

**HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE**  
**OF THE**  
**SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**  
**Minutes**

A regular meeting of the Health and Human Services Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on Thursday, June 18, 2009 at 2:00 p.m.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

Legislator Kate Browning, Chairperson  
Legislator John Kennedy  
Legislator Tom Barraga  
Legislator Jack Eddington  
Legislator DuWayne Gregory

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:**

George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature  
Barbara LoMoriello, Deputy Clerk of the Legislature  
Diane Dono, Budget Review Office  
Dennis Brown, County Attorney's Office  
Greg Blass, Chief Deputy, SC Department of Social Services  
Ed Hernandez, Deputy, SC Department of Social Services  
Nancy Woessner, SC Department of Social Services  
Dr. Chaudhry, Commissioner, SC Department of Health Services  
Linda O'Donohoe, Assistant to the Commissioner of Social Services  
Michael Pitcher, Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay  
Marge Acevedo, Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay  
Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Caucus  
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Caucus  
Maxvel Rose, Aide to Legislator Gregory  
Roland Hampson  
Debra Alloncius, AME Legislative Director  
Rick Brand, Newsday  
Other Interested Parties

**MINUTES TAKEN BY:**

Lucia Braaten, Court Stenographer

**MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:**

Denise Weaver, Legislative Aide

**[THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 2:16 P.M.]**

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Good afternoon. We will start our Health and Human Services Committee starting with the Pledge of Allegiance, led by Legislator Gregory.

*(\*Salutation\*)*

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. Good afternoon. I don't believe -- do we have any cards?

**MS. LOMORIELLO:**

No.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

No cards?

**MS. LOMORIELLO:**

No cards.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Wow. This will be a quick day. Okay. Before we start, I do see we have Commissioner Chaudhry's here, and I'm not sure who's here with Health and Human Services. I can't see. Does anyone from Health and Human Services -- oh, Greg, you're here. Does anyone want to come up? Do you have any reports or anything you would like to speak on? No? Okay. With that, we'll do the resolutions.

*(\*Tabled Resolutions\*)*

**1223, Directing the Suffolk County Department of Health Services to establish an online healthcare directives registry for Suffolk County residents. (Gregory) Legislator.**

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Madam Chair, I'd like to make a motion to table.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. Motion to table.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Barraga. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **It's tabled. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**IR 1290, Adopting Local Law No. -2009, A Local Law to enact a grading policy for food establishments. (Losquadro) Motion to table for Public Hearing.**

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Eddington. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion is tabled. **Tabled for Public Hearing. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**1347, Adopting Local Law No. -2009, A Local Law banning e-cigarettes in Suffolk County.**

**(Cooper)** Make a motion to table for Public Hearing.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Kennedy. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? It's tabled. **Tabled for Public Hearing. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

*(\*Introductory Resolutions\*)*

**1471, Establishing a grow green - save green initiative by promoting "Recession Gardens" in client benefit applications. (Horsley)** Sounds good. George, do you want to tell me what that is?

**MR. NOLAN:**

This resolution requires the Department of Social Services to work with the Department of Environment and Energy to develop and distribute a letter to people who are applying for food stamps advising them that they can purchase seeds and plants that produce food for consumption with their food stamps. That's what the resolution does.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. So instead of going to buy food they're going to buy seeds and not have food on their table and wait for -- okay, yeah, but you have to wait for it to grow. Okay.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Madam Chair, on the -- I don't know, do we have a motion on this yet?

**LEG. GREGORY:**

I want to make a motion to approve.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. We have a motion to approve. Second? I guess I'll second it.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Okay. On the motion, if I can just ask if there's anybody here from the Department? Can we just get an idea about the numbers of individuals we're talking about at this point and what the average time period is for approval of a food stamp application? I think it's probably going to take a whole growing season before they get the money. So we might save on a paper.

**MS. WOESSNER:**

Good afternoon. I'm Nancy Woessner, Assistant Division Administrator, Client Benefits Division, Suffolk County Department of Social Services.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Hi, how are you? Nice to see you again, Nancy.

**MS. WOESSNER:**

Likewise.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Can you tell us a little bit about just how many residents do we have in Suffolk County at this point that are receiving food stamps or how many applications we have pending? How many letters would we be dealing with here?

**MS. WOESSNER:**

Well, we send out approximately 6,000 temporary assistance and food stamp applications per month. Currently, the food stamp caseload is close to 30,000 households in Suffolk County.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

And we have about 30,000 that are on and we send out 6,000 that's in response to people calling to ask for food stamps, is that it?

**MS. WOESSNER:**

That's correct. That's for applicants.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

All right. George, would this resolution pertain to existing food stamp cases or is it new applications?

**MR. NOLAN:**

It says with -- if an application goes out that's when they're supposed to be advised that they can use food stamps for this purpose.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Okay. So we would anticipate that we would do about 72,000 letters a year regarding as a result of this resolution?

**MR. NOLAN:**

If that's how many applications there are then that's who would get the information.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Does it make any difference as to whether or not it's a successful food stamps benefit case, or is it just to accompany the app?

**MR. NOLAN:**

With the application.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Okay. Do we have any idea, I mean, is there is a cost factor to this or is it just another tree to whack?

**MS. WOESSNER:**

I do have some estimates. We already contract with the vendor to prepare our application packages. It would cost approximately a penny per page to put this in each application package, a cost of about \$60 per month.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

What's the time period between a successful application tendered to the Department and a recipient actually obtaining food stamps to buy something with?

**MS. WOESSNER:**

The State and Federal mandate is 30 days from the date of application. However, as of the end of May, our average days to disposition for a determination on a case was 18 days.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Eighteen days. You're turning around a determination on food stamps in 18 days?

**MS. WOESSNER:**

That's correct.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

That's -- that's wonderful. I mean, that's not what I'm hearing from my parish outreach folks. They're saying more to like four to five months.

**MS. WOESSNER:**

This is an average. Eighteen days is an average.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Well, 18 days could be two years and I guess two days. I mean -- all right. If it's a penny a page, \$60 a month, I suppose the cost is de minimis, but I wonder what the likelihood of being able to do anything with this information is. I'm still somewhat unconvinced. Thank you.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. So we had a motion to approve and a second. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions?

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

I'm going to abstain on this.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. Abstained, Legislator Kennedy. Okay, motion carries. **Approved. (VOTE: 4-0-1-0 Abstain: Legislator Kennedy)**

I guess I would like to -- I think the way the agenda is, I'd like to take 1516 out of order. I'd like to make a motion to take 1516 out order.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Gregory. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? With that, Greg, could you come up, please?

**MR. BLASS:**

Actually, with your permission, Madam Chairman, I'd prefer to stay up here if I could, if that's okay.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. Not a problem.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thanks.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

**1516, Approving the appointment of Gregory Blass as Commissioner of the Suffolk County Department of Social Services. (Co. Exec. Levy)** I guess before we start I'll make a motion to approve. Do I have a second?

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Second.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Kennedy. With that, Greg, if you'd like to give us a little.

**MR. BLASS:**

I have a brief statement, Madam Chairman, to you and to members of the Health and Human Services Committee. Please let me begin my comments with an expression of thanks and sincere gratitude to County Executive Steve Levy for nominating me to be Commissioner of the Suffolk County Department of Social Services, which for me will be the pinnacle of a lifetime of public service. I also thank each member of this committee and to all the County Legislature for carefully considering my nomination. I humbly and earnestly ask for your help and your consideration for my appointment with a promise from me at the outset that I will do everything I can to prove worthy of your support and confidence.

The comments I want to make today prior to your questions will be limited to three areas. What I bring to the job, where we find DSS as I take the helm and where I hope to see this department go, my vision, if you will, of how this award-winning department will rise even higher as it fulfills its mission of providing assistance to the public it serves. I will be brief as I'm aware of the busy agenda you have today.

What I bring first and foremost to this awesome task of DSS Commissioner is a history of a humanistic approach to public service. Back to my days as a student at a Jesuit High School in Brooklyn, where I spent many afternoons tutoring young people from a public school system in Bedford-Stuyvesant; as a Naval Officer counseling all backgrounds of military personnel and their dependents on how to obtain the benefits due them; as an attorney in civilian practice who provided substantial pro bono legal services to those unable to afford a lawyer; as an attorney for the Village of Greenport who found creative ways to keep in service the utilities and other programs provided by the Village to the working poor of the community; as an adjunct professor at Suffolk County Community College who always took the extra time to guide and encourage a number of students who struggled to climb out of poverty or overcome other challenges; as a Family Court Judge and Court Attorney Referee, who for over a decade in a highly stressful environment, worked tirelessly and successfully at turning around literally thousands of seemingly hopeless children's cases into bright futures; and as Chairman these past two-and-a-half years of the Suffolk County Executive's Task Force to prevent family violence.

It was for 12 years that I served in this honorable County Legislature, an institution for which I have enormous respect, and as Chairman for a time of this very committee. My work as a County Legislator gained for me a continuing sensitivity to Legislative issues and pressures and how a Legislator's success actually translates into a community success. I've also developed an aptitude that would be invaluable to any Commissioner, an insight into the unique complexities of Legislative leadership, having myself served as Presiding Officer and as Minority Leader. I know firsthand what it's like and how wrong it is for a County Legislator to be blind-sided, especially by a department of Suffolk County government.

Finally, and just as importantly, I've accomplished a keen and useful understanding of this department, its operations and its dedicated and highly professional workers as DSS Chief Deputy Commissioner for the past two-and-a-half years. If I'm to have the honor of Legislative confirmation as DSS Commissioner, I will be taking charge of a department that finds itself in a time of one of its greatest challenges, the same economic decline that makes staffing, revenues and budgeting so difficult also greatly impacts thousands in our County, many of whom desperately seek government assistance for the very first time in their lives.

Authorized position in DSS numbers 1,782 as a result of this year's budget, of which 216 are vacant. For Medicaid alone, our caseloads are 86,652 and that is much higher if you consider individuals and families, and is a record that is climbing rapidly. For CPS we just broke a record with breaking 1,000 state central registry reports in one month. CPS investigative intake so far this year numbers 4,433, continuing a trend over the last four years of 6% increases each year. Our emergency services caseload, defined as cases which raise a level of concern so serious that a weekend or evening caseworker visit is warranted, numbers in the thousands, 5,524 in 2008, and has climbed by 31% in

the last two years. Over 360 emergency petitions, which are cases where risk to children is so intense as to require immediate court intervention. These cases have been filed in Family Court so far this year are almost 10% above all of last year.

In other areas we've seen a resurgence in the number of singles and families in emergency shelters and a record number of child support orders to enforce. While public assistance numbers have remained relatively stable, there has been a dramatic increase in programs such as food stamps and HEAP, which support the working poor with increases of households served of over 25%. The bottom line is that more and more people need to be served and seek our services as a last hope.

The vision I have for DSS is to start by giving the Department a Commissioner who has these priorities: to lead in a direction of what is best for the Department and the public it serves, to assist the administration of which we are a part in partnership with this Legislature. This will be a Department that will operate with a consistent understanding that the Legislature, the Executive and this Department are really all in this together. Complaints about this Department's work will not come before this Legislature on a frequent basis because we will listen and address them when they first arise. I envision a Department of Social Services where the rank and file employees will become even more a valuable resource, a gold mine of ideas for all kinds of internal improvements. Scores of employees at all grade levels will be tapped in confidence for their input as I've done before.

There will be an enhanced role for the Commissioners Advisory Council, a new age for our Social Services centers and with staffs that will be strongly supported in their very hard and often thankless work, with an enhanced sensitivity to those whom they serve. And state-of-the-art technology that will make seemingly endless lines of clients shorter and more manageable. At DSS, we'll encourage our workforce and raise its morale, recognizing extraordinary performance in every instance.

I will put into motion as well a review of our agreements with our contract agencies, create a task force to begin a comprehensive review of the emerging burden known as sober homes, and scrutinize virtually every policy, program and service connected with DSS.

In summary, I can pledge to this Legislature and to the people of this County, as I have to County Executive, that I will be a DSS Commissioner who will live his role as public service in its purest form, using whatever God-given talents and skills I may have to fulfill the ideal purpose of government as Lincoln described it -- to do for those in desperate need what they cannot do for themselves. It is a daunting task at a remarkably challenging time, but as I have said, we are all in this together. That is the approach I plan, combined with a humanism and compassion I learned from my parents and from the education in and out of school, which they made possible for me. I will always strive for the wisdom of egolessness in my dealings with all of you as well as with all of our employees, the contract agencies and the public we all serve. With all the experience, backgrounds and vision brought together just in this room and in this administration, not to mention the remarkably professional staff of this Department, we cannot fail.

I can say with confidence that the Social Services system in this great County will be on the verge of a new era, and with your support I'm ready to help it begin. Thank you, Madam Chairman, members of the committee.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Thank you. Does anyone have any questions? Legislator Kennedy.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Thank you, Madam Chair. I guess I was going to say welcome, but it's -- you know, yeah, you've just decided to go ahead and morph it into, I guess, another capacity. And good luck with it and I would encourage you to use the opportunity to put your own stamp on how the Department operates.

And I would also ask you to keep in mind some of the things that we've had both public and private conversations about, particularly with food stamps. You know, it occurs to me as we're looking at the numbers, you are acknowledging that the need is expanding, the resources for all intent and purposes are remaining static, but nevertheless, the challenge is to go ahead and deliver the service. And I think it just says that we as an organization or an entity have to work smarter, not necessarily harder, and the way to do that sometimes is to use some of the technology and the other system tools that we have available to us. The electronic food stamps; I will continue to try to be a part of and very much want to see it come about.

The homeless housing issues I also have a grave interest in or a great interest in from the cost aspect that we've spoken about, knowing all too well what families are experiencing going through it, so I have an interest in that.

And I guess I would just ask you one thing and we talked about this, I've always been a great believer in management by walking around. I would ask you if you've not to please make it your business to be at every Social Services center to talk with the line folks up close, and then at least spend some time with the agencies that assist us, if that's a possibility. Thank you.

**MR. BLASS:**

Absolutely, Legislator Kennedy. And, in fact, I will continue doing just that. I've done some of that already. I consider it a crucial function of the Office of Commissioner to reach out to the rank and file, to let them know you're there, that you see what they're doing. And, in fact, I've already asked the division administrators to let me know when something significant happens with an employee, whether it's just unusual amount of overtime on a particular case, whether it's getting a caseload moving forward, something that makes anyone stand out even slightly, and I'll send them something as simple as an e-mail because I know that that makes a big difference. But visiting the centers, working at the various stations, we have ten different distribution points for food pantries -- I'll be at them all and I'll be there repeatedly.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Good.

**MR. BLASS:**

Absolutely.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Thank you. Good luck.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thanks.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Thank you. Okay. Legislator Gregory.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Thank you, Mr. Blass, for coming here today and thank you for reaching out to me, and I thoroughly enjoyed our conversation. And I eluded to this in our previous meeting in Public Safety where we talked about, you know, as a young lieutenant, you know, it was often that colonels and generals would come down and talk to us and try to get our feedback. Because in the military, you know, we have a term, you know, top-down planning or bottom-up refinement. So it's good to have the big thinkers at the top making the overall plans, but sometimes the guys on the ground, you know, they'll make refinements to change that plan and you can't do that unless you get feedback from the line workers, if you will. And from what I understand, you've done it already. You've been out in the different centers and I really respect that, because as a person who's been there, you know, and particularly being in government where we can't reward our best employees all the time, sometimes

the best reward is knowing that our bosses appreciate what we do, and they have a sense that they have a part of the process and that -- and that's, you know, and building that morale is something that you can't even put a dollar value on. And I'm sure that the employees that you've met have appreciated that and so I commend you for your efforts in that way. And I commend your vision.

And I commend the work that Janet has done. Not everyone has agreed. I supported Janet, I say that publicly. The issues are what they are, we're not going to revamp that. But I think the Department is in a good place. I think that with your leadership you can move it even a little bit further. And the people of my district, certain portions, sections of my district, could really -- are really looking forward to your leadership and enhanced services because it's going to impact them. So I give you -- I pledge you my support and I wish you the best of luck.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thank you, Legislator Gregory, and you'll be hearing from me, as all of you will, on a regular basis.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Tom? Okay. Legislator Barraga.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

I just wanted to extend my personal congratulations to you. You know, based on your background and your history and all the work you've done you are more than qualified to do an excellent job in this particular area. There's one provision here, which basically says, you know, you will not let develop what developed in the past where groups continually come before the Legislature on a given issue, session after session after session, without someone interceding to correct it, especially if it's a social service problem. Hopefully, we will not see that in the Legislature in the future.

And I will also agree with Legislator Gregory with reference to reaching out to those who are really on the line, who are doing the job daily. I mean, you will have your hierarchy around you, but the reality is there are people out there doing whatever you're going to potentially change or modify or restructure, they're doing it on a day-to-day basis and often their input is extremely, extremely valuable.

And the only other thing is that I -- the only reservation I really have when I take a look at this, I see you were taught by the Jesuits, which is the alternate Catholic religion, but --

*(\*Laughter\*)*

But I wish you the very best anyway.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thank you very much. And some of them I had in school would be proud to hear you say that.

*(\*Laughter\*)*

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Okay. Thank you, Greg. I mean, I look forward to continuing to work with you.

**MR. BLASS:**

Likewise.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

You know, we hear all the time about doing more with less. And, again, like DuWayne and Tom said, you know, we are in tough times, we are trying to do more with less. However, you know, it's the -- you know, it's the Department with the largest budget. You know, the workers are very frustrated. It's very difficult for them right now because of the people that are coming in looking for help that never did before. And I think they want to see a strong leadership where they're going to

get the support from you so that they're not, you know, the morale is better, that they're feeling better about what they do. You know, it's -- again, talk to them. You know, we're always looking to see how can we save money in this Department, you know, because of the economy and talking to them, they can certainly make the suggestions as to where you need go, what you need to do.

I like your comment about sober houses, you know, that's my thing. I appreciate your support in what we need to do on that issue. Obviously, the State needs to start doing a bit more on that.

But I do look forward to continuing to work with you and trying to make Suffolk County a better place for all residents no matter what their income level is.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thank you, Madam Chair.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

And I think Legislator Eddington has a comment.

**MR. BLASS:**

Sure.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

I guess I should, I don't want to be the only one not to congratulate you here. And we spoke, I guess it was yesterday, and I like your ideas. And in line with what everybody is saying, I think a way to accomplish the communication might be like with quality control circles, you know, get some people from down below to meet with you occasionally and get input on a regular basis and I think that will definitely keep you on top of everything. So --

**MR. BLASS:**

Unquestionably.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Thanks a lot and welcome aboard.

**MR. BLASS:**

Thank you very much, Legislator Eddington.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

And with that, I guess we had a motion to approve and a second. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **Motion is approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)** Congratulations, Commissioner Gregory Blass.

**COMMISSIONER BLASS:**

Thank you, Madam Chairman. See you Tuesday.

*(\*Applause\*)*

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Almost. Tuesday. Okay. We have **IR 1474, Removing Janet DeMarzo as Commissioner of the Department of Social Services. (Cooper)** I'll make a motion to table.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Second.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Second, Legislator Gregory. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **The motion's tabled. (VOTE:**

5-0-0-0)

**IR 1484, Approving the reappointment of Tracy A. Trypuc as a member of the Suffolk County Board of Health. (Eddington)**

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Motion to approve.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Motion to approve, Legislator Eddington, I'll second. I have to tell you, Tracy has been an asset. Am I correct, Commissioner? She definitely has done a great job with the Board of Health. I've had the ability to work with her. With that, all in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **Motion's approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**1489, Amending the 2009 Adopted Operating Budget to accept and appropriate 100% additional State Aid from the New York State Office of Mental Health for Personalized Recovery Oriented Services (PROS) Programs. (Co Exec. Levy)** Motion to approve. Legislator Kennedy.

**LEG. KENNEDY:**

Make a motion to approve and put on the Consent Calendar.

**CHAIRPERSON BROWNING:**

Motion to approve, Legislator Kennedy, and place on the Consent Calendar. I'll second. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Okay. Motion carries. **Approved and Placed on the Consent Calendar. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**1493, Appropriating funds in connection with the purchase of equipment for health care centers (CP 4055). (Co Exec. Levy)** Motion by Legislator Kennedy, second Legislator Eddington. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **Approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

With that, I guess we have no other business. A motion to adjourn and second, Legislator Kennedy. We're adjourned.

**(\*THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 2:44 P.M. \*)**