

Shenandoah Valley Social Services

Joint Meeting of the Staunton Board of Social Services, the Waynesboro Board of Social Services, and the Augusta County Board of Social Services

May 26, 2020

The Staunton Board of Social Services, the Waynesboro Board of Social Services, and the Augusta County Board of Social Services met jointly on Tuesday, May 26, 2020 at 8:45 a.m. via video conference (Zoom).

The Following individuals were present:

Mrs. Jennifer Whetzel, Augusta County Board of Social Services
Mr. Mike Hamp, Waynesboro Board of Social Services
Mrs. Leslie Beauregard, Staunton Board of Social Services
Mrs. Anita Harris, Director
Ms. Lisa Dunn, Assistant Director
Mrs. Susan Hughes, Administrative Office Manager
Ms. Jessica Marino, Human Resources Specialist

Mr. Hamp called the meeting of the Waynesboro Board of Social Services to order at 8:45 a.m.; Mrs. Beauregard called the meeting of the Staunton Board of Social Services to order at 8:45 a.m.; and Mrs. Whetzel called the meeting of the Augusta County Board of Social Services to order at 8:45 a.m. Mr. Hamp presided over the joint meeting of the Boards.

Approval of Minutes from the previous meeting- Mrs. Whetzel made a motion to approve the minutes from April 21, 2020. Mrs. Beauregard seconded the motion. The motion was passed unanimously by the Boards.

Public Comment- no public comment was presented.

NEW BUSINESS

Director's report- Mrs. Harris stated that the department is in phase 1 of the Agency's Pandemic Recovery Plan. Benefits staff are continuing a telework rotation, and Services staff will begin a telework rotation next week. Offices will be closed until phase 2, which is currently expected to begin June 8. The Department continues to follow the guidance of the Virginia Department of Social Services (VDSS). This plan may change in coordination with the

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Governor's order and the number of positive COVID-19 cases in Virginia. During phase 2, offices will open from 9:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m. to allow client access. Altered business hours will limit the number of clients in the lobbies and allow for continued cleaning procedures to ensure the safety of staff and public alike. Once the Governor announces Phase 3, all staff will return to working in the offices Monday through Friday and offices will open to the public 8:00 a.m. – 5:00 p.m.

Mrs. Harris reported that there have been numerous changes in program delivery since March, and staff have adapted well to a “new normal” at the workplace. A Wellness Guidance has been developed in conjunction with guidelines provided by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) to inform and remind staff of proper hygiene and cleaning procedures. Mrs. Harris added that the Department is planning to add this information to new employee orientation.

Mrs. Harris shared that application boxes and drop boxes have been utilized by clients outside the buildings to drop off pertinent documents and pick up applications. This is being done in an attempt to reduce the number of visitors inside the buildings, as previously the Verona and Waynesboro offices had a combined total of approximately 3,000 people entering every month. Mrs. Harris mentioned that the current number of visitors is minimal, and they are coming to pick up Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards. Mrs. Harris noted that these distancing practices are best for both staff and community members to ensure continued health and safety for all. Mrs. Harris added that these changes present a learning curve, which provides the opportunity to strengthen the agency overall.

Mrs. Harris announced that she volunteered to be the Virginia League of Social Services Executives (VLSSE) representative for Planning District Six, which includes Staunton, Waynesboro, Harrisonburg, Lexington, and Buena Vista, as well as Augusta, Bath, Highland, Rockingham, and Rockbridge Counties. Mrs. Harris will be responsible for scheduling and facilitating meetings periodically (at least quarterly) and reporting to League board meetings.

Mrs. Harris reported that the Department has a new agency-wide email address (Svss.connect@dss.virginia.gov), which will provide a more streamlined method for clients to make contact with the Agency. There will be a rotation of clerical staff responsible for following procedures to review and forward messages to workers on a daily basis. The email address will be posted on the website and Facebook pages.

Mrs. Harris reported that VDSS spearheaded the launch of a brand new COVID-19 Virginia resources website and app, COVID VA (currently available via Apple, with Google Play forthcoming). It is designed as a “one-stop” resource for individuals, families, and businesses to access benefits, services, and critical information. The website and app aim to connect clients

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with an essential need, such as healthcare, housing, unemployment insurance, and more, with an immediate and actionable resource.

Mrs. Harris reported that the Department continues to update a community agency listing on changes related to COVID-19 and sharing this resource with community members on a weekly basis. Mrs. Whetzel thanked Mrs. Harris for providing updates on available childcare facilities and other community resources. Mrs. Beauregard added that the document is a great resource. Mrs. Harris stated that the Department is sharing as much information as possible to assist clients.

Mrs. Harris stated that the Department continues to track COVID-related expenditures such as gloves, cleaning supplies, wipes, disinfectant, etc. The Department also purchased individual seats to replace bench seating in waiting rooms in an effort to ensure social distancing. Units continue to coordinate and complete cleaning of common spaces several times per day.

Mrs. Harris stated the Department remains very busy, despite changes in operations over the last few months. Units are still conducting weekly meetings and conferences (via Zoom, telephone, etc.), and the Foster Care unit has sustained continuous recruitment activities for families. The Website and Facebook pages have been regularly utilized in efforts to recruit foster parents.

Mrs. Harris stated that the Department has submitted an invitation for bid for a new cleaning service for the Verona office, which was advertised May 5. Pre-bid conferences took place and nine vendors toured the building. After narrowing the list down to three vendors, the Department selected one to start the second week in June.

Mrs. Harris reported that the Adult Protective Services unit organized a display in front of the Augusta County Sheriff's Office to raise awareness for Elder Abuse Prevention Month.

Mr. Hamp questioned whether there are known populations in the region that require assistance, but fail to fit neatly into existing programs. Mr. Hamp added that the Community Foundation of the Central Blue Ridge is eager to lend some assistance, and acknowledged the fact that the Staunton, Waynesboro, and Augusta County area doesn't have a huge public health crisis like some larger areas are experiencing. Mr. Hamp added that Waynesboro City has purchased personal protective equipment (PPE) and has made additional mitigation efforts. Mr. Hamp asked if there seem to be individuals or families who don't qualify for benefits or services, or who aren't aware of other community resources. Mrs. Harris stated that the Department has not received complaints from anyone seeking assistance, which she stated would indicate that community members are acquiring assistance when needed. Mrs. Harris

added that the Department has been working to share information and resources in various ways. Mrs. Harris stated that the local food pantry is reporting a decrease in numbers served, perhaps due to additional assistance offered through SNAP, summer meals for children, additional EBT assistance, etc. Mrs. Harris shared that workers have received calls requesting cooling assistance, and that cooling assistance will be offered beginning June 15.

Ms. Dunn shared that some foster parents have been laid off or have other financial challenges, and the Department is attempting to assess their needs.

Benefit Programs

Mrs. Harris stated that emergency allotments for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) households were issued in March, April, and May. This increased the household's current monthly allotment to the maximum allotment, based on household size. Current SNAP households who already receive the maximum are not eligible for emergency benefits. All emergency benefits were delivered on Electronic Benefits Transfer (EBT) cards.

Mrs. Harris informed the Boards that Congress awarded the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) additional federal funding due to COVID-19. At this time, the amount and date of dispersal is unknown in Virginia. Some possibilities for the use of extra funding include expanding the cooling component or distributing a supplemental payment to households that received Fuel or Crisis assistance this year.

Mrs. Harris stated that households with children should consider applying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and may be eligible for Diversionary Assistance to help with their expenses. Presently, the TANF Emergency Assistance maximum benefit is \$550, but will increase to \$1,500 on July 1.

Mrs. Harris reported that Pandemic Electronic Benefits Transfer (P-EBT) will provide additional assistance for children who attend schools that offer free and reduced lunches, amounting to approximately \$376 per minor child. Current SNAP recipients will receive the additional benefit on their monthly EBT card. Those who are not already receiving SNAP benefits will have a P-EBT card mailed to their homes. Households are still encouraged to participate in other food assistance programs such as those provided by the schools and summer meal programs.

Mrs. Harris explained that current Medicaid cases cannot be closed or have coverage reduced. Ongoing SNAP cases cannot close unless an eligible change is reported, such as moving to another locality or requesting that the case be closed. Ongoing renewals of benefit programs have been pushed back to the fall. Interview waivers for SNAP and TANF are currently being

discussed. Mrs. Harris added that benefit renewals in the fall will increase the workload for employees in the fall and winter months, and the Department is developing a plan to manage a change in workload.

Mrs. Harris reported that Walmart and Kroger provide SNAP/ EBT curbside pick-up, enabling clients to order online and pick-up outside the stores. Presently, Food Lion and Martin's do not offer this service. The purchase of online SNAP and hot meal purchases are still pending approval from the state.

Mrs. Harris shared that Project Grows and Farmer's Markets accept SNAP and can offer additional benefits. These entities should be able to double SNAP benefits up to \$25. For example, a family may spend \$25 and receive \$50 worth of produce.

Mrs. Harris reported that Benefits and services workloads will likely increase in the fall. Although staff are aware that there will be no salary increases this year, evaluations will be completed as planned in July, before workloads increases. It is expected that employees will be busy with increased referrals, travel, and managing ongoing cases in the coming months. Mrs. Harris stated that Mrs. Faith Duncan, HR Director for Augusta County, approved evaluations taking place in July. Mrs. Harris asked for input from the Boards. Mrs. Whetzel stated that moving forward with the schedule that works for SVSS makes sense. Mrs. Beauregard and Mr. Hamp agreed. Mrs. Harris added that completing the evaluation process in the summer will alleviate some of the anticipated increased workload for the fall and winter months.

Services

Ms. Dunn stated that the Department continues to receive a large number of Adult Protective Services (APS) reports, many of which involve neglect and concerns related to food insecurity. Therefore, APS workers haven't experienced reduced caseloads due to COVID-19. Ms. Dunn added that workers are required to wear masks when out in the field, and the Department has a supply of masks. Ms. Dunn stated that Child Protective Services (CPS) workers have received fewer reports, although there was an increase in May. The decreased number of reports and the significant nature of cases have been alarming. Workers are often required to be on-site, but continue to maintain social distance. Ms. Dunn reported that recently the first child came into foster care within the last couple of months. The Department anticipates an increase in referrals in the fall, which will coincide with children returning to school.

Ms. Dunn stated that the state has continued the use of Doxy.me software for virtual visits, and is proposing to continue virtual visits for another six months to reduce state-wide travel. Workers will travel when an emergency arises or when it is necessary to move a child. Ms.

Dunn added that workers access Doxy.me with iPads. However, the software program presents bandwidth issues that are beyond the state's control. Ms. Dunn noted that Family Assessment and Planning Teams (FAPT) and Family Partnership Meetings (FPM) continue to be conducted, often utilizing Zoom.

Budget

Mrs. Harris shared that the Department received additional preliminary budget allocation information from the state on May 6, advising that funding for all new spending initiatives was un-allotted. This includes salary increases, pay band adjustments, and new funding for Prevention Services and Family Services positions. Accordingly, revisions were made to the proposed SVSS budget for Fiscal Year 2021, to include omitting increases, new positions, reclassifications, and vehicle purchases.

Mrs. Hughes stated that year-to-date through month 11, the Department is .37% over budget for initial allocations for Fiscal Year 2020. The Department is in the process of finalizing the fiscal year, including completing the final check run.

Mrs. Hughes reported that the Department was able to utilize about \$106,000 from the Virginia Initiative for Education and Work (VIEW) program for the administrative budget, which enabled the Department to take advantage of a higher reimbursement rate (85.5%). This transfer of funds saved the localities about \$53,000 in local match dollars. Mrs. Hughes added that the Department plans to access additional pass through funding, with an anticipated \$30,000 remaining. Mrs. Hughes added that more adjustments will be made to the budget in the coming weeks, and the Department remains under budget based on the County fiscal year.

Mrs. Hughes stated that for Fiscal Year 2021, the updated budget results in a reduction of \$309,000 to the administrative budget. Additional money for the janitorial service was added into the budget because the service will be contracted rather than hiring an individual. Augusta County can expect an increase of \$1,700; Staunton City and Waynesboro City can expect reductions of \$150 and \$25,000, respectively.

Mrs. Harris stated that the Department has received ten unemployment claims since April, amounting to a potential payout of \$60,000 in eligible claims. The updated budget has been revised with additional funding to cover this expenditure.

Mrs. Whetzel inquired as to whether the unemployment claims were a direct result of COVID-19, and stated that some County employees have consequently lost their jobs. Mrs. Harris

stated the unemployment claims are a result of COVID-19, and the Department does not have the ability to question or appeal a claim. Mrs. Hughes reported that some claims were from prior employees who lost their subsequent jobs, and the Department is sharing some of the cost because the claim occurred within a year of departure. Mrs. Hughes mentioned that one claim involves a full-time employee whose secondary employment with another organization was reduced. Mrs. Whetzel stated that these expenses may qualify under the CARES Act. Mrs. Hughes inquired about employee paid leave under Policy 7 and whether or not it was reimbursable. Mrs. Whetzel stated that Policy 7 leave could be reimbursable, and the Department should be tracking those hours.

Mrs. Hughes shared that the Department has spent approximately \$3,600 in expenses related to COVID-19. Mrs. Hughes explained that the Department is billed quarterly from the state (Laser), meaning expenses related to unemployment claims can be expected later in the year. Mrs. Beauregard asked when the Boards will see expenditure details. Mrs. Hughes reported that \$7,700 has been paid under Policy 7, and about \$3,600 for COVID-19 expenditures.

Mrs. Harris stated that the Department is keeping record of all expenditures related to COVID-19 and will be submitting for reimbursement from the state via the monthly Laser process. Mrs. Harris added that while FEMA is providing reimbursement, the Department cannot receive a second reimbursement for those expenses after already receiving a reimbursement from the state. Mrs. Harris explained that this poses a question regarding local matches from localities and that each locality may want to further investigate the possibility of reimbursement. Mrs. Hughes added that all COVID-19 expenditures are being paid via pass through funding, which has a higher local match (66%). However, the localities may have the opportunity to be reimbursed for those purchases.

Mrs. Hughes stated that the Social Security Administration conducted an audit with only one finding, which was akin to report timeliness. Mrs. Hughes added that the Department must file annually for each child who receives Social Security benefits, and three reports had not been received. Previously, no tracking mechanism existed to ensure proper filing procedures were followed. The Department has developed a tracking mechanism to alleviate this issue and Accounting personnel are following up with workers to ensure necessary information is obtained.

Mrs. Hughes inquired about the need for formal approval of the budget from the Boards. Mr. Hamp stated that funding was already appropriated, and unless the state requires formal approval, there is no need. Mrs. Harris added that the Department must submit a comp plan

with signatures from the Board Chair and Mrs. Faith Duncan, which can be brought before the Boards in June.

Vacancy Report

Mrs. Harris stated that the Department currently has four vacant positions, resulting from one demotion, one retirement, a promotion, and a departure. Mrs. Harris reported that recruitment is frozen because of COVID-19 and asked if the Department could proceed with advertisement. Mrs. Harris explained the importance of filling positions for the fall to assist with anticipated caseload increases. Mr. Hamp stated that the Boards adopted a budget that allows for particular vacancies and does not object with recruitment. Mr. Hamp added that the Department should be prepared to make changes, if necessary and advised Mrs. Harris to proceed with caution. Mrs. Harris reported that the vacant positions are all included in the current budget, with the first available start date being July 16. Mrs. Whetzel and Mrs. Bearegard agreed with moving forward with recruitment.

Next Scheduled Meeting

Mrs. Harris stated that the next meeting will be on June 23, 2020. Mr. Hamp stated that the meeting could be held in person.

There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 9:55 a.m.

Mrs. Jennifer Whetzel, Augusta Board

Mr. Mike Hamp, Waynesboro Board

Mrs. Leslie Beauregard, Staunton Board