Autism Commission Housing Sub-Committee Meeting Minutes

September 22, 2016 11am-1pm

500 Harrison Ave, Boston, MA

Carolyn Kain, Executive Director of the Autism Commission called the meeting to order at 3:10pm and welcomed the members. 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. Carolyn Kain, Dianne Lescinskas, Julie Kelley, Dr. Beth Jerskey and Zachary Houston all voted to allow remote participation. Tina Fitanides, Sarah Geldart, and Sue McCarthy participated by phone.

Next the members voted to approve the minutes of the previous meeting. The minutes were approved unanimously.

Carolyn Kain said that it would be good to discuss the current services available for individuals with ASD ages 3-14 years old and then to discuss what if any barriers exist in accessing those services and also where language access issues exist. She mentioned the Children’s Behavioral Health Initiate, the Children’s autism waiver program, the special education services available through the public school districts, and ABA services available through private insurance under ARICA and MassHealth. She also mentioned that with regard to AAC devices Mass Health had been providing a stripped down version of the iPad that it believed met the federal reimbursement issue but that there was a new amendment to the state budget, if the iPad or tablet is less than the state’s portion of the cost it would be covered.

Julie Kelley stated that she wanted to file new legislation regarding the circuit breaker statute, if the full commission will approve, to include programs like NECC to bring them to public schools rather than send student out of district – it is cheaper to have students stay in their school and it will allow students to stay in their community – it allows for more inclusive opportunities. Also, it will benefit the teachers in the public school who could tap into the resources offered by NECC to help other kids with behavior issues. This is an issue because public schools cannot get reimbursed for these services under the current circuit break law. Julie said that Representative Kim Ferguson would be willing to file the legislation with support from the Commission.

Carolyn Kain said that while she did not know the exact language of the circuit breaker, she agreed that having more in district quality programs was a good idea, but she didn’t know if the circuit breaker could allow that to happen. She said there would need to be a review of the language and the specific requirements for programs because while NECC does have a number of partnership programs that she wasn’t aware of whether or not other providers offered similar in district programs for public schools because NECC could not serve all schools/districts. Carolyn asked Dr. Jerskey to explain what the May had available and she asked Zachary Houston to talk about what they had available in Boston. Dr. Jerskey said that the May Institute – offers a heavy consultation service to school district but not direct services. Zack Houston from BPS said their ABA programs were a work in progress. He said that had a partnership program in the past but currently they use the NECC ACE curriculum and they receive consultation services from NECC. Carolyn said that there were various models of the NECC program and that in some cases they provide the lead teacher or BCBA and the district provides the direct services providers and that she knew of programs years ago where NECC provided all of the staffing. Carolyn said that someone would need to review the circuit breaker law and what if any changes could be made to see if this could be an opportunity to have more expertise in school district in a more affordable manner, and parents of course would like to see their children receive robust programming closer to home and where there were opportunities for integration with their peers. Julie Kelley offered to look at the circuit breaker language before the next meeting, and said she would like to see brought before the full commission and this filed for the next legislative session.

With regard to AAC devices – Julie said that if provided by a school – schools were asking parents to sign a financial waiver – if device breaks at home families are responsible. Some families will not sign it in fear they will have to pay so the students do not have a device at home. Julie said that she had advocated for some families and help them to file a complaint about this requirement. Carolyn said that while it can be the school’s responsibility to provide the device if the Team agreed, she knows that the take home piece has always been a struggle. She said that she recommended that parents should try to go through insurance to avoid this or at least have it in the IEP that it is necessary to take home. Carolyn also said that it would be better if parents owned their child’s device because that avoided access issue with the school and the device would belong to the child if the family were to move and change school districts. Carolyn will ask Mass Health if they are aware of any barriers they have become aware of to address issues with trying to get a device and the insurance hurdles.

Tina from Mass. Advocates- DESE is working on the Autism Endorsement for teachers. Question – will the endorsement be opened up for General Education teachers? Sarah Geldart said that DESE completed a survey and it came out favorable about adding Gen. Ed., and it would need approval by the Board.

Carolyn asked how Sped. Teachers would feel if Gen. Ed. Teachers received the same endorsement. Sarah Geldart said that you do need field experience (150 hours). DESE – they may give out 2 different types of endorsements (one for sped teachers one for gen. ed. Teachers) Not determined yet.

Who pays for endorsement courses? – In some cases districts will use as PD in other cases teachers are responsible for paying. Carolyn asked if Districts could take this on as professional development.

Julie stated she is concerned about the endorsement – will they present themselves as an expert? She believes they need more time in the classroom. It was stated that there is a fieldwork component of 150 hours in an inclusive classroom setting. Julie said she wants to make sure it is effective.

Autism Waiver – stated that there are challenges with parents accessing services – long wait lists for services (about a year) There is a shortage in the State with BCBA’s for afterschool and weekends. The Employment Sub-Committee is reviewing this issue. The Workforce Development sub-committee is looking into colleges recruiting students to take courses. Carolyn asked “what type of incentives can they use to get students to take the courses?” Is tuition forgiveness a possibility? The May Institute partners with Endicott College – the students can receive a certificate from the May. Other institutions are also partnering with colleges.

Zachary Houston said that BPS funded the training of 38 teachers through Elms College (the instructors are from NECC). Currently, only 12 teachers are certified through this program – the delay can be with the supervision that is required. Some teachers get the certificate and then leave the district. BPS teachers, through the union, can get a bump in pay if certified.

Carolyn discussed the high demand for ABA services and therapist and the link with “bad” providers because of the high demand. Who is policing this issue? Zack from BPS mentioned the RBT process of 40 hours of training.

DESE – school districts do not have requirements that teachers need to meet to show they are properly trained in ABA. There needs to be a standard of training. A recommendation focus should be “What to do to ensure standards of training”. It needs to be a regulatory change. It was discussed that there is a range is quality for BCBA’s but the pay is less than a teacher – how are you supposed to attract good BCBA’s with low pay?

Paraprofessionals were discussed. DESE recognizes the need for PD for paras. A challenge is that they do not have PD days. How could DESE monitor paraprofessionals? Is there a system that delineates who can do what as a paraprofessional? Some have much better skills than others.

Tina from DESE thinks that some states have a licensing program for the paraprofessionals – question – What do other states do?

Carolyn mentioned that the statute says that it needs to be diagnosed by a doctor or a psychologist. Some diagnoses are getting rejected due to the person that is diagnosing autism. Carolyn met with folks from BMC and said that nurse practitioners, who are highly trained to diagnose using the ADOS, are experiencing insurance rejection of the diagnosis. Carolyn said it should not be the type of person but the experience the person has in diagnosing she asked if others agreed. Dr. Jerskey said that is the clinical experience that is key and not necessarily the license. Carolyn said that based on the input of professionals they may need to look at amending the statute to expand the field of those qualified to diagnose but experience standards needed to be developed.

Data – Julie said sees a rise in students being diagnosed with autism (high needs). Carolyn said in Boston she has seen the numbers stay steady and May Institute sees a slight rise. The best numbers of cases of autism right now come from DESE – DDS has the newly eligible numbers. There is a study being done at UMass Medical on data – will be ready to share soon. Julie talked about the rise in numbers and the housing crisis for those with autism.

Next Steps: Zack to get more information on RBT and what Boston did with Elms College – could other districts do the same?

Julie and Dianne will work on getting information regarding what other states do in regards to training paraprofessionals.

The next scheduled sub-committee meeting is to be held on October 13th at 11:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m. There being no further business, upon motion duly made, seconded and approved, Ms. Kain adjourned the meeting at 12:45pm.