

**Commission on Disability
Tuesday August 18, 2020, 4:30 PM Minutes**

Virtual meeting with WebEx platform

Live streaming on City's website:

<http://www.worcesterma.gov/video-on-demand>

Call-in conference line and ASL interpreters provided

Attendance:

Members Present: Robert Bilotta, Robert Bureau, John Finn, Jr., Nancy Garr-Colzie, Fitzroy Hall, Dee Karuna, Elizabeth Myska, Joseph Prochilo, Stephen Stolberg

Member Absent: Paul Keister

Staff: Jayna Turчек, Miriam Nyante, Dawn E. Clark

Guests: John O'Dell, Director of Energy & Asset Management; Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk Commissioner; Dr. Matilde Castiel, Worcester Commissioner of Health & Human Services; Casey Burns, Lorie Matiska, and Kristen Mayotte from Healthy Coalition of Greater Worcester; Eve Gilmore, Executive Director, Edward Street Child Services

Call to order, instructions for virtual meeting, introductions

Chairperson Bureau called the meeting to order and requested Director Turчек to provide the technology instructions for access and participation during the meeting. Commissioners then introduced themselves.

Approval of July 21, 2020 Minutes

Commissioner Prochilo moved to approve the July 21, 2020 minutes as written. Commissioner Garr-Colzie seconded the motion. All approved.

City of Worcester ADA updates *

- City Hall improvements (2nd and 4th floor counters)
- Union Station construction of new center platform (MBTA)

The City received a State Municipal ADA grant of \$40,000 which was used to make City Hall counter tops accessible at the Treasurers and Election office windows on the second floor and the Planning division on the fourth floor. There was also an aesthetic improvement at the Treasurers window that fits into the character of the building. Photos provided to Commissioners in advance.

Improvements have been made is at Union Station. These includes push panels installed at the garage entrance where originally one using a chair could not get in without going around to another door. Also a ramp at the Harding Street entrance which eliminates the previous step/ lift combination halfway up the corridor into the building. These improvement to accessibility and convenience have been done through the ongoing work to improve the building and not with a specific grant.

For information purposes as to access, the State is in the process of extending the platform (four times the current length) which creates additional accessible access points to MBTA and AMTRACK trains. This project is scheduled to be completed in two years.

Updates on voting process (Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk)*

- **Early voting and mail in voting options for 2020 election season** <http://www.worcesterma.gov/elections>

Niko Vangjeli, City Clerk, reported there have been a lot of changes made to the 2020 election season due to CoVID 19. Every Worcester voter in the city should have received a mailing from the Massachusetts Secretary of State with an application for an absentee ballot. Any voter that wished to vote in this matter should return this request. The City clerk's office to date has received over 17,000 requests. As of today the clerk's office has in turn mail over 6,000 early voting ballots and a little

over 1,000 absentee ballots to voters. Closing date for mailing is a request for ballot is August 26 at 5:00pm.

From August 22 to August 28 the city will offer in person early voting at various locations and days. All districts will have an early voting opportunity. The clerk encouraged voters to go to the city website for early voting information. All 50 polling locations will be open on primary day, September 1, 2020.

The recent legislation set August 22 at 8pm as the last day to register to vote in the September 1, 2020 primary.

The process will be the similar for the November 3, 2020 election. October 17 – 30, 2020 are the dates for in person early voting. Details about days and locations of early voting have not been finalized.

October 24, 2020 is the deadline to register for the November 3, 2020 election.

The City is trying to make voting as easy as possible for voters. Postage is provided on the ballot's return envelope. If people are not comfortable returning the ballot by mail, there is a ballot drop off box inside city hall garage and on the first floor of city Hall when coming in the back door. There will be an effort to have drop off boxes at the early voting sites. A video was also shown.

The City of Worcester created a public service announcement (PSA) for Deaf and Hard of Hearing residents in American Sign Language (ASL) and with closed caption. The short PSA was shared during the meeting, will be posted on the City website and shared with community members and specifically with Joan Philip at the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Independent Living Program at the Center for Living and Working, Inc. and Sue Philip with our Deaf Survivors. The video can be viewed here: <https://youtu.be/owYCodyfBOo>

Mental health presentation and conversation with Dr. Mattie Castiel, Commissioner City of Worcester Health and Human Services

Dr. Castiel began by explaining sharing the work of the Mayor's Mental Health Task Force which has been meeting for the last couple of years. This is a model out of the state of New York and looks at similar issues and best practices for addressing mental health from around the United States.

Many agencies have come together in Worcester to look at the stigma of having a mental health issue in communities of color, the general dearth of clinicians and those clinicians who speak a client's language. The pay for social workers, psychiatrists and others are less than other medical fields and need to be increased to attract these specialists to the field of mental health care.

Additionally the Community Health Improvement Plan has a Committee working on behavioral health issues led by Ken Bates of Open Sky. The two groups recently decided to merge.

In addition, during Covid-19, Worcester Together created a group to address mental health needs and has since merged with the former two groups. About 90 people are involved in this effort. The stigma group, work force pipeline group and early education and childhood group continue to meet. A community response team and clinician change affinity group have been added.

Dr. Castiel introduced Casey Burns, Director of Healthy Coalition of Greater Worcester which works at assessment and community engagement around public health through the 2016-2020 Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP). They are beginning the process for understanding the health issues for updating the plan. Specific to this discussion is an objective in the CHIP to improve culturally competent care to communities of color. The Behavioral Health Group looked at

the numbers of mental health patients and providers determining that there was a significant need for mental health providers overall and more specially providers who are culturally competent. The Coalition was able to secure funding to do an in depth study leading to successful strategies at work across agencies.

Dr. Castiel introduced the leaders of two sub-groups: work force pipeline group and early education and childhood group.

Lorie Matiska and Kristen Mayotte spoke from the work force pipeline group. Taking Casey's overview as a backdrop agencies have had difficulty filling positions and second find culturally competent staff affecting access to care. Filling positions provide opportunities to have a diverse workforce and economic ability for staff.

Beginning in 2019 the group has been looking at the current workforce for providing mental health care and the gaps so that strategies can be developed to meet the need. There were over 700 vacant positions and suspect that the vacancy rate is more. The group is working with the agencies, providers, local colleges and the Fallon Foundation which has granted almost \$210,000 towards the work. The Worcester Youth Opportunities staff is also part of this group.

The goals of the grant and sub- group are:

1. Introducing young people to the mental health care as a profession
2. Separating the work- the caring function from paperwork and medication as an example.
3. Work with colleges and pool resources to develop training programs.
4. Plan for providing assistance to refugees
5. Advocacy: Increasing workers pay scale – This was going well until the cost to the state to address the pandemic.

The overall goal is to change the system so both client and provider can have the best outcomes.

The work plan for this year includes virtually or in person:

1. Securing buy-ins from the executive staff level for meeting the inclusion, equity and diversify commitment including Boards and all staff levels.
2. Doing some redesign of job descriptions across agencies for a pathway to career development and upward mobility.
3. Exposure and education of youth about the mental health profession.
4. Develop a training collaborative- meeting funding requirement and addition trainings
5. Conduct a pilot program to arm staff with others skills such as driver education that with assist to clients in their every day living.

Eve Gilmore shared information about the early childhood education sub group. She is the Executive Director of Edward Street Child Services and a peer with the local Together for KID's Coalition, a coalition of people working with birth to age 8. The focus has been the physical and mental health of children and family engagement. Research has shown the children's brain function which has changed how providers are working with them in preparation for the children to enter kindergarten. The recent learning of brain development has been an essential driver for trainings and implementation of new ways for teachers, mental health professionals and other staff working with young children.

The same staffing issues identified in the work force pipeline sub-group effect early childhood education as well. It is important for the community to inform and education caring and committed staff. The sub-committee has been working with colleges to develop new courses and certificate programs, has developed a mentoring program.

As part of the CHIIP the group is working to make early childhood an identified population which need to be addressed. It is part of the Mayor's mental Health Task Force. The overall goal is to bring providers together at the table working together as a collective, elevating the importance of early childhood and mental health.

Initiatives underway are:

- Kid's Together began in Worcester 25 years ago working with children under the age of 5 and is nationally known helping teachers work with children who exhibit stressful symptoms such as anxiety
- There have been three panels for businesses to learn about early childhood development how stresses at this time of life effects people when they are adult
- Working with The Health Foundation and Ready Go to develop curriculum for urban children with stressful situations for teachers and parent to respond effectively. This is a two year research project. Hopefully resulting in new ways to benefit teachers and staff. Locations are Worcester and Southbridge.
- Working with UMass and Child Advocate at the state level for a program called: "Building Resiliency in Children and Classrooms". This is for teachers, parents and clinicians around trauma care for children.
- Boston Basics or Basics

The goals of these initiatives are to help prevent stressful family situations and bring the community together to be supportive.

Prior to the pandemic funding was looking positive now early childhood programs are competing with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for resources.

The following is in response to a question about the state of the community's mental health during Covid

- In this time of Covid both state and local surveys indicate 50% of the parents have an elevated anxiety level.
- The preliminary results of the Covid community survey, 2,000 respondents is indicating higher than 50% at a moderate to high level

- Senior Center staff is reaching out to seniors. There was already a concern about loneliness in the senior community. Many don't have access to computers.
- Youth Opportunities staff is reaching out to that population.
- Dr. Castiel is concerned about those who may be using opioids and the potential for increase in use. Also domestic violence on the rise.
- Eve Gilmore indicated early childhood providers and staff connect about three times a weeks and encourage specific call-in times for parents and caregivers to get information and have conversations. The learning is that the priority focus has to be on the social/emotional issues before introducing any educational material.
- Covid has wreaked havoc on child care. In Central Mass. 30% of providers are not reopening
- Telehealth is a positive that has been a result of Covid. It has been years working to get this service.

The Chairperson thanked the presenters.

Updates on PawSox stadium and accessibility Recommendations

In a communication with Director Turchek, the spokesperson for the PawSox indicated they were willing to provide the information requested by the Commission. However, due to a personal issues the two engineers were not available. Director Turchek will follow up.

The Chairperson said it was important that the stadium be accessible and the Commission seeks to work with the PawSox to this end.

Update: Outdoor dining and accessibility

Director Turchek has been in communication with Stephen Rolle, Director of the City's Planning Department who works with the Commissions that oversees this issue. There was a hearing about outdoor dining on August 11, 2020. City Council is interested in having a more comprehensive plan for out-dining going forward. There was an issue with one restaurant on Shrewsbury Street which was resolved by

having two people at a table: thus keeping the required boundary requirement. There will likely be another hearing before going back to Council. He was very clear about his willingness to work with the Commission about any proposals and any further complaints.

Comment from Michael Kennedy, Center for Living & Working, Inc. Access Coordinator indicated that even before Covid the path of travel would often be on the brick banding with the holes where the tees of planted. This is not wide enough and dangerous. This probably is the number one challenge for outdoor dining.

Request for information: Ride the Woo trolley accessibility

An invitation was extended to an owner to come before the Commission. This is the trolley used in the Canal District. The one trolley on the road now is not accessible and is a pilot. The plan is to have two more added maybe next year that will be accessible. Originally there was no plan to have accessible trolleys.

Update: Worcester transportation initiatives

1. Nancy Garr-Colzie reported the WRTA Rider Advisory Group is discussing cleanliness of the busses and fare collection. At present fares are not being collected and is scheduled to begin September 1. Check their website to confirm. Note: The MBTA has resumed collecting fares.
2. The WRTA Advisory Board did not meet in July or August.
3. The Transportation Planning Advisory Group (TPAG) will meet tomorrow. This group advises the WRTA on para transit and bus transportation about accessibility issues.
4. The Transportation Advocacy Coalition is meeting this Thursday afternoon. Discussion of on-demand transportation is on the agenda. There is still only one accessible taxi in Worcester.

Buses have been running on Saturday routes so some routes have not had bus service.

Review of AAB notices and applications:

Notice of Action

- 209 Harding St. Docket # V20 135

Suggestions for upcoming agenda items

Updates on following items:

- PawSox stadium seating and accessibility recommendations
- Outdoor dining and accessibility
- Ride the Woo trolley accessibility
- Worcester transportation initiatives

Announcements:

- **REDD (Rights, Equality and Dignity for the Disabled)**
September 1, 2020, 4:00 – 5:30pm, For questions email:
jbellel@yahoo.com
- **Next Commission on Disability virtual meeting: September 15, 2020 4:30pm**
- **WRTA Transportation Planning Advisory Meeting:**
September 16, 2020, 1-2:30pm, Contact: CMellis@cmrpc.org
- **Emergency Preparedness Meeting: TBD**

Adjournment: Commissioner Prochilo moved to adjourn and Commissioner Garr-Colzie seconded. All approved. 6:40pm

*Material can be viewed at the Office of Human Rights & Disabilities during normal business hours.