

Minutes
Human Services Committee
March 20, 2024, 5:00 p.m., Legislative Chambers
Livestreamed on YouTube
Gerace Office Building, Mayville, NY

Members Present: Proctor, Pavlock, Parker, Landy

Members Absent: Gustafson

Others: Lee, Chagnon, Swan, Thomas, Martin, Ihrig, Zafuto, Powell, Songer, Gollnitz, O'Connor

Complete video of meeting can be viewed on
YouTube

Chairman Proctor called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

Approval of Minutes (02/21/24)

MOVED by Legislator Parker, SECONDED by Legislator Pavlock.

Unanimously Carried

Privilege of the Floor

Good Evening my name is Karen Gollnitz. I currently work for Child Protective Services out of the Jamestown office and I have been with the unit since September of 2022. Although I am relatively new to the unit, the span of my adult life has been spent working to improve outcomes for individuals within Chautauqua County. I have 25 years of experience as an EMS provider in both the volunteer and professional capacity, 6 years' experience working as a pharmaceutical community liaison with the geriatric population and 5 years' experience working with children in special education. Further, I'm a mother of 2 wonderful sons, my son Marcus, age 23, who is a soldier in the United States Army and my son Jackson, age 16, who is a sophomore and is excelling in both scholastics and music. I want to share a small synopsis of my life with you because I believe that it is pertinent to your understanding as to why I am speaking to you tonight. In October of 2010, my life took an unexpected and devastating turn and I found myself a single mother trying to keep her head above water. I lived paycheck to paycheck, many times falling behind on my mortgage and having my electricity shut off. I didn't have health insurance and countless times went without a meal to ensure that there was enough food for my children to eat. Overnight and due to circumstances beyond any control, my children and I became that family that needed resources. We made \$78 too much, each month to qualify for any sort of assistance in our County, and we flew just under the radar of CPS. We were victims of trauma trying to survive and were desperately in need of the resources that we didn't know that were available to us. I believe my family's personal experience helped in my ability to connect with the families on my case load as a CPS working because I can genuinely relate to the hardships that many families in our County are facing. Health and Human Services face an uphill battle when servicing these families. Not only is there a systemic problem such as homelessness, poverty and drugs, but there is also overly long wait lists for services due to a number of reason including a lack of experienced workers or the general lack of workers within these service organizations, CPS

included. CPS faces chronic and ongoing staffing shortages. There is currently 30 CPS case worker positions in Chautauqua County with 6 vacant positions, which equates to 20% of the CPS workforce. There are 2 teams based out of the Jamestown office with 8 caseworker positions on team 1, and 10 caseworker positions on team 2. Team 1 is at 87% capacity with 7 trained caseworkers and 1 vacancy. Team 2 has a 60% capacity, with 6 caseworker positions and 4 vacancies. However, of those 6 filled positions, 1 case worker is on medical leave, and one caseworker is currently in training and is not receiving a case load, leaving team 2 with a 40% workforce. The teams that work out of the Mayville office is at 100% capacity with 6 caseworkers, and the team in the Dunkirk office has 6 caseworkers positions and is at 83% capacity. 5 of those positions are currently filled and there is 1 vacancy. On top of the staffing shortages, the Jamestown office is presented with a unique challenge of having 62% of the staff having under 2 years of field experience, while the Mayville and Dunkirk offices each have 16% of their trained staff with under 2 years field experience. Due to the ongoing staffing issues coupled with the limited number of caseworkers with experience over 2 years, caseworkers from the Jamestown office expressed to their supervisory staff and to the Units Administrative team, that there is a need for a 40 hour work week to ensure that the families we are working with, are receiving the time and attention they need as well as they deserve. On March 18, caseworkers received an email stating that starting on Thursday, the 21st, we would only be able to work a 35 hour work week, unless there was an emergency. The email did not contain any explanation for the sudden shift and when the Jamestown based CPS employees requested a follow up meeting with Commissioner Hernandez, he declined to meet on this matter. In my opinion, this is an irresponsible decision. Often times, caseworkers are seeing firsthand how poverty and drug use in the homes, effect a child or children. Some caseworkers are seeing child fatalities, while others are listening to a child as they recall the sexual abuse that they've endured. There are cases which a child or children need to be emergently removed from their homes which now leads to regulatory timelines with specific portions of that work that needs to be completed in that specific time. The Administrations recent decision for a 35 hour work week does 3 things. First, it restricts the caseworker's ability to access and assist the families on our caseloads that could result in needs not being met. Second, it undercuts the trust some of the caseworkers in the Administration and whether our work is truly being supported. Lastly, it tramples on the morale of caseworkers from an office that is already struggling. Thank you for your time.

Legislator Proctor: Thank you. Is there anyone else for the privilege of the floor?

Hello, good evening, my name is Melissa O'Connor and I'm a CPS supervisor based out of the Jamestown office. I'm here following up on what Karen has said as well. I've been at CPS for my whole career with the County and I am approaching 22 years in CPS. I am coming to you on behalf of the Jamestown CPS staff as well as the children and families that my workers serve in this county. I believe that some of you may have heard of the concerns of the Jamestown CPS staff has brought before the full legislature these last couple of months. We have addressed our concerns with the administration for well over a year now. I personally have met or been in meetings with the commissioner in April of 2023, October of 2023, November of 2023, December of 2023 and twice in February of 2024. I have also met at least biweekly with my direct supervisor for well over a year to address these specific concerns as well. For approximately the last 3 years, and for the majority of my last 22 years here, CPS staff, specifically south county CPS staff have worked up to 40 hours each week due to factors of staff shortages, inexperienced levels, extensive state training requirements, report intake levels and the level of difficulty associated with reports and the more urban setting such as gang affiliations, guns, violence, drugs, mental health and general poverty. We currently have 6 vacancies out of a total of our CPS staff of 30 workers with 5 of those vacancies in the south county. And this vacancy has been an ongoing problem for years. We are unable to recruit new workers nor retain the staff we had due to a variety of factors including but not limited to,

having a 40 hour work week, which most people consider full time and we don't have it, not enough pay associated with the kind of field work and stress levels this job entails and I believe the moral associated with administration not prioritizing CPS in general. The case workers civil service test was offered this past Saturday and exactly 5 people showed up to take the exam. In comparison, back when I took the exam, there was almost 100 people in the room because the county was considered a great place to work. Both my direct supervisor, as well as the commissioner have directly said to me in meetings and with staff that the former administration may have placed misconceptions in the minds of the legislature about CPS and Commissioner Hernandez is the one who directly encouraged supervisors and staff to attend these legislative meetings and speak out on behalf of ourselves. It seems that since (*inaudible*) have followed the advice of the commissioner, they are now being punished which also serves to punish the children and families that we are working with in the community. A directive was given to the staff on Monday that a 35 work week is what is now required and to just do the best that you can. This job is not able to be properly done in that amount of time which when this factor was brought to administration, they agreed with us that it was true. Commissioner Hernandez has quoted in the recent newspaper article saying "I'll be honest with you, I don't think 35 hours is enough". The newspaper then reported that he said that the 35 hours are contractual, but he's able to renegotiate them and he is trying to find the money in the department or from the state to cover the difference. That is actually true, per the contract as the contract states that a department head may increase the work week of their department from 35 hours to 37.5 or 40 with the approval of the County Executive. Additionally, 62% of the salary of a CPS titled employee is paid for by New York State as this is a mandated position so whether the staff is at 35 or 40 hours, the State percentage remains the same. The Commissioner was also stated in the recent newspaper article saying that he recently had 3 applicants decline a position with CPS because it was only 35 hours a week and not 40. I've had more than that. When I personally met with the Commissioner on February 15th, we talked a 40 hour work week and he stated that he could definitely make that happen and then he met with the CPS staff in the south county about a week later and told them he could almost guarantee that he could make that happen and now this response from administration after the recent newspaper articles is essentially to cut their hours and do the exact opposite of what was told. I cannot wrap my mind around this decision nor have we received any true rationale behind it. I am sure you can imagine how the staff feel about this, undervalued, unappreciated and unheard. In addressing the difference between the north and south county during a recent conference with the Commissioner and myself, and another supervisor, he agreed that Jamestown area is more like the Bronx, referring to where he use to work in New York City and the Dunkirk area was more like the suburban areas. He agreed that the Jamestown area cases have a higher level of difficulty and complexity due to the criminal activities, mental health factors and poverty associated with a more urban environment and therefore, these take more time and logistics to fulfill casework needs such as connecting with children who attend multiple different schools even though they all live in the same house. The biggest concern for me personally after 22 years of doing this job is this impact the strictly 35 hours work week will have on the most vulnerable families and children that CPS has mandated to try to help. It seems that this current administration does not share the same concern, despite all of these multiple meetings over the past year, the information and data that has been shared over a very long period of time. The 40 hour work week option for CPS would only need to be approved by the commissioner and the County Executive and to be clear, any current CPS staff who feels that they do not need the 40 hour work week, it would be optional for them, per our contract. Thank you for listening and we hope that we can count on your support moving forward.

Proposed Resolution – Amend 2023 Budget for Year End Reconciliations – Department of Mental Hygiene and Social Services – *Presented by Dianna Songer, Deputy Director of Finance for Human Services and Sam Zafuto, Fiscal Supervisor for the Department of Finance assigned to Social Services and Public Health*

Unanimously Carried

Proposed Resolution – Authorize Lease Agreement Renewal with Warwick Plaza, LLC for Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene - Mobile Crisis Team Office Space – *Presented by Kristy Martin, Assistant County Attorney*

Unanimously Carried

Other –

Discussion – Lead Project Update – *Presented by Lacey Wilson, Public Health Director and Ana Powell, Childhood Lead Poisoning Program Coordinator/Manages HUD*

MOVED by Legislator Parker, SECONDED by Legislator Pavlock to adjourn

Unanimously Carried (6:00 p.m.)

Respectfully submitted and transcribed,
Olivia Lee, Clerk of the Legislature/Kristi R. Zink, Deputy Clerk