

EDUCATION & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MINUTES

A meeting of the Education & Human Services Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on February 2, 2016.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Monica Martinez, Chairperson
Leg. Thomas F. Barraga, Vice Chair
Leg. Robert Calarco, DPO
Leg. Kara Hahn
Leg. Leslie Kennedy
Leg. Kate Browning

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George M. Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel/Legislature
Jason Richberg, Clerk of the Legislature
Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
Jill Moss, Budget Review Office
John O'Neill, Commissioner/Department of Social Services
Ben Zwirn, Suffolk Community College
Kevin Peterman, Suffolk Community College
Katie Horst, County Executive's Office
Lisa Pinkard, Aide to Leg. Martinez
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Karen Klafter, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Alyssa Turano, Aide to Leg. Hahn
Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
Michael Pitcher, Director of Communications/PO
Rick Brand, Newsday
Dr. Richard Koubek, Chair/Welfare to Work Commission
Kathy Liguori, Vice Chair/Welfare to Work Commission
Denise Dowell, CSEA
Kathleen Roche, Rainbow Chimes Early Childhood Center
Diane Eppolitto, Long Island Head Start
Angela Zimmerman, Family Support Long Island
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Denise Weaver, Legislative Aide

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 1:07 PM

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Education and Human Services Committee. I'd like to welcome everyone here. Happy New Year. It's going to be a great year. I have to my left our Vice Chair, Tom Barraga, who I have the honor of serving this Committee with this year. So if we can all rise for the Pledge of Allegiance to be led by our Vice Chair.

SALUTATION

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. Continuing with today's agenda, we do not have any correspondence. We do not have a presentation as well, but we do have a few cards and I would like to call the first speaker. Just keep in mind that you have three minutes. The first speaker is Dr. Richard Koubek.

PUBLIC PORTION

DR. KUBEK:

Good afternoon. My name is Richard Koubek. I'm Chair of the Welfare to Work Commission of the Suffolk County Legislature. And in June of 2014 our Commission released a report titled "*Who's Minding the Kids?*" which is probably the most comprehensive report on Suffolk County childcare that's ever been written. And I believe you received yet another copy of it today.

We are, again, providing you with this copy because we want you to see the profiles in there. This is an \$804 million Long Island industry employing over 9,000 workers, serving more than 111,000 parents who earn about \$10.6 billion a year just here in Nassau and Suffolk County.

Our report described Suffolk parents burdened by the high cost of childcare who, with two children using licensed childcare, typically pay \$27,000 a year for these services. That's accounting for 16% of the average income, which is far above the recommended 10% that the State said should go for childcare. It's about what it would cost, by the way, to go to a State university for a year. The result is that many Suffolk parents are forced to place their children in lower-cost, lower-quality programs, sometimes in illegal programs that are dangerous.

Our report also documented the critical educational benefits that quality childcare provides children ages five -- birth through five whose parents are working. And the report documents a childcare industry that is laced with competing programs, which operate out of separate funding silos, thereby preventing a coordinated system. And by the way, the benefits are outlined in the second whereas of the resolution I'm speaking about today.

A key recommendation in our report was for the Legislature to create a Suffolk County Childcare Commission. And that is what is proposed in IR 1023, about which I am speaking. The Welfare to Work Commission's purview is to assess childcare opportunities for low-income families, those earning up to about 200% of the federal poverty level and they only constitute 15 to 20% of the families in childcare in Suffolk County.

We, as a Commission, will continue to prioritize the needs, childcare needs, of low-income families but this resolution talks about a childcare industry that serves all of the children, pre-kindergarten children in Suffolk County. And this is why we are supporting the creation of this Commission that would evaluate and make recommendations to coordinate, connect and improve the childcare system in Suffolk County.

So the report was conceived and implemented by a very creative group -- a committee of folks who are in the field and many of them will have seats on the Commission. And just bringing them to the

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

table, I think, will be a tremendous step forward in getting us out of those silos.

So I'll conclude with a statement by Jennifer Rojas from the Rauch Foundation when she testified at our public hearings and this is what she said: On Long Island one of the biggest obstacles to making systemic change to the childcare system is the total lack of a system. So creating this Commission, we feel, will begin a process, it has a one-year lifespan, you can evaluate it after a year, but it will begin a process to bring to the table a coordinated effort to get out of those silos and to really begin to have a coordinated system here on Long Island.

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. Our next speaker is Kathy Liguori.

MS. LIGUORI:

Hello, my name is Kathy Liguori and I'm the Vice Chair of the Suffolk County Welfare to Work Commission and the owner of Habitat's Preschool and Childcare Centers in Middle Island and Medford.

For the past 15 years I've been one of your leading advocates for childcare and early learning. I remember when first asking about putting together a childcare commission, it was about ten years ago when working with Legislator Viloría-Fisher. So when I say thank you for bringing this resolution to the table and for a vote today, I sincerely mean it.

In the past 12 years, three professional childcare industry reports were published for Suffolk County. And IR 1023, to establish a Suffolk County childcare commission is one of, if not, the first recommendation that our governmental leaders have acted upon. I am grateful and my support is genuine for that.

To state some facts: Childcare spending has that multiplier effect. Each State and Federal dollar generates \$1.92 back into the local economy. And the 2014 Childcare Industry report stated that for every dollar Long Island invested brought back \$42 in State and Federal funds to Long Island compared to \$10 just ten years ago. That's pretty remarkable. As Dick Koubek stated, working Long Island parents who rely on childcare collectively earn \$10 billion annually. Yet childcare remains a patchwork of silos: Working independently, whether it is a governmental agency, a childcare agency or a modality of childcare providers. I provided you with a handout prepared by the Rauch Foundation that will give you a picture of what it's like.

At the Welfare to Work Commission hearings, as Dick Koubek had also said, Jennifer Rojas from the Rauch Foundation said that *on Long Island one of the biggest obstacles to making a systemic change to expand and improve the childcare system is a total lack of a system.* There are many local, State and Federal agencies involved with providing early childhood programming. And this fractured system creates inefficiencies and dilutes accountability. It makes finger pointing an inaction very easy. I think it ultimately confuses the families whose decisions are challenged when they search for the care that they need and want, if they can afford it. I think we can do better and this resolution can help that.

Another interesting fact is that in the past three years 54% of family day-care providers in Suffolk County closed. We need to find out why, where and what the economic impact it has had. This would be some of the data that the Commission could present to you.

In closing, IR 23 will open the doors of the silos and bring the committed players in the industry to one table, to communicate, to gather information, to raise awareness and to make recommendations

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

to our Legislature about a more coordinated delivery system of childcare to Suffolk County. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you, Kathy. Next we have Denise Dowell.

MS. DOWELL:

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. My name's Denise Dowell and I'm the Director of Early Learning and Care Programs with CSEA. We work with about 10,000 family childcare providers across New York State, outside of New York City, about 1,000 of them are here in Suffolk County.

And we heard a thank you and let you know that we strongly support the creation of the Suffolk County Childcare Commission bringing together stakeholders to inform important decisions about early learning and care for children and families in Suffolk. And I'm just going to speak for a minute about how important it is that this happen now. Some of you may be aware that in November 2014, the Federal government reauthorized the Childcare Development Block Grant. That's the money that comes from the Federal government to the Office of Children and Family Services and then is allocated to counties for childcare subsidies. And there were many positive changes raising standards, health and safety standards that the State will now have to meet and also new guidelines around parent eligibility that are all good for children and families.

The problem is there was no money attached to these -- these changes in standards coming to New York State from the Federal government. We did see a slight increase in CCDBG spending when the Federal budget was voted on in December. What that's going to mean for about -- for New York State is about \$14 million additional. We estimate that the full cost of implementation for these new standards over the next year or two is going to run about \$200 million. And so there are going to be many important decisions that are going to have to be made at the State level and at the County level as New York works to meet these new Federal requirements. So from the childcare side, this couldn't come at a better time. Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. Our next speaker is Kathleen Roche.

MS. ROCHE:

Good afternoon. Some of you may remember me. I'm Katy Roche, the Executive Director of Rainbow Chimes, a non-profit early education and care program. It's been around for about 35 years.

I'm here today to speak on behalf of forming the Suffolk County Childcare Commission, which I believe will offer many informative and opportune benefits to this Legislature and the public we all serve. You may well ask, why this commission and why now? The 2014 "*Who's Minding the Kids?*" report issued by the Welfare to Work Commission determined that there's a lack of licensed affordable and thus safe childcare slots in Suffolk despite an indisputable need for the quality childhood experiences children of working parents need.

This quality in early life is proven to result in quality in later years. Adults who are stable, crime-free and capable of supporting their families. The Welfare to Work Commission highlighted the LIA's report, which stated that the childcare industry is a valuable economic activity generator and it enables job growth and quite substantial return on public monetary investment. Despite all this good, parents cannot afford quality care here on Long Island, not only the poor due to the lack of subsidy dollars to meet the need, but also middle class parents, they cannot afford licensed quality care due to the tremendous cost involved for the childcare providers to meet all of the State

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

regulations. This is a recognized serious problem that affects not just working parents, but everyone who's vested in the future outcomes of young children. And that, of course, is all of us.

Yet, as of now, there is no answer for meeting these needs or answering the problem of affordability or access. Despite this documented lack of licensed slots due to tight sustainability margins, even my well regarded non-profit school is having trouble finding enough enrollment to stay afloat. And that will affect a lot of the DSS subsidized children who we currently have in our program.

Financially stressed parents are choosing cheap unlicensed care over costlier licensed care. And what young parent nowadays is not financially stressed? The Welfare to Work Commission's findings led them to recommend a separate childcare commission, first, because these needs are so great; but second because that commission is unable to address these needs within the scope of its own mandate. Specifically, there is a need for policies and procedures that address development of a coordinated quality childcare and early learning databased delivery system in Suffolk. Further, a means must be found to help poor and middle class families to manage the cost of licensed quality early education and care.

Now, that these findings have been made public that the role of this Legislative leadership is to convene a special group of knowledgeable volunteer representatives from various corners of the early childhood committee to further discern, evaluate and report back to you with particular facts, ideas and recommendations. It has been suggested that this commission be proposed for just one year. And I understand that some of this -- the proposed members have already been meeting to plan their work in advance and that shows their commitment to you.

I hope that you will agree this is important and thank you for allowing me to testify before you on this issue.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. Our next speaker, Miss Diane Eppolitto.

MS. EPPOLITTO:

Good afternoon. My name is Diane Eppolitto and I am the Quality Assurance and Planning Analyst for Long Island Head Start. Long Island Head Start is celebrating its 50th year of service to at risk children and families in Suffolk County. We serve over 1700 children birth to five in 24 centers across Suffolk County and just recently received the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership Grant to partner with ten childcare providers, to enhance services to an additional 98 infants and toddlers. It was an honor to be part of the childcare committee on the Welfare to Work Commission. The experience of meeting with distinguished professionals from the field of early childcare, discussing the needs and challenges of families in Suffolk County in creating recommendations that would make a difference in the lives of Suffolk County residents was both a great learning and rewarding experience.

Long Island Head Start and every agency, organization represented on this committee benefited because stakeholders, passionate about serving children, came to the table to discuss ways to create a safer, more effective, more productive way to teach our youngest and most vulnerable residents and teach, we do. Seventy-five percent of brain development happens between birth and age five. But high quality childcare does not just affect the lives of the young; it enables parents who now feel comfortable knowing their children are in good hands to go back to school, find employment and make a better way of life for their families.

Our agency committee assessment indicates that the lack of affordable childcare in Suffolk County is one of the ten -- is one of the top three barriers or challenges for families to connect to community resources and further their educational or employment status. Although these families receive Head

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

Start services, a six-and-a-half hour day is not sufficient for someone working a full-time job. Therefore, families must find alternative childcare for the remainder of the day, most of the time with family, friends, neighbors from unlicensed and unregulated settings.

About 14 years ago I was a center manager for Patchogue Early Head Start. A woman came into the center to enroll her child. And after her child was enrolled she walked over to my desk and showed me a picture of a baby, her baby, it was a different child from the one who had just entered our program. You could see the grief and heartache in her face. She did not say anything but I knew from a recent news broadcast who this baby was. This child had died at the hands of the babysitter only weeks before. The greatest fear any parent could have when they leave their child in the care of another person came true for this parent. She would probably never really recover from this tragedy but there was some comfort in knowing that her other child was in a safe and nurturing environment. We were there to support and assist her as well.

Parents entrust their most valuable possessions to childcare and preschool teachers. We as a society have an obligation to ensure early childcare settings are safe and of the highest quality. Every child in the County deserves access to high quality childcare services and research indicates that a high quality childcare and learning environment can change the trajectory of a child's life, especially those from low-income environments.

This commission will play a vital role in exploring, researching and recommending childcare policies and procedures to the Suffolk County Legislature that would raise the quality of childcare services for all children, help protect and educate our children and bring about a more unified coordination of services. John Dewey, U.S. philosopher and educator said: *What the best and wisest parent wants for his own children, that must the community want for all children.* Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. And our last speaker we have Angela Zimmerman.

MS. ZIMMERMAN:

Good afternoon everyone. And it's really a pleasure to stand before you on such an incredibly important topic and structure that will continue to make a difference in the lives of children, families and communities.

On behalf of Family Support Long Island, we appreciate this opportunity to address you as you consider a bill related to the establishment of the Suffolk Childcare Commission. We believe that the intent of this commission to evaluate and make recommendations on Federal, State and County policies and procedures to coordinate, connect and improve childcare system in Suffolk is not only timely but it's critical because of all of the issues and facts and context that speakers before me talked about. And it's also a greater opportunity to build will, enhance our local coordination and truly serve as a platform to leverage current and future investments and relationships in a broader and more strategic way. It also connects to a County agenda whose key aspects look at family stability, economic development and safer communities.

In my career I've worked with lifers in prisons, I've worked with young people, I've worked with children. And truly I have seen through the eyes of families that whole continuum of -- of the important element and foundation that early childhood and development and family development makes in the lives not only of our families but our communities. Families truly are the foundation of our society and when they're healthy and strong communities thrive, government thrives.

We've heard a lot of the facts from the Commission's report, and I'm not going to repeat them. And I'm not going to repeat some of the facts of the implications in terms of what working families have on the current economic fabric and social order of our communities. But as one of the oldest

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

suburban areas in this country and with a population of over 2.8 million people, Long Island is an experiment and that we are facing issues other suburban regions have not. And it's a tremendous opportunity for leadership. This is compounded by a median income that hides the economic, health and social disparities that exist, that greatly impact the strong development of families, children and access to affordable and quality childcare.

Why this? Why now? What is the importance of the moment? Early learning and education represents key places and spaces to cultivate the healthy development of children. As Diane said, 75, 85% of a child's brain is developed by the age of five. This is a teachable moment, an opportunity to look more intentionally at how we build a seamless and robust agenda around early care that extends it into and benefits adolescents as well. And in doing so, we are averting more costly systems of care over time.

You've heard a lot about context, national policies, local and State initiatives; the time is now. But the question remains how do we use this as a key opportunity locally to build the will necessary to make quality and affordable and accessible care our priority?

Further, how do we use our position and voice locally to engage our local politicians and State and Federal representatives and the broader community to strategically coordinate what we have, to develop new and innovative responses and an invitation for involvement in this topic that is everyone's business? Over the past ten years the demand has been great; it has never been greater. This is the time.

In addition to all of the above, affordable and accessible early care is just the right thing to do. Meeting the eminent demands for resources to expand quality, affordable and accessible care is essential and is our collective business. What is also important --

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Sorry, Angela.

MS. ZIMMERMAN:

Sure.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I would love for you to keep speaking, but --

MS. ZIMMERMAN:

My time is up.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

-- your time is up.

MS. ZIMMERMAN:

So I appreciate the opportunity to speak before you and I look forward to being part of this journey and I thank you for your time.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. And I would like to thank every single individual who came forward to speak in favor of this resolution. Is there anyone else who will like to speak on this? No.

We do have the Commissioner of Department of Social Services here with us as well. Commissioner, is there anything that you would like to share with us today?

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

Good afternoon, Education and Human Services Committee Members -- new Members. Good to see everybody. Looking forward to an exciting year.

I think the resolution as rewritten is acceptable to the Department and we would like to see it proceed -- to go forward. I just want to remind folks about the resolution and the fact that Department of Social Services, the specific services we provide around childcare works with OCFS and there are -- based on the comments, there are other areas they want to delve into that, quite frankly, are out of my purview.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. And I want to thank you also because this resolution has been a concerted effort by many individuals, many organizations, clearly for over a decade. And coming in as an educator of our profession, it gives me great pleasure to see this move forward. And I do hope I have the support of my colleagues today. Because just from experience I have seen the difference between a child who has received early childcare, whether, you know, as well with early learning and how they succeed in school, all right, and how they perform. And you can see the difference of someone who has received early education compared to someone who has not. And we're speaking about childcare in specific and making sure that they are in places that are legal, that are safe. I know that as a parent we want to leave children in the hands of someone who we trust and we can ascertain that our child will be kept safe. But I also know that in my line of work prior to this, I would have students who had to stay home just to make sure that they took care of their sibling because there was no appropriate childcare for them.

So I think coming together to the table and just finding ways in how to help and how to find ways, I think it's very important. And I'm really happy to see this. I'm glad to have the support of our Commissioner who will also have a -- a seat at the table and many other organizations. So, I know there are a couple questions that my colleagues may have so I'm going to hand it over to them, but I'm looking forward to what the Commission will do if it's approved and -- and I'm looking forward to working with you as well as we have been the last two years. I believe, Legislator Hahn, you had a question?

LEG. HAHN:

Hello. I'm glad to be -- well, new -- new to the Education portion of the Committee but back on the Human Services portion of this Committee.

I'm just hoping that we will have a strong appointment of yours to this Commission and that that individual will have, you know, real support from the Department to delve into these issues. There are issues that span across many silos but sometimes in the end come down mostly issues of money. But there are many that probably do not and we can solve without, but we also need to find a way to commit long-term financial increases here. And we need a strong representative from the Department, someone who takes this issue very seriously and is really willing to give -- give the kind of attention that is needed here.

COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

The Department's nomination is Dana Friedman.

LEG. HAHN:

Thank you, excellent.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I was going to say, you will be content; so thank you for that.

2/2/2016 Education & Human Services Committee

COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

You're welcome.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Do we have any other questions? Okay. So I would like to make a motion to approve the resolution, second by Legislator Browning. **(1023 Establishing the Suffolk County Child Care Commission) (Martinez)**. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **Approved** **(VOTE: 6-0-0-0)** Thank you so much.
(*Applause*)

We have happy people back there so that's good, too. (Laughter) But that -- that's the end of our agenda, that concludes today's Committee. Thank you and have a great day.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1:35 PM
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