

Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council (AIACC)

Monday, January 25, 2021

Zoom

The AIACC met on Monday, January 25, 2021, 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: Commissioner Kimberly Boswell, Commissioner Jane Elizabeth Burdeshaw, Robert Caldwell, Tametria Conner, Suzanne Dowling, Dr. Erich Grommet, Dr. Heather Jones, Melanie Jones, Dr. Whitney Meade, Dr. Sarah O'Kelley, Darryle Powell, Constance Rice-Johnson, Dr. Justin Schwartz, and Senator Cam Ward. The following proxies were in attendance as well: Karen Watkins-Smith for Stephanie Azar, Diana Tullier for Barbara Cooper, Jake Schieber for Lucian Cronkite, Laurie Eldridge-Auffant for Dr. Scott Harris, Elisabeth Newell for Eric Mackey, Wendi Glass for John Mascia, Yada Horace for Jim Ridling, Suzanne Bruton for and Chris Stewart. Also in attendance was Anna McConnell, State Autism Coordinator.

Lead Agency Comments: Commissioner Kimberly Boswell recognized Cam Ward, who has been a champion for those affected by Autism. His ability to make deep impacts in on a state level for Autism is unequalled. In 2006 and even earlier, he officially began his public work with Autism, while his private life had been impacted much earlier. Cam used his position to make lives better for those affected by Autism, first as a member of the House and later as a member of the Senate. In 2007, Representative Cam Ward and Lieutenant Governor Jim Folsom, Jr. announced the formation of the Alabama Autism Task Force (AATF). House Joint Resolution 23 was passed by the Alabama Legislature and signed into law by Governor Bob Riley shortly afterwards. Cam was integral in the formation of the Alabama Autism Collaborative Group, which conducted a statewide Needs Assessment to further support the work of the AATF. This work was the foundation for the Alabama Interagency Autism Coordinating Council. In addition to this work, he has helped develop the Alabama Behavior Analyst Licensing Board and the championed the difficult victory for insurance coverage for those with ASD. Cam has shepherded autism issues (and the people affected by them) through a complicated system with an advocate's heart. Thank you for leaving these issues in Alabama much better than you found it – that is what public servants do. We look forward to our continued partnership and wish you the very best in your other passion as the Director of the Alabama Bureau of Pardons and Paroles.

Chairperson Comments: Cam Ward responded with gratitude for the recognition. He noted that many legislators didn't know what autism meant, but with advocacy and work, much progress has been made.

State Coordinator Comments: Anna McConnell expressed gratitude to Cam Ward for his work and leadership for autism and wished him well in his new endeavors. Vera Hendrix was recognized for her inclusion in the 2020 Women Who Shape the State listing. Leah Fullman is with Faulkner University, which will be working towards developing a new ASD clinic.

The minutes from the October 19, 2020 meeting were approved and adopted.

New Business:

0-5 Subcommittee: Sarah O'Kelley noted that this committee is quite large and has subcommittees to achieve various parts of the work. Dr. O'Kelley noted that Mary Beth Vick summarized current activities well. Early Intervention is working to identify and serve children with ASD. The workgroup is working towards improving the transition for children from Part C to Part B (preschool services). ADRS is thankful for the additional financial support from ADECE as work by Dr. Barber and Dr. Tomeny continues, intensive training and mentoring and teaching best practices for young children with ASD.

6-13 Subcommittee: Heather Jones noted that COVID-19 has affected special education and school aged children. Elisabeth Newell noted that the Autism Academy is still planned for teachers this summer during the MEGA conference that will be held over the summer. There have been more shifts at ALSDE as Crystal Richardson retired.

14-20 Subcommittee: Erich Grommet reported that the subcommittee has continued virtual meetings in months where there is not an AIACC. There is a website that is live and still pending more content. The intent is to use it as a landing place for services for those with ASD. More resources are expected to be added soon, then it will be sent to the larger group for more recommendations on resources.

21+ Subcommittee: Sarah Ryan noted recent retirements and job changes has impacted the committee membership – if any are interested, please contact Dr. Ryan. The group is looking at resources in other states and considering what possibilities for services could be in Alabama.

Diagnostics and Health: Justin Schwartz noted that the group has continued to meet and focused on workforce issues for those diagnostic and healthcare for those with ASD and increasing access to these services. There are informal discussions related to access to diagnostics and mental health needs.

Virtual learning has been an issue for many families during the pandemic, highlighting the need for mental health services for those with ASD and their families.

Public Awareness: Melanie Jones reported that the ASA and group continues to work on Autism Friendly Alabama. The website is in development. Once it is developed, the site will be sent out for further review. More committee members are needed.

Regional Autism Network (RAN): Dana Handmacher is a Family Navigator with the University of South Alabama.

Direct Assistance: Family Navigators continue to enhance the RAN. They are located at USA, AU, and UA. Caregivers and self-advocates can get information they need to access resources and provide support that many parents are seeking. This only enhances the services RAN provides – connecting parent to parent. The data from these calls helps to stay on top of the needs in the community. This last quarter, the trends were similar across the state. The greatest concerns were about school concerns, mental and emotional health issues and behavior concerns, and diagnosis need. At the AU RAN, many calls for Spanish translation services. The AU RAN has received a grant for Hispanic outreach for ID/DD statewide.

Technical Assistance and Trainings: The UA RAN has been working with the Tuscaloosa Public Library for an autism resource collection. The UAB RAN conducted a community assessment survey to determine topics for the Community Education Workshops. The UAH RAN has been reaching out to Special Education departments and speaking with local sports teams and museums about hosting Autism Friendly events in the future. The USA RAN has an upcoming training with Vocational Rehabilitation for autism specific to supported employment providers across the state. Ninety professionals are set up currently. More professionals are reaching out to the RAN to access services statewide.

Statewide Coordination and Collaboration: The RAN staff all meet regularly twice per month, including meeting with ASA monthly. Everyone has different disciplines and backgrounds, and these meetings allow the group to work more effectively. Plans are in development on the annual statewide Constituency Board meet in February. The RAN staff have been discussing trainings that could be offered. Some ideas include a series of parent “boot camps”, which would invite parents who have successfully navigated different systems to help other parents learn how to go through those processes; and providing training to teachers. The RAN has

collaborated with other agencies around the state. Some examples include the United Way and the Community of Practice group through DMH.

Staff changes have recently occurred. Ashley McLain is the new UAH RAN Director. She has been networking in the community and jumped in with the RAN duties. UAB has added Anne Brisendine to its leadership as the new PI, and UAB RAN is also working toward hiring a Family Navigator.

The RAN meetings have provided a good time to reflect on where we have been and where we are going. It is obvious we have come so far, due to the collaborative work of everyone involved in services for those with Autism Services, including Cam Ward.

Funding and Finance: Anna McConnell reported that the RAN was increased funding in the DMH budget – to allow for an additional \$375k total (to allow for an additional \$75k per site). We are waiting to hear from the Governor's recommended budget to see if it will be included there. The Behavior Analyst Licensing Board updated from Heather Jones reported that Dr. McKerchar will be coming off as chair and Ken Atkins will be taking on that role. The website has all of the most recent licenses as of 12/31/2020. There are over 300 listed there, including the Assistant Behavior Analysts. Anna McConnell noted that the Coalition of Autism Service Providers (CASP) is looking at reimbursement rates for ABA nationally and a number of local service providers are members as well. Related to public coverage, DMH Autism Services are growing well. Telehealth is being utilized and some clients have been seen in person. Case management is being provided and Rehabilitative Providers are coming online quickly. Karen Watkins Smith reported that Medicaid is considering continuing the telehealth post-COVID. Medicaid coverage of ABA is available outside of DMH services too, via Chapter 37. A list of those providers is on the Medicaid website.

Member Updates:

Anna McConnell reported on behalf of Laurie Eldridge-Auffant. ADPH has received grant funding for a fulltime COVID-19 and emergency preparedness disability advocate.

Sarah O'Kelley noted that the Alabama Autism Conference will be virtual this year. Visit autism.ua.edu for more information.

Maria Sahonic offered her gratitude for Hispanic families being involved and advocating and requesting services. Translation is needed for services and workshops (and information about these activities).

The Caregiver Social associated with the Alabama Autism Conference will be virtual and will be hosted by the RAN and ASA.

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

Next meeting: Monday, April 19, 2021

Recording Secretary

A. McConnell

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