

CWAC minutes June 17, 2011

Members present: Deborah Eves, BJ Zarris, Nanette Bowler, Suzanne Fountain, Elizabeth Hutchens, Phyllis Grooms Gordon, Dorothy Hollahan, Denise Dickerson, Brady Nemeyer, Mary Dunne Stewart, Matt Wade, Paul McWhinney, Melanie Galloway, Denise Gallop, Mattie Satterfield, Phyl Parrish, Jo-Ann Harfst, Sharon Harris, Lisa Linthicum, Martha Kurgans, Jack Ledden, Kathy McElroy, Heather Jones, Cate Newbanks, Lelia Hopper, Karin Addison, Courtenay Brooks, Virginia Powell, Vernon Simmons, William Shackelford, special guest: Martin Brown.

Jack Ledden was introduced to the committee members after a brief review of the agenda. Mr. Ledden explained that he was with Prince William Department of Social Services for over twenty years and held a variety of positions including Director of Social Services. Prior to serving as Director, he served as the Residential Services Director for the county's comprehensive, community-based, residential services system for youth. He most recently worked with Youth for Tomorrow, a youth residential services provider in Prince William County.

Lelia Hopper, who is the Director of the Court Improvement Program (CIP), shared with the group about her opportunity to testify before the Subcommittee on Human Resources of the Ways and Means Committee on June 16, 2011. The hearing was on the Reauthorization of the Child Welfare Services program and the Promoting Safe and Stable Families Program, including the Court Improvement Program. Her testimony can be read in full at:

http://waysandmeans.house.gov/UploadedFiles/Lelia_Baum_Hopper_Testimony.pdf

Ms. Hopper shared with the group that she was able to talk about the good work done here in Virginia through the CIP and the Virginia Children's Services System's Transformation. She stated she feels like the information she presented was well received by the committee members. There was talk during the hearing about the revisions to the third round of the Child and Family Services Reviews. Bryan Samuels, Commissioner for the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, suggested the review may become more focused and will be different than the past two rounds.

Deborah Eves reported to the group the annual report on the Child and Family Services Plan (CFSP), also known as the APSR, is awaiting the signature of the Commissioner of VDSS. The plan is due to the federal regional office by June 30, 2011. The 2010 APSR, along with the 2010-2014 CFSP are posted at: http://www.dss.virginia.gov/family/cfs_plan.cgi. As soon as the report on the plan is approved, it will be posted at the same link. The committee members were asked to review the plan when it is posted and provide any feedback to Ms. Eves (deborah.eves@dss.virginia.gov). There was a question from the group concerning the inclusion of Custody Assistance in the report on the plan. Custody Assistance is included in this report because the Program Improvement Plan (PIP) has been incorporated into the report. Therese Wolf, Program Manager for Permanency, briefly updated the group on the status of Custody Assistance. Lyndell Lewis will reconvene the workgroup that previously had been working on the implementation plan for Custody Assistance. Pam Sheffield will reconvene the workgroup that had been working on OASIS updates. There has been approval from the Commissioner's office to move forward with Custody Assistance as a statewide pilot program beginning around April 2012.

Therese Wolf presented information about Adoption Assistance (AA). The draft AA guidance is now consistent with federal and state law changes and integrates tenets of Virginia's Children's Services Practice Model. The guidance establishes steps in the AA process, sets parameters for local decision-making, and provides new tools for workers and adoptive parents. The guidance also directs the AA negotiation requirements and clarifies how child's special needs and the family circumstances guide negotiations. The guidance has been developed with broad input from a workgroup with members from private agencies and local department staff. The Permanency Advisory Committee, VDSS legal advisors, and the federal region III liaison have reviewed all the drafts as well.

Ms. Wolf discussed the following: The purpose of AA guidance is to facilitate adoptive placements and ensure permanency for children with special needs who require additional support. It seeks to assist workers in recognizing and proactively responding to the impact of trauma, loss and disruption in the child's life. The guidance should help clarify that AA is one component in providing the child an essential foundation for success in life: a safe, stable, and caring family, committed to meeting the child's special needs and sharing their traditions, special holidays, and important life events together. It provides statewide parameters within which LDSS can provide adoptive parents the necessary financial and/or medical assistance enabling them to adopt the child with special needs. The discussion about the purpose of adoption assistance must begin when parents first come forward. This requires integration of accurate information about AA in initial training for all parents and should incorporate this information in ongoing training as necessary. Social workers should discuss with parents one on one when adoption is a possibility for a particular child, and VDSS Permanency and Resource Family consultants, as well as CRAFFT, can help with this message. A new "Information Sheet on Adoption Assistance Program" has been developed.

"Special Need" criteria are defined by the state as race/ethnicity; siblings; mental, emotional medical disability and/or a history of a hereditary or congenital condition or birth injury (no current symptoms required). "Special Need" for State Adoption Assistance Only is further defined as living with foster parent 12+ months and significant emotional ties and/or having a disability diagnosed after finalized adoption and within 12 months of initial diagnosis. If a child is SSI eligible, they will qualify as "special needs". Custody by a licensed child placing agency is not required to qualify as "special needs". A court order "contrary to the welfare" language in involuntary removals and voluntary relinquishments is required.

There are several considerations when reviewing applications and determining funding for maintenance payments and/or services. One must address all applications for adoption assistance. If a child meets the definition of special needs and meets eligibility requirements, the local department must make adoption assistance available to that family. Maintenance and services payments are two distinct components of adoption assistance and the LDSS determines if requested assistance is best met through maintenance or services. Maintenance in adoption assistance is not the same as foster care. All decisions for payment and services MUST be child specific – no "blanket policies." For example, a locality cannot say "we will not provide day care services as part of any agreement" or "we will provide mentoring as a part of every agreement." There is a detailed framework provided for assessing the child and family's needs and negotiating an adoption assistance agreement. The same process is used statewide to

provide consistency and equity, but each adoption assistance agreement is to be individually tailored.

New Applications gather the information needed to enter into an informed, objective and child- and family-specific negotiation. Family income shall NOT be the sole or the primary determining factor in establishing the assistance amount but it does have a role. Families are involved in discussing and assessing how and what personal resources and community resources will be used to meet the child's needs and these are documented in the agreement. An adoption assistance agreement may be for \$0, a negotiated amount, or the adoptive parents may decline an agreement – there are no longer conditional agreements.

There are several tools found in the new guidance that can be used for Adoption Assistance:

- Information Sheet on Adoption Assistance Program
- Full Disclosure of Child Information
- Adoption Assistance Screening Tool
- Application for Adoption Assistance
- Virginia Enhanced Maintenance Assessment Tool
- Adoption Assistance Agreement
- Annual Affidavit
- Request for Addendum to Adoption Assistance Agreement
- Addendum to the Adoption Assistance Agreement
- Checklist on Worker Responsibilities for Adoption Assistance

If there are any questions about Adoption Assistance, please contact Therese Wolf (therese.wolf@dss.virginia.gov). The new guidance is expected to be published in July.

Martin Brown, Commissioner of VDSS, was invited to join CWAC and to present on “Strengthening Virginia’s Families.” Over the past fifty years, social and cultural forces have led to drastic changes related to marriage, divorce, cohabitation, childbearing, and childrearing. Research shows that children who grow up in intact, two-parent families with both biological parents do better on a wide range of outcomes than children who grow up in single-parent families. Nationally, children who are raised by single parents are at greater risk of dropping out of school, teenage pregnancy, juvenile delinquency, living in poverty, and experiencing health, emotional, and behavioral problems than children growing up in two-parent families. While growing up in a single-parent home is not the only indicator of these negative outcomes, family structure has a direct impact on the overall well-being and long term outcomes of children.

In Virginia, the recent economic landscape has exacerbated these societal shifts, while the demand for core public services continues to increase. Many of Virginia’s citizens are experiencing serious financial hardships for the first time, while others, already known to our human service organizations, are forced to rely heavily on government support. In Virginia, poverty rates are higher for children, less educated adults, female-headed households, and families with no working adults. Virginia families that are headed by women have a 31% chance of experiencing poverty, compared to only 4% of married families with children. Over the past several decades, demographic trends consistently demonstrate that marriage rates have decreased, non-marital births have increased, and the number of children raised in single-parent homes has increased.

Strengthening Virginia's Families seeks to create a practice shift. VDSS is developing a system-wide approach to strengthening all families that focuses on reducing non-marital births, connecting and reconnecting fathers with their children, and encouraging the formation and maintenance of safe, stable, intact, two parent families. This includes capitalizing on opportunities to strengthen the family at every point of client contact and using a holistic approach that looks beyond clients as individuals and focuses on strengthening the family unit. There will be alignment of policies, programs, and resources with the guiding principles and values of VDSS.

Understanding changes in family structure and the basic demographic characteristics of the people we serve is critical for shaping the way social programs and policies are administered. In order to achieve system-change, key strategies must be employed to align policies and practices effectively. These strategies include:

- Development a practice model that sets forth our standards of professional practice and serves as a values framework that defines relationships, guides thinking and decision-making, and structures our beliefs about individuals, families and communities
- Establishment of outcome measures, process measures, and benchmarks relevant to the work of VDSS and in alignment with the values outlined in the practice model
- Evaluation and revision of policies and processes across all VDSS divisions and program areas for alignment with the goals of the initiative
- Identification of opportunities to streamline and maximize Department resources through performance-based contracting, reallocation of funds, and waiver processes
- Development of a comprehensive communication and outreach strategy for targeted messaging through marketing campaigns, trainings and conferences, and the dissemination of information
- Development of strategic partnerships with internal and external partners to garner support and influence the civil society
- Development and implementation of family strengthening best practices related to fatherhood involvement, parenting, and healthy relationships and marriage through grant opportunities to local communities

There are four implementation steps:

- Develop policy/legislation that will support this initiative
- Engage community (people outside of state government)
- Work with other state agencies
- Social Marketing – communicating the message to the individuals we serve

Go to <http://www.dss.virginia.gov/about/sfi/> for more information and resources for Strengthening Virginia's Families. There were several questions from the group for Commissioner Brown.

Q: Will this go across all the departments under the Secretary of Human Services?

A: Yes, that is the idea but first we have to start with VDSS first. Practice Model has been developed and now working on policies

Suggestion from CWAC: Can we brainstorm about ways to strengthen families – specific to child welfare to bring back to the commissioner to be included in the initiative?

Q: How will VDSS address reduction of non-marital births?

A: Partner with the Dept. of Health with their pregnancy reduction efforts.

Q: How do we get around federal government disincentives?

A: We have a good relationship with our federal partners and we are going to be asking for waivers. This initiative lays the foundation to have conversations about redistributing funds like TANF or child care to be supportive of families.

Q: Many children are being diverted from foster care and going to grandparents. What about Custody Assistance? Fostering connections requires relatives become foster parents and that is not what most people want to do. Can VDSS seriously consider support to families like Custody Assistance without some of the added requirements?

A: This is something to take into consideration.

Q: What is really meant by two parent family?

A: Reading the statement (in the power point) it sounds like two parents means in the same home, but that isn't what the focus will always be. There is recognition of issues like Domestic Violence, which will be dealt with aggressively, and those issues would keep the offender out of the home. The focus is on safe and stable families.

Q: What are we going to do about keeping families that are already two parent families together?

A: We are working on that now. The divisions in VDSS are going to use different means to help the families that won't be dictated by management. The practice model will help guide how we do business and create policy and regulations that will help us strengthen families.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:00 pm. The July meeting is scheduled for Friday, July 15th from 10:00 – 1:00 pm. If there are agenda topics you would like to see added, please contact Deborah Eves (Deborah.eves@dss.virginia.gov).