

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 January 30, 2015.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Monica Martinez - Chairwoman
Legislator Kate M. Browning - Vice Chair
Legislator Lou D'Amaro
Legislator Kevin J. McCaffrey
Legislator Robert Trotta

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Presiding Officer DuWayne Gregory - District No. 15
George M. Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson - Assistant Counsel to the Legislature
Jason Richberg - Chief Deputy Clerk of the Legislature
Jill Moss - Budget Review Office
John O'Neill - Commissioner/Department of Social Services
William Shilling - Aide to Legislator Calarco
Justin Littell - Aide to Legislator D'Amaro
Maria McCue - Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board Appointee
Nancy Mariano - Regional Director/Friends of Karen
Rick Brand - Newsday
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher - Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Kim Castiglione - Legislative Secretary

(THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 1:09 PM)

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Good afternoon and welcome to today's Human Services Committee meeting. If we could all rise for the Pledge of Allegiance to be led by our Vice Chairwoman, Legislator Browning.

Salutation

Please be seated. Good afternoon. Again, thank you for coming out and I know we have postponed this from Tuesday, but I'm glad that we're here today. There are no correspondence. Do we have any cards?

MR. RICHBERG:

No, cards, Madam Chair.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you. There are no cards. Anyone in the audience who would like to address the committee? For the record, there is no one in the audience who would like to address the committee.

We do have a presentation today, but we are going to first do our resolution before we continue with the presentation. We also have our Commissioner here, Commissioner O'Neill. Do you have a couple of things to say before we do the resolution?

COMMISSIONER O'NEILL:

I'll be very brief. Good afternoon, Human Services Committee members, Chairman Martinez. I just wanted to let you know, advise you, I sent a memo, I don't know if it's reached your office yet, that we recently updated the Department of Social Service's website, hoping to make it a little more user friendly to navigate around so information can be obtained quickly, not only by clients, but also by other folks, departments in the County, as well as maybe your Aides, whoever may want to access it. It's 95% complete. There are still some improvements we do want to make. But again, the intent was to make it more user friendly so documents could be downloaded and folks don't have to make a trip to the center just to get an application and that type of thing. So if you'd like to take a look at it that would be great. As I said, I just wanted to make a brief little statement about that.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I appreciate that. I did receive the letter and I did check the website out, and yes, it is definitely a lot easier than before, so I do appreciate the efforts of your department. Do we have any questions for our Commissioner? All right. Thank you.

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTIONS

All right. Continuing with our Introductory Resolutions we have **2173 - To appoint member to the Teen Pregnancy Advisory Board (Maria P. McCue). (Calarco)**. Is Ms. McCue here? Good afternoon, Ms. McCue.

MS. McCUE:

Good afternoon. Thank you for having me here.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you for being here. Just quickly, if you could just say a couple of words about yourself and as to why you would like to take on this position with the Teen Advisory Board.

MS. McCUE:

Okay. Well, my name is Maria McCue, and I've been living in Suffolk County for over 25 years. And I have a daughter who is 25 years old, and when she was much younger I saw that there was a great deal of problems with teen pregnancy in her -- in the schools that she was attending. I decided that I would go back to school and get a degree and try to get a job that would help me to get involved in that kind of thing. So that's what I did. I received my degree in Community and Human Service. I began work in alcohol and substance abuse, but then moved on to becoming a prevention specialist for SNAP and working mostly with teens who were pregnant and/or parenting.

At this current time I'm working for Stony Brook, the Research Foundation for Stony Brook. I'm a coordinator for the Comprehensive Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Grant. I'm in a lot of different areas, but we handle mostly the highest risk kids, so the ones that are in foster care, group homes, the jail in Riverhead and alcohol and substance abuse residential and day operations for teens.

So I'm passionate about this subject. I think that I might have a few ideas that haven't really been presented in the past, and I would like to try to make things a little bit better.

LEG. BROWNING:

I don't have questions, but I know Maria and I have to tell you about her public service and her dedication to community is admirable, so I'm very happy to see that you're stepping up to do some here, like you haven't done enough. So congratulations in advance and I want to co-sponsor this.

MS. McCUE:

Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I appreciate that, and I think we need people with expertise, especially this is something that many districts are facing. And knowing that you'll be on board, you know, that makes me happy as well, especially in my district that I do encounter this on a regular basis. And I always have a rep at these meetings, so I do look forward to hearing about your big ideas that not been presented yet. So I do look forward to it. No pressure, though. Anybody else? Okay, Ms. McCue, thank you.

MS. McCUE:

Thank you so much.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Motion to approve.

LEG. BROWNING:

I second that.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Second by Legislator Browning. All in favor? Opposed? Okay, motion carries. **(Vote: 6-0-0-0 Presiding Officer Gregory is included in the vote)**. Congratulations, Ms. McCue.

That pretty much ends our business in terms of resolutions. We are now going to listen to Friends of Karen, who we have today for our presentation. I know that Legislator Hahn reached out to my office to see if you could present at today's Human Services and we're looking forward to hearing what your organization offers.

MS. MARIANO:

Thank you so much. I know many of you, many of you know me, but it's such a wonderful opportunity whenever I can share Friends of Karen's story with you. But before I do that, I'm going

to show you a video so that you can meet some of our families and see a little bit more about what Friends of Karen does from the voices of our families.

(VIDEO PRESENTATION)

MS. MARIANO:

I have seen that film I don't know how many times, and it's so meaningful to be able to share it because no one can tell the story as well our families. Last year we helped 1625 children; we lost 68 precious children. In that film everyone is alive but the one child that had brain cancer. The one on the trampoline, that family had gone through a relapse but the child is doing well. Most of our children do go on and do well.

So in your folder you are going to have all the information and more than what you need about all our services, but I do want to just quickly -- we've been around for 37 years. We started out with the one girl named Karen, and fast forwarding we've helped over 13,500 children. We're in the tri-state area. We have an office in Port Jeff, in Union Square Manhattan and up in Westchester. We're in 24 hospitals, all the major hospitals that you can think of and all the Long Island hospitals. We have programs. They all love us because we pay the bills.

What Friends of Karen does is we make sure that the family stays stable when they're going through -- like what you just saw, the worst thing a family could ever go through. And it's not just about paying the bills. That actually is the easiest part, as long as the money is there. Those numbers are off. This film is a year and a half old. Now we spend \$125,000 a month instead of \$100,000 a month. We do not give the families the money. We pay the bills, for all the reasons. You know, a family might be going through this and want to take a trip to Disney World and come back and there's a padlock on their door because they haven't paid their mortgage or their rent. So we pay the bills. We raise money from all sorts -- our budget is over \$4 million, so you can imagine the fundraising efforts that we do. The hospitals love us and pull out the red carpet because we pay their bills, as we do for Ronald McDonald House and many other things.

But the most important thing, I feel, after making sure the family is financially stable, is to make sure that the family is intact, that the siblings are able to deal with this. They won't talk to the parents. If they're older they're too embarrassed to say, you know, when am I going to get a hot meal or maybe if I had cancer or something else life-threatening maybe someone would pay attention to me. So they will talk to our Sibling Support Specialist. In doing so, they can release their emotions. If you ever have a chance and go on our website and you read Adina's Angels, you could see what could happen if Friends of Karen is not involved, that happened to that family before we got involved. Over 80% of families get divorced without Friends of Karen. We really, really make sure that the family stays stable. I just want to make sure I'm covering some things that are not in your package there.

We just started -- we're always starting new things. It's not like we do enough, we have to start other things. There's gift programs. Even if you are not financially qualified, if a family doesn't need a dime, we're still there with gift programs you'll see in there, back to school, all kinds of stuff. And the emotional support we'll give to anyone.

But one of the things that we have to address, and it probably is our Hispanic Social Worker. And when she sits and tells us stories that when a family is in a hospital and the parents can't speak English, the child that's sick is interpreting what the doctor says, which is the worse scenario, that the child has to talk about his condition. And then when and if a child dies there is no bereavement programs for the Hispanic population dealing with this. It's very important in our bereavement programs that it's dealing with just people that have died from a life-threatening illness, not from a car accident or suicide, because the grief management is totally different.

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So through a wonderful grant we are now starting a program where we will be dealing with the parents of children in the Hispanic communities, and it's piloting right now in Queens and the Bronx and will come out here after that works. One group in one room we'll be talking just to the parents in Spanish, and in the other room we'll have the Sibling Support Specialist talking to the siblings and seeing how they're dealing. And our support goes on for as long as the family needs it. There's no cut off time. There's no okay, we'll stay with you only three months and then we're gone. We're there from the day of diagnosis, through treatment, and if the treatment fails for as long as they need us.

With that in mind, we are finding that sometimes in the tri-state area when our families don't get success with the hospitals here, they may go to St. Judes. When our families goes to St. Judes, the doctors in St. Judes say to us you need to open up a Friends of Karen here, because when your families come, all they want to know is how you're going to cure my child. When the other families come they want to know how long am I going to be here, my job, my other children, who is going to take care of the rent, the mortgage. They don't have to worry about that.

So with that mind and part of our strategic plan, we decided that we need to come up with a telephone book of how to run Friends of Karen, not that we're doing it, we have enough on our plate. So we are now in a study, I want to quote it so I get it right, just give me a minute, of an expectation of how you can -- with another grant, a huge grant from the Heckscher Foundation, we are working with the Center for Evaluation and Applied Research at the New York Academy of Medicine, an independent study to evaluate Friends of Karen, to really tear it apart and see what we're doing, but what we can do better. And then once that's done, we are ready to make this telephone book and make sure that families in other parts of the country could take advantage of another program similar to Friends of Karen, even though it won't be us.

So I'm here because now that you hear the story -- I'm sure that each one of you get the phone calls when families are falling apart, they have a child that's sick, they can't take care of things. So, you know, my ambassadors, if you hear of anyone that has a child or a life-threatening illness, please insist on them to call Friends of Karen. It's the best phone call they can make. You know, whether they need money, whether they need a hand to hold. If anybody thinks they could do this by themselves, they're wrong.

With that, I also have to ask this or I wouldn't be doing my job. We used to get amazing support from the County. I know that dollars have dried up all over the place. I'm starting to see some State money again, which really, really makes me very happy. But from 2005 to 2011 we received almost -- over \$700,000 from Suffolk County. So I wanted to just throw that out there in consideration down the road if anything happens and comes free, please remember us. The money usually comes through Social Services. You can see in your documents the things that we pay for, whether it's rent, mortgage, transportation, car payments, childcare. There's so many things that without us we do not want that family to go down the tubes just because they have a child that's sick. And with the medical science, as you saw in here, to have sickle cell anemia not be a death sentence anymore and is treated just like cancer. We have so many families that are doing that.

I do have to share something from Dr. Parker from Stony Brook is on my board, as is the head of Sloan-Kettering and Cohen Hospital. Cohen Hospital doctors is also the Dream Team for Stand Up to Cancer with two Nobel Prize doctors. He'll get up at the advisory board meetings for Long Island and he'll say that he has to attribute part of his cure to Friends of Karen. Even though we're not the doctors, without Friends of Karen, many of his families, which 80% of his families are Friends of Karen families, would not get the treatment, would not have the emotional support when they get home to be able to cure the terrible disease of cancer. So any questions?

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you for coming today. Prior to me being elected I was an educator 14 years. This year, and actually our Presiding Officer joined me this summer in putting together a walk for sickle cell. There is not one here on Long Island at all and it's a silent disease that my community actually faces a lot of. This walk that my office put together was in the name of this former student that I had that just passed this summer. And knowing that you're out there helping communities with sickle cell, I thank you for that because not too many are out there, you know, not too many know about it. So I just, you know, from my heart I want to say thank you and I would like to discuss further how we can work together with those families, because I know this family that has lost their son, they're having a difficult time, you know, emotionally, whatever it may be, you know, but I look forward to working with you on this.

MS. MARIANO:

And I'm glad you brought that up, because they do not have to be a Friends of Karen family to fit into bereavement, as long as they succumb to an illness.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I do appreciate that. Do we have any questions or comments? Legislator Browning.

LEG. BROWNING:

You know, it's funny, because how much I've known about you and how often I hear about you. I know everything you do. And I just -- we are actually planning a fundraiser in my district for a little boy who has leukemia. And I think -- the things that I have to say about where I live, in two days they set up a Go Fund Me and they raised \$10,000 in two days for this child to help the parents out. And again, you know, I'm sure money is an issue for them, but I'm definitely going to recommend they reach out to you.

MS. MARIANO:

You know, our communities do so much wonder in support of our families, but that's not enough, because they need the expert supervision and help and kindness of people that have been doing this for so many years, so, Kate, please give me a call. They may already be a Friends of Karen family. I can let you know that over the phone.

LEG. BROWNING:

Chances are, yeah, maybe. Thank you.

MS. MARIANO:

And I just want to say something else. I've been involved in government for a long time. Before this, my other life was Special Olympics, so I've always had my hand out and I've always got help, but I've also learned never to depend on any one source, so we do major, major, major fundraising. As you can see in your thing, we're part of the Long Island Marathon. That grew from 25 people to 1600. We are always doing fundraising efforts so not to depend on any, but we would really love to get some sort of support. Or the help, if any of you have ideas of where maybe I'm not thinking and somebody else comes up with something. Like Mariano Rivera. We just did an event with him, and I just got a call yesterday Yankee Stadium is giving me a thing to do an event there and I am like crazy happy. So, you know, we're out there. We are really pushing ourselves, but it's just not enough. It's just not enough.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you.

MS. MARIANO:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Presiding Officer.

P.O. GREGORY:

I just want to say thank you for all that you do. You know, you do so much for our community and for those families that are in the greatest time of need and it's very much appreciated. And you're right, we have supported you in the past less than what we have in the past, but that doesn't negate the real benefit that your organization provides to families, and not only here in Suffolk County, but throughout Long Island and New York.

MS. MARIANO:

So let me ask you this question. I know this year I didn't even put in for anything because I didn't think there is any support. Is that still the way things are now? Forever? Is that a loaded question?

P.O. GREGORY:

That's a tricky question. Well, you know, it's obviously challenging to provide, you know, resources to all the various important programs that are out there. At this point it would be very difficult to make a budget amendment to provide support. I recall that you were in our budget. I could be wrong.

MS. MARIANO:

Not since 2011.

P.O. GREGORY:

Okay. Okay. All right. It's been that long. Okay.

MS. MARIANO:

Yes. So if someone tells me who I should contact to maybe start even the process, and I know there's no guarantee, but at least to start that process that -- who I should be talking to on that.

P.O. GREGORY:

Okay. We can talk.

MS. MARIANO:

With you?

P.O. GREGORY:

Yes.

MS. MARIANO:

Okay.

P.O. GREGORY:

All right.

MS. MARIANO:

Thank you. Thanks everybody.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

I'm sorry, you have one more question. Legislator McCaffrey.

LEG. McCAFFREY:

Hi, how are you? I was just -- when you were talking I was on your website checking things out, very impressive the work that you do. I got to see the history behind the organization, too. It was a nice story. If someone had a question about whether or not their child was -- because of instead of like a life-threatening illness, if someone had a question, who would they direct it to?

MS. MARIANO:

Call me.

LEG. McCAFFREY:

Okay.

MS. MARIANO:

My card is in all your folders. Call me.

LEG. McCAFFREY:

We got that. Okay. Very good.

MS. MARIANO:

Call me, because the one thing about Friends of Karen, if somebody calls, even if it's an adult with breast cancer, we are not going to say we can't help you. Before they get off the phone they will have resources they never heard of.

LEG. McCAFFREY:

Great. Okay. Very good. Thank you.

MS. MARIANO:

I'll connect them to our Social Worker who will give them those resources, so there's never just no. Happy New Year everybody. Thank you for the time.

CHAIRPERSON MARTINEZ:

Thank you, you too. Well, this concludes our meeting for today. Please be safe out there and the meeting is adjourned.

*(*The meeting was adjourned at 1:37 p.m. *)*