

**HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**

Minutes

A meeting of the 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 November 26, 2012.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. DuWayne Gregory, Chairman
Leg. Kara Hahn, Vice Chair
Leg. Kate M. Browning,
Leg. Lou D'Amaro
Leg. Edward P. Romaine (Absent)

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Renee Ortiz, Chief Deputy Clerk of the Legislature
George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel to the Legislature
Diane Dono, Budget Review Office
Joe Muncey, Budget Review Office
Paul Perillie, Aide to Leg. Gregory
Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Jill Rosen-Nikoloff, Director/Real Estate
Thomas Vaughn, Deputy County Executive III
Greg Blass, Commissioner/Social Services
John O'Neil, Deputy Commissioner/Human Services
Linda O'Donohoe, Assistant to Commissioner Blass/Social Services
Jeannette Morales, appointee/Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board
Julian Pessier, appointee/Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 10:00 AM

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Good morning everyone. We're going to get started with today's Human Services Committee. We'll start off with the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Hahn.

SALUTATION

Okay, hope everyone had a nice Thanksgiving. Everyone seems to be back happy, healthy and full; put on a few extra pounds.

All right. We're going to head into the agenda. We don't have any cards, but I don't see anyone in the audience that may want to speak. So, raise your hand if you do. Okay. So we'll get right to the tabled resolutions.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

We have Jeannette Morales. Please come up and sit right here. I'll just call the resolution. **IR 1874, To appoint member to the Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board (Jeannette Morales). (Spencer)** And Jeannette Morales is Dr. Spencer's respective appointment. I'll make a motion to approve.

LEG. D'AMARO:

Second.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Second by Legislator D'Amaro. Good morning, Officer Morales. Please introduce yourself and tell us a little bit about yourself. You have to --

MS. MORALES:

My name is Officer Jeannette Morales.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Oh, is that on?

MS. MORALES:

I work in the Suffolk County Police Department Third Precinct, COPE Unit. I've been a Police Officer going on eleven years. And I'm in charge of the Police Explorers in the Third Precinct; basically do a lot of work with the community in the Third Precinct area.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Does anyone have any questions? No. Okay. We have a motion, a second. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **(4-0-0-1. LEG. ROMAINE ABSENT)** Your appointment is approved. You do not have to appear before the full Committee, so congratulations.

MS. MORALES:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

All right, have a good day.

MS. MORALES:

Have a good day.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

We also have another appointment. I don't see anyone -- this person here, but I'll call the resolution anyway. **IR 2095, To appoint member to the Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board (Julian Pessier). (Spencer)** It's Julian Pessier. I think that's Legislator Hahn's appointment. Julian is not here so I will make a motion to table, second by Legislator Hahn. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **(4-0-0-1. LEG. ROMAINE ABSENT)**

Okay, maybe we can call someone up from DSS, kind of give us an update. Commissioner?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Good morning, Mr. Chair, members of the Committee. The Department is pleased to report that the aftermath we all suffered, in particular some communities suffered in the wake of the storm, the two storms -- actually the first storm was three storms in one, I understand, so the four storms, I would -- am pleased to report the Department addressed basically all concerns, needs and requests that it made of it; and yet at the same time we transacted what business was necessary with different programs. When our centers were all on line -- the South West, as you know, was the last of them to get on line for a few days. That, too, was able to provide full service.

The HEAP Program started on a timely basis, November 19th, which is, of course, later than usual. It's getting later every year, but that's running well. And I'll turn it over to John to discuss any of the details that he may want to sure with us, too, because he was an integral part of the success the Department enjoyed.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

Good morning. Thank you, Commissioner Blass. Just real quickly with the details, obviously with the Super Storm Sandy, the centers were impacted. And there's a lot of backup volume that the Department has processed and continues to process. And I just want to say that I think the staff did an excellent job given the conditions. As Commissioner Blass mentioned, some of the centers were not operating right away, lost power, lost data communications, but they were quickly resolved within a couple of days and the Department was functioning normally again. But as a result we're seeing a huge influx into our South West Center, which primarily serves the Islip/Bay Shore area along the South Shore. So there continues to be a residual effect from that, but it's getting better every day.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

If we had had power at the Mary Gordon Building the first day, it's very likely none of our computer systems, our technology systems, would have gone down like they did for the first few days. So, we're exploring the feasibility of a generator for Mary Gordon. Because apparently the way the technology is set up, and my children actually explained it to me better than I can explain it to you, but the Mary Gordon Building is the center of the universe of the systems of record that we deal with. And when that's down, everything suffers.

So we hope to find the kind of generator that the Health Department had on Rabro Drive, which they obtained through a grant. And if we can do the same, we think that we will even be in better shape than we were. But I only can supplement what John just offered, and that is that the workers in the Department were all on duty late into the day Monday when the storm started hitting. And they were dedicated to show up almost an overwhelming majority the very next morning. We're really proud of them. And they were there for what everybody needed.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Great. You did an excellent job, Commissioner, explaining that. Your children would be proud. (Laughter)

Quick question. I'm glad you brought up the computer issue because your Department is so heavily

dependent on computers. And I know that you need more equipment -- updated equipment. So you feel that having a generator or U -- some type of UPS system to kind of keep everything in place would help you out? And we don't have anything like that as of yet to date?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

There is a small backup battery-powered type of device that is used. But with the duration of the loss of power, that failed as well. So as the Commissioner stated, with the amount of technology infrastructure in place at the Mary Gordon Building, to our IT and as well as the Admin -- DSS Admin is housed, we believe it's critical that we obtain backup generator for that particular building. Quite frankly, the other centers would be helpful as well; this way we can serve the public in times of, you know, catastrophic events that we just saw.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Right. And how do we primarily communicate with our clientele? Is it regular, old snail mail or is it phones?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Well, communication is certainly starting with the internet and the website, which are heavily used at the libraries; probably if any one factor or venue is the origin of our applications outside of the centers themselves, it's at the libraries.

We also have certainly telephone. We have a CRU team, Commission's Response Unit, that is really inundated with calls, but we have it managed down now to a system where the inquiries that come through CRU are being handled without any real significant backlog any more.

And, I guess, the third area that is the heaviest is the centers themselves. They are where many come to visit. They're like the ER's of our operations because all manners of applications, situations and emergencies from domestic violence to homelessness to temporary assistance and the different programs that pertain to them, present themselves initially and primarily at the centers.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Great, great. And because of the severity of the storm, just in my experience, I've seen people that generally wouldn't come to Social Services for assistance in need of assistance. Is there any special programs available for them? I mean they're -- they're not necessarily wealthy people, but they're working class people, you know.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Again, many of the programs have those strings attached that are utterly out of sync with the needs and the expense level and cost of living level of Long Island. But that's where FEMA has stepped in. And that is where the Red Cross stepped in, to help assist with some of the homelessness issues we dealt with. And we coordinated very well with them and continue to do so.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

So there isn't any special, like, food stamp program? I know we've tried to working with Housing. I guess we'll talk a little later with Jill and John about that. But is there any type of food stamp program because --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

There is a DSNAP Program.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Oh, okay.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

-- that would reach a larger population. We are exploring the feasibility of our being able to do it; plus the need that's been expressed for it. And we've looked to the other Counties. Nassau has declined DSNAP. The city has gone ahead to do it. I think Westchester is doing it as well.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

That's correct, Westchester.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Westchester is doing it as well. So we're on the verge of making a decision in the very near future, next few days about DSNAP.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

DSNAP stands for what?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

It is a Disaster -- D is related to Disaster.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

I figured that. So you say you're in the process of making a decision. So it's not --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Well, we have to -- we have to weigh staffing. It's a very large population. It's a very work-intensive kind of application process. And it only has an open window of three to seven days, I believe, it is. Is that correct?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

I believe it's seven to ten.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Seven to ten.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

And that's calendar days. That's not working days.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Right. And then once that timeframe expires, the program expires. So we don't know how many -- we figured the longer we consider it and take time to decide, the more chance it has to be circulated, publicized and discussed. And then we'll see whether the need is as dramatic as it would justify the expense of resources to administer. Because it will take away from the regular food stamp workers. And that, as you know, is an inundated program already.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

But it's -- my last question is, is it additional monies or we'll have to use monies that we currently have allocated?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

It would be additional.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Okay.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

It would be additional funding. Don't forget food stamps is 100% funded program --

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Right.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

-- for the actual benefits. But it's also -- the DSNAP Program is a labor intensive activity that we have to weigh as it would impact -- and we're still weighing that. And we'll know in a few days whether it would impact our ability to comply with the litigation that's now the subject of the stipulation that requires us to meet the timeframes for the regular Food Stamp Program.

So we have to be careful that one doesn't impact the other. And it's ironic that the Plaintiffs in the original Food Stamp litigation are asking what we're going to do with the DSNAP program when, in fact, we have to consider the lawsuit that they brought and what it requires us to do as compared to what this new brief program will entail. We'll know, as I say, within the next few days for sure. We've been studying this since the storm actually.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Okay. Thank you. Legislator Hahn has a question.

LEG. HAHN:

Okay. So not knowing exactly what DSNAP stands for, is that --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

No, it does stand for -- it is Disaster Food Stamp. Disaster Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

LEG. HAHN:

Okay. Because I was going to ask, you know, there are people -- the people who get their food stamps, and we all know food stamps won't cover what a family needs for a month, but when you lose your electricity for a week, as most of us did, your fridge goes empty -- and I actually scrubbed mine out. But the freezer is empty and the fridge is completely empty; things go bad. And you have to refill that. And that's a very expensive proposition. And food stamps doesn't cover that. So this DSNAP is meant to help them refill their fridge a month later?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

I'll let the Deputy respond to that, Legislator Hahn.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

There's a couple of points to be made in reference to that question. OTADA -- anybody that receives SNAP benefits in October of this year received a 50% extra, if you will, in November. So that was in case you could not use your SNAP benefits or your food expired due to the lack of power. So that's what that pertained to.

LEG. HAHN:

Good. So they actually got more money to help with that; although it never covers it, but --

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

Agreed. And further to that also, they reduced or eliminated, I should say, the restriction on prepared foods. You're not allowed to purchase prepared foods, which SNAP -- because a lot of the supermarkets were closed, they didn't have power, so they allowed the SNAP benefit for this month, I believe, to be used to purchase prepared foods. But typically that restriction we put in place.

LEG. HAHN:

So I also -- do you have -- did you in anyway -- able to check in on our contract agencies that help the poor, like food pantries and -- what are the lessons we're kind of going to learn from this storm if it is going to be the new norm, you know, about how -- how we are ready to help these individuals and these scenarios and our contract agencies, how are they faring after the storm?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

We have been in touch with the contract agencies. And virtually all of them were in the same boat that we were because we're really partners with them. And their budgets were really hit. They had just a dramatic increase in demand right at the outset. We also -- it became clear to us that communication, even with cellphone towers down, cellphones weren't available, regular land lines weren't available, computers weren't available. Some of us endured only for 48 hours or less, but a lot endured longer. And it impacted them even harder. Because they were not given the priority of repair, that, say, the utilities devoted to government agencies.

I think that the ultimate conclusion is that when a natural event like this hits us hard as it did, there's not much we can do. We can talk about generators, we can talk about supplemental programs, but the key is getting the workers back on the job in facilities that function as soon as possible. Because ultimately, once again, it comes down to people and the devotion to their work that we have. And that goes also for the contract agencies. They really had the benefit of devoted staff, hitting the ground running at a time when most people would not be able to get out of their houses. They were already on their work sites and we're very proud and grateful about that.

LEG. HAHN:

It's funny because sometimes you think your contact list is up-to-date because you've got someone's e-mail, and you got --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Right.

LEG. HAHN:

-- their cellphone. But then you realize, "holy cow, we need their actual street address because we gotta go knock on the door because we can't get them by the phone or --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Right.

LEG. HAHN:

-- by e-mail or by fax" or whatever but --

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

And that's what some of the contract agencies were doing. And, in fact, we were working with the County Executive's Office and sending individuals -- individual workers or contract agency employees out to communities knocking on doors to find out if they were -- the cutoffs from the outside world -- who contacted the outside world, where suffering and case problems were emerging that we wouldn't know about unless we'd gone to them, as was happening in the City in the apartment house where it was really a significant remedy to that program. Because those multiple dwelling units were unable to be -- they could not exit them.

So in a lot of cases, you had the Office of the Aging, the Department of Social Services and other government departments working closely with the contract agencies to find those who were in need. But there's still an aftereffect. The centers are still being -- are seeing gradual increases over and above the normal activity that we've seen, which is also on the rise -- on a pattern of rising. And we think that's going to be continuing for a few weeks yet.

LEG. HAHN:

One more thing. Is there anything you can tell us about -- I know -- I think it's being run through you, the Housing at NYIT, is that being run through your department?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

That's being run through the Department of Real Estate.

LEG. HAHN:

Through Economic Development -- Real Estate?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Yes.

LEG. HAHN:

And that's why Jill's here. So I look forward talking to her as well. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

One more point, Legislator Hahn. I think I should let you and the Committee know that we do intend to submit some recommendations, a list of ideas, of concepts that might be workable in the course of this -- experiencing these kinds of things. And we will have that ready for you by the end of this week. We've asked all the Divisions, the different Divisions, if you had it to do over again, what would you do? And certainly the generator that we talked about for our central building is one of them. But there are a few others that we think might be beneficial to share.

LEG. HAHN:

Yeah, I think it's important that every time we go through one of these scenarios, that we actually -- we do talk about, you know, what went well and make sure we repeat that next time.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Right.

LEG. HAHN:

And what didn't go so smooth. And we try to fix it ahead of time.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Right. It's a time for --

LEG. HAHN:

You know, have a better plan each time we face something.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

It's a time for introspection.

LEG. HAHN:

We're a little bit better off.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Yep. It's a time for introspection and has been.

LEG. HAHN:

Thank you. I know how hard you all were working and I know how dedicated you are to all the people in need in Suffolk. So thank you for all your hard work.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Thank you so much.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Thank you.

Jill, would you mind joining the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner at the dais? A few people have questions about the program instituted at New York Tech. And I know you and John worked on it. I know Legislator Browning has a question. I'll have her --

LEG. BROWNING:

Well, one quick question. You know, out of curiosity, I again want to say thank you, you know, Roland did a phenomenal job helping a constituent of mine who was underwater. And we helped her get into another rental property away from the water. And, you know, they were sleeping in a motel, a family of six. And it was kind of rough for them because she was at the Nursing Home, couldn't get home to take care of her family. And between her and her husband, it was a struggle.

So, I saw them on Wednesday night. They are much happier and doing much better. And I know that Social Services was able to help them because of their income with their first month's rent and their security deposit. But I'm just curious, you know, the various communities where there were families that were underwater, do you know what the number of actual DSS clients needed to be relocated?

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

We don't have an exact number, Legislator Browning, but we don't -- from what we've seen, it was not that significant.

LEG. BROWNING:

Right.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

It was fortunately a limited number --

LEG. BROWNING:

Right.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

That were relocated but I don't think we --

LEG. BROWNING:

So most of the people you're helping are basically, you know, lower income.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

Yes.

LEG. BROWNING:

You know, they've been paying their own rent but just -- it was a challenge for them now to try and relocate.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

And that is the essence of Social Services Programs today.

LEG. BROWNING:

Right.

COMMISSIONER BLASS:

-- is to assist those who can be self -- continue to be self-sustaining but for food stamps, but for a problem with an automobile that helps them get to work and some of the others. But there are those who are on the path. And these programs help them to get there. Certainly, though, of our 54 shelters very -- I believe less than -- you can count on one hand -- have the kind of trouble that affected their habitability and they were addressed within 48 hours.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay. And as far as New York Tech's concerned, I know -- I got your e-mail yesterday, Jill. I see you're working on Sunday, too.

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

Yeah.

LEG. BROWNING:

I received your e-mail. And I did -- believe last Tuesday mention that in my District that the Health and Welfare Council had a list of homes. And I know Josh has been trying to go back and forth with you. But just out of curiosity, how are things going at the New York Tech? Do you have anyone in there currently or --

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

Well, the facility and the hotline have been up and running since Friday. Fortunately we have not had to place anyone there, whatever we can extrapolate from that. But we feel that we need to keep it open in conjunction with the Red Cross as a precautionary measure.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah. I think probably a lot of people are staying with friends and family. And, again, you know, should we be pulling them out of the motels? Would it be less expensive? I mean, maybe taking a look at who's in the motels; hotels and motels and maybe try and relocate them to New York Tech. Wouldn't it be less expensive if we pull them out of motels?

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

John and I have had those conversations. I know that there was some concern about placing DSS clients in the NYIT facility both from the County Executive, the Legislature as well as NYIT so -- but we have been discussing that. I mean, if they need housing and they're not pre-storm homeless, perhaps we can revisit that since we currently have rooms available.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

If I may?

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay. No but -- I'm asking is because I think a lot of the displaced family that in hotels are not necessarily DSS clients; correct? So wouldn't you want to relocate them?

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

A couple things. Let's just take it, parse it out; probably it'll be a little easier to digest the information.

First, with respect to DSS clients, the reason why the decision was made to house DSS clients and DSS contracted shelters is because they are typically in need of additional services than other folks in order to help them gain self-sufficiency. Frequently they have mental, substance abuse problems as well as mental health issues; so, therefore, they get additional services.

So that's DSS. So the non-DSS folks, I think, you're describing, Legislator, that are in hotels and

motels, we have to be careful. A lot of those folks have received FEMA assistance for rental. And that information is not translated back to us real easily. So it's a FEMA database. They're in charge of information. There are privacy concerns that FEMA has. So we have to be very careful how we ask for that information.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay. I get you. And I don't know if you've had any success with reaching out to Health and Welfare Council with Gwen O'Shea?

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

I'm sorry, could you repeat that?

LEG. BROWNING:

Gwen O'Shea from the Health and Welfare Council. I know that she's been working with the organization in my community, you know, coming up with the list of families that have been displaced. And, again, I know some of them are with friends and family but, again, some of them may outstay their welcomes so --

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

I would love to have that list. You know, maybe me and Josh we can put calls and e-mails into Mayor {Bionda} but I think he's got his hands full, you know.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay. We'll work on that today.

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

Because we can try and help them. If not at NYT, on a case by case basis.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay.

DIRECTOR ROSEN-NIKOLOFF:

With some resources we'll put together.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah. I'll get -- I know that the list is not necessarily just people who need housing. They have a lot of other issues. But I know they have a list of like 300 families. So many of them -- I can tell you a lot of them that I've spoken to are not in -- you know, not in the home. Some of them are staying with family and whatnot. But that list, I think, needs to be broken down to the ones who just need housing. So we'll work on getting that for you.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

I think to take away -- specific to housing be those folks that are maybe staying with other resources, family members, friends, etcetera, if we can get that specific list over to Jill, I think, that would be very helpful. Because Jill has a bunch of resources lined up, but potentially you could, you know, try to get those folks stay in their home area, if you will.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

Okay, thank you, Legislator Browning.

As I entered the office this morning, there was a -- I got a call from a person I used to work with who's housing a family -- she lives in East Islip. The family's from Amityville. They lived on South Bay which the whole area in South Bay, Stewart, I mean just got, you know, six feet of water. But they have a school-age child. So, you know, with the State law, if you're 15 miles from your home

district, you can't get transportation. So I'm sure you're going to deal with those issues, too. You know, not everyone lives in the New York Tech area. Once you start placing people, basically it's children, and then you get approvals, it's just a bureaucratic nightmare.

Does anyone else have any questions? No? Okay. All right. Thank you for your efforts and I appreciate you being here today.

DEPUTY COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN GREGORY:

All right. All right. That's it for today and we stand adjourned. Thank you.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 10:27 AM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**