

Health & Human Services Committee
June 28, 2022
Minutes

Members Present: Committee Chair Anthony Doldo, Legislators Philip Reed, Allen Drake, John Peck, Jeremiah Maxon, Frances Calarco, Corey Grant, and Board Chair William Johnson

Others Present: Legislators Michael Montigelli, Daniel McBride, James Nabywaniec, Patrick Jareo, Robert Ferris and Scott Gray, County Administrator Robert Hagemann, Deputy Administrator Sarah Baldwin, County Attorney David Paulsen, Community Services Director Tim Ruetten, Public Health Director Ginger Hall, DSS Commissioner Teresa Gaffney, Veterans Service Director Dave Pavey, JCC Administrator in Charge Dan Dupee, JCC Interim VP for Admin & Finance William Emm, Alliance for Better Communities Project Director Anita Seefried-Brown, Watertown Daily Times Reporter Alex Gault, Confidential Secretary Jill Jones

Anita Seefried-Brown presented the Committee with the 2022 Jefferson County Prevention Needs Assessment Summary Report (copy attached for file reference) with regard to substance use of local teenagers over time and how it relates to the national average in terms of percentage increase/decrease. This was done by conducting a survey of participants in grades 7 - 12 in ten different local schools. She noted of particular concern was how the legalization of marihuana affected the participants' perception of marihuana use being more acceptable in everyday life.

James Uhlinger, Town of Champion Councilman urged legislators to support the resolution on the agenda regarding changing the laws for housing related to sex offenders at the State level. He said passing the resolution would start the domino effect that is needed to help Assemblyman Blankenbush and Senator Ritchie to get legislation passed. He also asked that the County no longer place high needs clients at the Pleasant Night Inn in West Carthage.

Jamie Corradini, West Carthage resident felt like the Committee was passing the buck on trying to do something about the sex offenders placed at the Pleasant Night Inn and said he did not believe legislators would like sex offenders in their back yard either. He urged Committee members to do something to help the residents.

Justina Gerard, resident of the Village of West Carthage and mother to two children spoke on behalf of the citizens of West Carthage and expressed disappointment in the lack of movement by legislators to do something about sex offenders being housed at the Pleasant Night Inn, despite residents speaking out, protesting and signing petitions for months about it. She said residents will keep speaking out until something is done to rectify the situation. She also submitted signed petitions in that regard.

Gary Worknell, resident of Carthage said it seems like the Committee is passing the buck

as there are five action items on the agenda but the sixth only urges New York State to take action, it doesn't actually do anything. He realized this was a challenging situation and empathized with the people that need services but said housing sex offenders next to a park is not the answer.

Scott Burto, Mayor, Village of West Carthage termed the resolution on the agenda for a change to the sex offender laws as a feel good resolution that doesn't really do anything. He said in order to protect children there needs to be a change in the policy at the Department of Social Services in terms of not placing sex offenders at the Pleasant Night Inn, and he did not see that on the agenda. He said this is not just a homeless issue it is larger than that and there needs to be a long term solution. He noted the letter he submitted to the Prison Redevelopment Committee regarding the Watertown Correctional Facility being redeveloped for the homeless. He said short term housing for the homeless should not be in hotels suggesting the long term solution could be partnerships with others in the County for this service.

Erica Porter, Representative for Community Helping Individuals Living in Distress (CHILD) in Jefferson County, said the Bonadio Group that gave a presentation to the St. Lawrence County Board of Legislators regarding the Group's analysis of the operations at the St. Lawrence County Department of Social Services (DSS) did not do a thorough job. She hoped that Jefferson County would not waste resources and hire this same group to conduct an analysis on the DSS here. She contended that there are multiple failures with the effectiveness of services at Jefferson County DSS and she hoped an in depth analysis of the department will be done so those can be corrected. She advised that she does not receive payment for being a CHILD representative.

Chairman Doldo 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 Reed seconded by Legislator Maxon and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Doldo introduced a resolution Authorizing Amended Agreement with the New York State Department of Health Related to Indoor Radon Grants Program and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Peck seconded by Legislator Maxon and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Doldo introduced a resolution Amending the 2022 County Budget Relative to Public Health Department Rabies Account and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Grant seconded by Legislator Maxon and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Doldo introduced a resolution Amending the 2022 County Budget in Relation to Childhood Lead Poisoning Primary Prevention Program Grant and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Reed seconded by Legislator Maxon and

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

Chairman Doldo introduced a resolution Amending 2022 County Budget Relative to Additional Revenue from the NYS Office of Children and Family Services for Youth Sports and Education Opportunity Funding and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Maxon seconded by Legislator Calarco and there being no discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Chairman Doldo introduced a resolution Urging the New York State Legislature to Amend and Reform State Law in Regard to the Living Situations for Persons Designated as Sex Offenders and entertained a motion for consideration. A motion was duly made by Legislator Peck and seconded by Legislator Grant. Legislator Peck thanked the Committee for consideration of the resolution and said just like the local boards adopt resolutions and sent them to us, we are adopting a resolution and sending it on to the State for our representatives to consider. He said this issue is not just happening here, it is a problem all over the State. The NYS Court of Appeals threw out the ability of local jurisdictions to have influence of where these individuals can be housed and that is the direct link to why we have individuals being placed at the Pleasant Night Inn. He looked forward to discussions after the resolution was passed with regard to changes in internal policies as that is completely separate. He said this is just a piece of the puzzle in trying to deal with the issue as a whole and urged support for the resolution.

Legislator Maxon said his initial response was not to support the resolution because it does not accomplish what the West Carthage and Town of Champion officials have requested. He said the meaningful action this Board can take is to amend our policy, but that was not on the agenda. However, he agreed with Legislator Peck that just as the other local officials send resolutions to us, we are sending a resolution to the State urging them to make a meaningful change. He would support the resolution if the Committee could also make a meaningful change tonight to internal policy, or if the Committee can be updated on how policy has been changed.

County Attorney Paulsen said there is a bit of a fallacy about what the County can or can not do. The State has preempted the County from entering into any local law or resolution that supercedes what the State has done in the area of how people on the sexual offender registry are treated, and that has been upheld by the Court of Appeals in 2015. As a work around the Village Mayor has suggested that the Board adopt a policy saying that we as a locality will not place individuals who are on the sex offender registry, either at this particular hotel or at a hotel near a playground. However, the New York State Department of Social Services issues regulations that have the full effect of law and the local DSS Commissioner is obligated to follow those regulations; 18 NYSCR 352.36 reads "All Social Services Districts are required by statute, regulation and directive to arrange temporary housing for eligible homeless individuals including those who are sex offenders". It lists factors which the Commissioner can take into consideration in locating those individuals who are sex offenders but the bottom line is that they still have to be placed. When the pool of places to put these people is not big, we are stuck. He said there is no way this body can make a policy saying that you can't place a person within X distance of a playground, without violating this State Law.

Legislator Gray said he understood the legal ramifications and suggested that we disregard the term sex offender and focus on individuals who are high need, as defined by the amount and type of services that they receive. He said West Carthage is 14 miles away from any services and many individuals in these facilities have regular treatment that they undergo and have programs that they need to maintain in order to receive benefits. He thought it within our capabilities to have some sort of internal operational policy, that may not require a Board adopted policy, to triage these individuals. This would allow individuals of a higher need status, as determined by DSS, to be placed within proximity of their services; individuals or families that are requiring services only of DSS are better suited to West Carthage. Attorney Paulsen said that would be permitted, if there is available space somewhere else, but you could not tie the Commissioner's hands if there is not. Legislator Gray suggested it does not preclude individuals from being moved around in that scenario.

Legislator Maxon said if the County can make a policy to tell the employees at DSS to check the sex offender registry or do a back ground check on people before placing them, or classify people who require high needs or certain services in order to alleviate any undue burden on the Village of West Carthage, then we should do it. He said the law also states that all reasonable efforts should be made to avoid making an ill advised concentration of sex offenders in certain neighborhoods and localities. He called the question on the resolution.

Legislator Jareo said this resolution is not the only thing being done, he believed lot of what Legislator Gray and Legislator Maxon discussed has been accomplished with a memorandum that was sent out last week by the Administrator, and he understood the Mayor had a copy of that. He said Administration and legislators have listened and changed policy accordingly. Mr. Hagemann advised that the memo was in direct response to the concerns expressed on June 7th.

Following discussion, the Committee agreed to sponsor the resolution as presented.

Legislator Peck said the homeless population, for different reasons, has doubled from previous years, and the County is very limited with placements due to the closure of facilities where they used to be housed. As a community he said we need to do better in placing homeless individuals and working with partners to study the homeless issue. In his position on the Community Services Board he will be an advocate for the mental health issue and see how that Board can help to address homeless issues. He asked what has been done internally so far and what is being done in the future to address the issue, not just for the protection of individuals in the Village of West Carthage, but the County as a whole in placing individuals in appropriate locations.

Chairman Doldo said the County has lost over 90 units to put homeless individuals in because of the closure of facilities. At this point it is either place them in hotels, they stay out on the street, or they have to find their own place to live; he was aware of people staying in their cars, and living in "tent city" in the woods. He said the County/DSS is doing their best to place people in the limited resources, and there are issues with NYSDOCS releasing people from jail and not giving proper notification to Social Services so placements are made at the last minute.

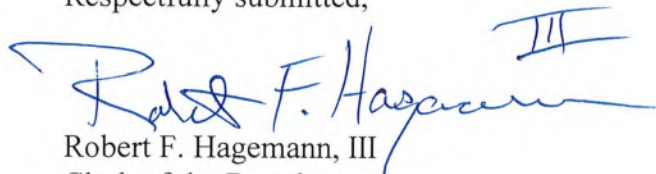
Administrator Hagemann said for the past four or five years the number of homeless has been in the range of eighteen to twenty two people per month; for May of 2022 the number is sixty six. He said the resolution passed earlier also references increasing the homeless shelter allowances for single individuals so they can move in to an apartment instead of staying in a hotel. Some homeless individuals may have a job but the cost of apartments exceeds the benefit they receive so they can't afford it. If the allowance is increased and those people moved into apartments, it would ease the demand for homeless housing. It is an ongoing dilemma that is being worked on within the shortage of space available. Also with the understanding that as of a June 14th directive sent to staff, proper evaluation be done in terms of services needed, and sex offenders not be placed at the Pleasant Night Inn or be moved as soon as possible, regardless of and before any letter was received from the owner of that facility. Chairman Doldo clarified that level two and three sex offenders are listed on the internet, but a level one is not and if they don't disclose that information, they may inadvertently be placed there.

Legislator McBride asked if initially it was the owner of the Pleasant Night Inn that reached out to the County to say they have capacity and could house people, or if the County reached out to the owner asking if they could take individuals. Mr. Hagemann said he would not be surprised if the County reached out to him, but he was not positive which way that went.

Legislator Maxon clarified that the County has already administratively changed the process for homing all homeless individuals by asking them what services they require and whether or not they are a level two or level three sex offender, and if the answer is yes, then as far as is humanly possible we will not put them in the Pleasant Night Inn. Mr. Hagemann confirmed that is the case.

There being no further business of the Committee, on a motion by Legislator Grant seconded by Legislator Maxon and unanimously carried, the meeting was adjourned at 7:25 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,


Robert F. Hagemann, III
Clerk of the Board