silos. The families are having massive frustration when they are turned away from DMH and they are not able to connect with other services. All agencies should be able to share the resource information to help these families. Carolyn said that you can direct these families to the Autism Commission – our role is to coordinate services between the state agencies and we can guide them to the Autism Support Centers which is a good resource but if people do not know about the ASC it is not helpful. Tina said that families will look to apply all agencies to find services. It was mentioned that there is a working group between DDS and DMH - maybe they could work on information for families to clarify services. Laurie said that the working groups on focus on adults and not the child - the Omnibus Bill is only for 18 and over and not applicable to kids and they are getting a request with the application and the bill attached. What services are offered by DDS to families – we are hearing that services are limited and I would like to hear what DDS is offering to these families. Carolyn said she will share that information and the Commission is currently creating a brochure to educate what is available for families. A recommendation could be to put together a cohesive packet of information for families and also for the other agencies to share. There are only 7 Autism Support Centers and they are geographically based, they are doing good work but there are not enough people to help the many that need the support. Carolyn said that they are very resourceful but are not the answer to all of our issues the missing piece is the integration of information for the agencies and families. Julie commented that there are many children in crisis with co-morbid diagnosis, ED boarding is a big issue too and individuals with ASD are not getting the help they need and cannot get a placement. It is a crisis mode and we need a better system between agencies and school district. Carolyn agreed and she is on weekly calls dealing with the ED boarding situation. There needs to be an interdisciplinary approach for all kids. DESE is responsible for our school aged children and some of the ED boarding could be a manifestation of lack of appropriate services prior to hospitalization and DESE also needs to be at the table for these discussions. Laura wanted to make sure people know that the ED boarding is a huge focus of Secretary Sudders and this issue is being addressed. There is also data that is being collected in the emergency room.

Carolyn said that we need to work on developing more information for families and guidance on whom and when they should contact for services. She is also concerned about the lack of family support. This will be a brought to DESE’s attention.

Laura asked if the invite for the next meeting could go out on Outlook and Zack Houston asked to be added to the sub-committee list. The next meeting was scheduled for February 10th from 1:30-3:00 at 500 Harrison Avenue.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:55pm.