

## **Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council (AIACC)**

**Monday, July 20, 2020**

### **Alabama Industrial Development Training Center**

The AIACC met on Monday, July 20, 2020, via Zoom (due to COVID-19 meeting capacity restrictions). The meeting was called to order by AIACC Chair Senator Cam Ward. Also in attendance were Council members: Jane Elizabeth Burdeshaw, Robert Caldwell, Tametria Conner, Barbara Cooper, Suzanne Dowling, Megan Everett, Erich Grommet, Heather Jones, Whitney Meade, and Justin Schwartz. The following proxies were in attendance as well: Beverly Churchwell for Stephanie Azar, Eliza Belle for Lynn Beshear, Sarah O'Kelley for Fred Biasini, Nancy Thomas for Lucian Cronkite, Tina Sanders on behalf of Eric Mackey, Wendi Glass on behalf of John Mascia, and Yada Horace on behalf of Jim Ridling. Also in attendance was Anna McConnell, State Autism Coordinator.

The minutes from the January 27, 2020 meeting were approved and adopted.

*Chairperson Comments:* Senator Ward welcomed attendees to the meeting. He noted that all meetings are being held remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions. He thanked the group for their participation in this forum.

*Lead Agency Comments:* Dr. Eliza Belle reported that the AL Department of Mental Health continues to make adjustments to COVID-19 issues, like all other organizations. She also noted that the [ADMH Annual Report](#) was released and highlighted the work of ADMH Autism Services.

*State Coordinator Comments:* During the pandemic, the AIACC has relied on coordination among Council members and partners for advocacy and outreach to improve services to those with ASD. She noted that a telehealth request to Medicaid was coordinated among these groups, allowing for increased access to diagnostic components during a time when in person diagnostics are not possible. She thanked the group for their work.

*New Business:* Senator Ward asked the group about their experience with access to services during the pandemic. A variety of responses were provided by the participants:

- An individual with ASD is unable to go to work as usual and has seen social regression.
- Services from some state agencies are frozen while safety plans are formulated.

- Non-English speakers had difficulty accessing services before the pandemic, but now it is even more difficult. Materials need to be translated into other languages to enable easier access to services.
- Concerns about amending IEPs
- Concerns about those with ASD having issues with mask wearing
- Increased burden on parents for schooling and therapy (insurance declining to cover virtual therapies for speech and OT).
  - It was noted that New Directions Behavioral Health covers telehealth ABA. Recommendations were made for families to continue to follow up with health plans as changes are still being made to policies and allowances due to COVID-19.

Erich Grommet noted that there are strong arguments against blanket policies that only allow for in-person or only telehealth service deliveries. Articles referenced are listed below:

- Cox et al. (2020; A Proposed Process for Risk Mitigation During the COVID-19 Pandemic) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7178923/>
- Colombo et al. (2020: An Essential Service Decision Model for ABA Providers During Crisis) [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341586248\\_An\\_Essential\\_Service\\_Decision\\_Model\\_for\\_ABA\\_Providers\\_During\\_Crisis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/341586248_An_Essential_Service_Decision_Model_for_ABA_Providers_During_Crisis)
- LeBlanc et al. (2020: The Role of Compassion and Ethics in Decision Making
- Regarding Access to Applied Behavior Analysis Services During the COVID-19 Crisis: A Response to Cox, Plavnick, and Brodhead) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7296895/>
- Rodriguez (2020: Maintaining Treatment Integrity in the Face of Crisis: A Treatment Selection Model for Transitioning Direct ABA Services to Telehealth) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7232927/>

*0-5 Subcommittee:* Sarah O'Kelley noted that this committee as been working to identify children who are at risk of developing ASD even earlier and to move them into services (the EI model). Data regarding pilot screening and diagnosis of tools are available earlier than it would have been. Originally intended in person projects are being redesigned for remote collaboration.

*6-13 Subcommittee:* Heather Jones reported that from the service provider perspective, that the closure of schools and IEP concerns are a major issue. She reported that The Learning Tree is focused on residential programs and clinics have gone to telehealth services.

*14-20 Subcommittee:* Erich Grommet reported that the subcommittee has continued virtual meetings, as were occurring prior to the pandemic. The group has been gathering transition resources. Troy has

offered server space and access to a webmaster to host the list of resources. A preliminary website is pending. Resources were requested from the group with any knowledge of options for transition to adulthood resources. If you are aware of resources, email to Erich Grommet or Anna McConnell.

*21+ Subcommittee:* Sarah Ryan noted that the biggest issue she is seeing currently is the disruption to schedules and protocols (mask wearing requirements) to what was day to day expectations for those with ASD. It is important for general public and workers to recognize that those with ASD are not necessarily rebelling against requirements but struggling with the changes in routine and possibly sensory issues.

*Diagnostics and Health:* Justin Schwartz noted that the group has continued to meet and has identified telehealth appropriate diagnostic tools that have research base. These include the TELE-ASD-PEDS, the Systematic Observation of Red Flags (SORF), and the Brief Observation of Symptoms of Autism (BOSA). It has been difficult to see patients safely. Dr. Schwartz also noted that the group has been working with ADMH to develop a [diagnostic tool for primary care providers](#) who have concerns of ASD. This tool allows for physicians to report their concerns using DSM5 criteria, and it can be used to access ADMH Autism Services and ABA therapy through AL Medicaid. The group is working with the Regional Autism Network (RAN) on the tool as well. Dr. Schwartz and Dr. Laura Stoppelbein presented the tool at the AAP Virtual Conference in June.

*Training and Education:* Anna McConnell noted that parent training has shown itself to be the most important component of services, especially during the pandemic.

*Regional Autism Network (RAN):* Amy Mitchell noted that calls to the RAN dropped significantly at the beginning of the pandemic; however, calls have begun to come in again, particularly regarding needs with the adult population. During this time, the RAN has partnered with the Autism Society of Alabama (ASA) to create a YouTube channel to provide support to families who needed access to information during the pandemic. Topics included: caregiver self-care, mask wearing, virtual therapy and schooling how-tos, etc. Videos have been posted 1x/week. ASA/RAN/DMH Autism Services have partnered to offer Drive Through Resource Fairs in various parts of the state – specifically to reach out to underserved populations. Amy introduced the Family Navigators: Tammy Barkey (UA), Maria Gutierrez (AU), and Dana Handmacher (USA) – they have been serving their own families amid serving clients that call with needs, as well as offering valuable insights into planning for video topics. April Coleman is the new UA RAN Director.

*Funding and Finance:* The Behavior Analyst Board had 286 active licenses in January 2020. The Board has been licensing weekly since on demand testing is available. Anna McConnell noted that ADMH Autism Services continues to grow in providers and clients and invited anyone interested to visit their [website](#).

*Member Updates:*

Fred Biasini (UCEDD) noted that Linda Russo and Sarah O'Kelley had been on an advisory group and had provided guidance to ADMH related to COVID. UCEDD had also applied for a transition grant. He noted the prototype of a database for providers of neurodevelopmental disabilities and the need for funding.

Justin Schwartz noted that UAB School of Public Health is wrapping up a Needs Assessment survey related to PCP needs. He also noted insurance coverage issues with NDBH and Medicaid. It has been difficult to get those with ASD to continue to qualify for services, noting that insurance providers continue to require certain assessments.

Erich Grommet noted that telehealth has been helpful for families who struggle with transportation issues and work conflicts. It would be a good option to continue post-COVID. Justin Schwartz agreed.

Dr. Barbara Cooper, the new Secretary of the Department of Early Childhood Education, noted that DECE has published open guidance for hybrid, virtual, and in person models of learning for each LEA. These are designed to support teachers in the new learning environments due to COVID 19.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 p.m.

Next meeting: Monday, October 19, 2020

Recording Secretary

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A. McConnell