

**Health & Human Services Committee**  
**November 30, 2021**  
**Minutes**

**Members Present:** Committee Chair John Peck, Legislators Allen Drake, James Nabywaniec, Jeremiah Maxon, Robert Ferris, Corey Grant, Anthony Doldo and Board Chair Scott Gray

**Others Present:** Legislators William Johnson, Philip Reed, Michael Montigelli, Daniel McBride, Patrick Jareo and Frances Calarco, County Administrator Robert Hagemann, Deputy Administrator Sarah Baldwin, County Attorney David Paulsen, Community Services Director Timothy Ruetten, Public Health Director Ginger Hall, DSS Deputy Commissioner Karen Marcum, Veterans Services Director David Pavey, Human Resources Director Valerie Nugent, Confidential Secretary Jill Jones

Chairman Peck called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m. and offered privilege of the floor.

Erica Porter, 19821 South Massey Street, Watertown, asked legislators to look into the removal of foster children from her and her husband Jamison's home and their home being decertified for foster care by the St. Lawrence County Department of Social Services and the Children's Home of Jefferson County. This was done based on an investigation and findings by the Jefferson County Department of Social Services Child Protective Services unit (JCDSS CPS). She said the JCDSS finding has been overturned following a review by the NYS Office of Children & Family Services. The children are currently in expensive institutional care and she would like the issues resolved and the children returned to their care for the Christmas holiday. She suggested that legislators should look into practices at the JCDSS and the CPS unit citing New York State statistics related to the response of the JCDSS CPS unit concerning abuse and neglect investigations, and the overall number of children in foster care for Jefferson compared to surrounding counties. She asked that legislators do whatever they could in the hope that the children can be returned to the Porters for the holidays.

John Phillips, 735 Mill Street, Watertown said he travels on his bike up to the Mall and back and said the intersection at Lowe's is very dangerous. He asked that legislators do what they could to look into having a dedicated crossing for pedestrians at that intersection as he has contacted DOT himself without being able to get anything done. He also said there were numerous traffic issues with the new roundabout out by Seaway Plaza on Route 11. After the first snowfall of the year it was not cleared in adequate time for everyone to get around it well.

Jamison Porter, 19821 South Massey Street, Watertown, also expressed concern about the removal of foster children from his and his wife Erica's home, and their home being decertified for foster care based on a report from the JCDSS CPS unit. Mr. Porter said his family is well known throughout the agricultural community, his and his wife's reputations as teachers in the Carthage School District were excellent and they were seen as a model foster home until they started advocating for the foster children to be provided with more services. They were

advocating for what was best for the children and at that point their reputations came into question, the attitude of the staff at the Children's Home of Jefferson County (CHJC) changed, there were multiple allegations of abuse and neglect made to the NYS hotline and the children were subsequently removed and their home closed for foster care. He asked legislators to look into the conduct of the CHJC and the JCDSS regarding their case and the actions that were taken, and do what they could to help get the children back in their home.

The Committee approved the minutes of the November 3<sup>rd</sup> Committee meeting as written.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Authorization Agreement for Provision of Senior Nutrition Program for Jefferson County Office for the Aging and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Nabywaniec seconded by Legislator Ferris and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Authorization Agreements for Provision of Services to Elderly of Jefferson County and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Maxon seconded by Legislator Ferris and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Authorizing Agreement for Provision of Related Services in Connection with the Program for Preschool Children with Disabilities and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Maxon seconded by Legislator Grant and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Amending the 2021 County Budget Relative to Mental Health Programs and Authorizing Amended Agreements in Relation Thereto and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Maxon seconded by Legislator Doldo and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Authorizing Agreement with Thousand Islands Emergency Rescue Service in Relation to COVID-19 and Other Communicable Disease Outbreaks and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Nabywaniec seconded by Legislator Ferris and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Accepting Additional Funding for Public Health Emergency Preparedness Program and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Doldo seconded by Legislator Grant and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Amending the 2021 County Budget in Relation to Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity Reopening Schools Grant Award and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Ferris seconded by Legislator

Doldo and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Amending the 2021 County Budget in Relation to COVID-19 Vaccine Response Grant Funding and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Nabywaniec seconded by Legislator Ferris and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Peck introduced a resolution Amending the 2021 County Budget in Relation to Epidemiology and Laboratory Capacity COVID-19 Local Health Department Funding and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Maxon seconded by Legislator Ferris and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Legislator Doldo said he has spoken to the Porters at length, and thanked them for being willing to care for foster children. He did not believe they were treated fairly and said the matter as well as the whole program needs to be looked into, but he didn't know if that responsibility lies with the County or with the State. Either way, he wanted to make sure that if something was done wrong, it doesn't happen again, and suggested that guidelines for the programs and services that are offered through the County need to be done.

Legislator Ferris spoke on behalf of the Porter family saying that he has known them for many years and they are a very good, loving family. He believed the Porters were absolutely wronged in this situation and that the CHJC needs to be investigated, and legislators should do whatever we can to help the Porters get the foster children back in their home.

Legislator Maxon found the allegations he heard tonight and previously from the Porters shocking and found the actions of the public service agencies reprehensible. The allegations concerning the employees of JCDSS CPS he felt were completely contrary to their mission and job. He wanted to hear from the DSS Commissioner regarding the allegations against her staff and asked what oversight the Health & Human Services Committee has over the particular agencies and what an investigation into those agencies would look like.

Chairman Peck said the DSS Commissioner was away at training this week and the Deputy DSS Commissioner is in attendance tonight. Administrator Hagemann said he was not prepared to address what the process is as he did not want to misstate it, and would have to report back to the Committee.

Legislator Nabywaniec thanked the Porters for coming in tonight to speak to legislators and was in favor of sitting down with stakeholders, DSS and the Children's Home to discuss this situation.

Chairman Peck thanked the Porters for attending the meeting and speaking to the Committee and said the County would do its fact finding and due diligence regarding the matter to see what could be done.

Chairman Peck reported that he attended a meeting in West Carthage with Administration, DSS Commissioner Gaffney and Community Services Director Tim Reutten to discuss the homelessness situation and how (because of fires as well as closure of buildings in Watertown) our choices are limited to house these people, and how necessary it is to keep housing people in West Carthage at the Pleasant Night Inn. The meeting was productive. Jefferson County is currently exploring options outside County boundaries to temporarily house homeless people as it is a serious problem.

Chairman Peck said the homelessness advocacy group that Community Services Director Reutten is point on continues to meet with its partners regarding the homelessness situation and there may be some recommendations coming forward next year. He said there are homeless people and people needing mental health services in every community, it is not limited to a specific area of the County and we should have compassion and help them get the services they need..

The Committee discussed the recent rise in Covid positive numbers and Chairman Peck and Administrator Hagemann advised that the November monthly index will be released by Public Health at the end of this week or early next week.

There being no further business of the Committee, on a motion by Legislator Doldo seconded by Legislator Ferris and unanimously carried, the meeting was adjourned at 6:35 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,



Robert F. Hagemann, III  
Clerk of the Board