



EARLY CHILDHOOD COUNCIL MINUTES

**REGULAR MEETING
Wednesday, September 8, 2021**

The Early Childhood Council (ECC) convened on Wednesday, September 8, 2021.

Board Members in Attendance: Chair McHorse; Vice Chair Worthington; Members Gordon, Alvarez, Huston, Hedrick, Conlin, and Schennum

Staff in attendance: Rachel Farley, Caitlin Oliver, Donna Sundstrom, and Cindy Gamez

CALL TO ORDER – Chair McHorse called the meeting to order at 8:41 a.m.

CITIZEN COMMUNICATION: GENERAL – No citizen communication

1. APPROVAL OF MINUTES from August 16, 2021, meeting – Member Hedrick moved to approve the minutes. Member Conlin seconded the motion. The minutes were approved by a vote of 7-0

2. NEW BUSINESS AND POSSIBLE ACTIONS

a. Discussion on Child Care Subsidies – Guest: Nicole Robinson, Director of Child Care Contracts, Workforce Solutions Capital Area

Early Childhood Council (ECC) members asked Nicole Robinson questions based on both oral (at City of Austin ECC meeting) and written community feedback about the child care subsidy system and services by Workforce Solutions Capital Area. Feedback pointed to the need for increased funding to expand the subsidy program and to reengineer the process by which parents interact with Workforce Solutions (WFS). A list of the questions ECC members prepared to ask WFS is included as a backup document for this meeting on the ECC website.

Question 1 - Is there an ongoing mechanism to confidentially track family satisfaction with the Workforce Solutions processes? If so, can we review the data/information? WFS tracks customer feedback from the website and the communications team sends daily communications to the child care or workforce team, as is relevant. There is also a monthly report about compiled about the comments and questions WFS receives. WFS has explored doing more direct parent surveys. In the past they have had low response rates to parent surveys. WFS can extract childcare pieces from the monthly feedback reports and share them with ECC members.

Question 2 - What mechanisms are in place to gather feedback from families on process issues (application process, client questions, general communications, etc.)?

Robinson expressed appreciation for the feedback from parents and future customers that ECC shared with WFS. At the monthly provider meetings, WFS shares out the email address that parents can use to connect with WFS with concerns and inquiries. Parents are encouraged to

reach out via email or phone so that the relevant unit can follow up. Parents can also provide feedback on the website. Most families apply online so they are already on the website. Member Gordon recommended there be different pathways for feedback on the website for different types of challenges families or providers may be experiencing. Recommends having all options and many methods of submitting feedback available.

Follow up question from Member Hedrick: What is WFS doing to build trust and protect confidentiality when parents give feedback? WFS's current contractor, BakerRipley, is working on training modules to help caseworkers better interact with families- including intensive customer service training and trauma-informed care training. WFS has heard from providers that some parents are hesitant to report changes that might impact their eligibility during the 12-month service period because they are fearful they will be penalized and lose services. Robinson described WFS's goal as not to be punitive and get families out of services, but that WFS still has a responsibility to ensure eligibility of families receiving services. They encourage families to reach out to us as soon as possible before the end of their 12-month period so that they can maintain eligibility. These families may be able to be placed on job search status or WFS can use local Continuity of Care funding.

Member Huston asked about the application process and possible improvements. There is an initial online application, which serves as a pre-assessment form with self-attestation. Families can select from over 30 languages to complete the application. Families get put on the waitlist and are then outreached for enrollment and given a checklist of items needed. Their application is processed when the packet is complete. They are procuring a company to make videos in Spanish and English to walk families through the application, enrollment, and certification processes. The process is completely paperless, and it has been 4-5 years since families have been required to come in person to submit paperwork. Only if a family is having trouble would the child care team propose the family come to one of the WFS locations to submit paperwork. Every board uses the TWIST integrated system, but they are transitioning to a document management system to manage caseload on the staff side that should shorten the timeframe, to see where the customer is in the system, avoid pain points, and speed the process up.

Question 3 - What role can the City play in improving the family interaction with Workforce Solutions? The ECC can continue to keep an open dialogue going between community members and WFS by bringing forth any ideas and concerns from parents and providers. Another way is through the mini grant from United Way for Greater Austin. WFS has applied to contract with them to see where WFS is with parent interactions, with the goal of increasing parent engagement.

Questions 5 through 7 - Questions about systemic change, including whether WFS believes there is a need for systemic process change and what the plans are to make change. Robinson said that there is always room to improve and make systems better at WFS and that the team at the local board is constantly looking for improvements and new technology that might help improve their processes. However, as a local board, they don't get to say a whole lot to try to get some more changes and improvements. The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) is in the process of procuring a new system to replace their database and attendance tracking. The hope is that with this new system the application will be universal and the same for all 28 TWC boards in the state. Locally, at the board level, they try to simplify the application process for

families so they can get services quickly and don't have to spend a lot of time submitting or resubmitting documentation. Every transaction will go through the issue tracker system, and they can use it to see where improvements need to be made. They are currently looking into implementing QR codes and they just got approval to use texting to keep families informed about outreach for enrollment and redetermination. Finally, their tiger team with some of the board members, is talking about having a town hall style meeting for parents and providers to come talk with board staff. The purpose of town halls would be to increase customer/community engagement so that the tiger team has the best information when making decisions on how to improve communication with customers and meet customer needs.

Vice Chair Worthington asked if there are grace periods or opportunities for families to rectify a mistake on an application. Is there a system of review for flagging when a family is close to completing enrollment but are missing a document? If a family shares that with WFS, they can follow that trail and can make exceptions. They do not have a specific communication protocol for how many times they reach out to families but they do have appeal rights where everything is reviewed and get different options for how to proceed. Any family who turns in 1 piece of paper or 6 is going to get the same services. WFS has to have "full kit" (complete packet) to authorize care. If ongoing problem for multiple families, the new issue tracking system TWC is implementing will show WFS where the bottlenecks are occurring. Vice Chair Worthington proposed using the new database as an opportunity to prioritize families that have less documents missing. Suggested also providing intensive case management using the capabilities of the new system. Robinson said that WFS can look at the capabilities of the new system to be used in that purpose.

Member Conlin asked, "How are staff supported to be ready to show up to do quality work?" Management seeks to provide the best possible wages. The contractor staff looks at budget and tries to provide competitive wages and benefits to full-time staff. The trauma-informed care training also benefits staff as some of the staff are customers as well.

Chair McHorse recognized that WFS Capital Area has had additional loads, burdens, and funding from TWC placed on them during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also recognized that the capital area is the TWC board with the highest number of quality rated centers and highest number of quality improvements.

Question 9 - What training is required for intake staff who manage and process applications and support clients through this process? How is this training funded? Are City funds utilized for that at all, or could they be? Who gets those trainings? All staff get the trauma-informed care and customer service trainings, including PAs (the administrative staff that takes application, enter data into system, take calls), eligibility specialists (call centers, check eligibility), and the fiscal team (processes payments).

Follow up question from Member Huston: How are staff attitudes to serve families baked into the system already? Is that built into the training that staff gets? WFS tries to foster and model a culture of "family first." It may take multiple times back and forth but they do try to make sure the communication is there to keep families in care. WFS is fortunate to have local dollars so they can transfer families to different funding sources when needed. Not sure what the

onboarding looks like on contractor side; but staff are getting that attitude from the management on contractor and board sides.

Member Hedrick asked, “What percent of the way do you think you are in getting toward excellent customer service, and if you had more money or capacity what would you put in place?” Robinsons believes they have a way to go with getting toward making all these changes and improvements, but they are at the table and the tiger team at the board is working on making improvements. With no constraints, Robinson would like to see someone dedicated to do intensive case management- someone who can work with families so they don’t lose services; help connect them with resources on the workforce side so they continue to meet participation; and promote more interaction and ongoing dialogue with families throughout the 12-month period. Unsure of number of intensive case management staff that would be needed.

Member Gordon requested to be a part of opportunities, such as the tiger team, for the Community Engagement work group to be involved in community conversations that Workforce has, to help build trust in the community.

Chair McHorse said next step was to take information gathered in this discussion back to the ECC work groups. From there, a memo or recommendation may be created. McHorse thanked Robinson for providing information to the ECC members, and Robinson thanked the ECC for this dialogue and sharing feedback from community members.

b. Community Engagement Work Group updates- Community experiences navigating child care systems

Member Gordon informed the members that the work group meetings are the last Tuesday of every month from 3:30-4:30 p.m. and extended an invitation to all to participate in the workgroup (parents, community members, providers, any early childhood stakeholders). At the August 31, 2021, meeting, the group recapped discussions from the last couple ECC meetings, including Nicole Robinsons’ August 16th Workforce Solutions Capital Area presentation to ECC members. There was also a discussion led by Foundation Communities and GAVA on community guided initiatives. The group explored alternatives for families on the waitlist- outside of the scope of what the City funds- as well as how to expand the child care ecosystem to support more families. Other topics at the meeting were looking at the role of the caretaker and how the City might support them during the pandemic and providing sessions for feedback from child care providers. At the next meeting, the group will talk about next steps on child care subsidies.

c. Policy Work Group updates

- i. City Economic Prosperity Commission exploring concerns about child care- Cathy McHorse

Chair McHorse was invited to give a presentation about child care systems and processes at the City Economic Prosperity Commission on August 30, 2021. The Commission’s focus is on work force development and construction. McHorse is waiting to hear back from the Commission after the presentation to see if they would like any more information about child care in Austin.

- ii. City Council approved inclusion of child care as requested use in competitive real estate processes and in lease, acquisition, or redevelopment of City property- Cathy McHorse

City Council approved Item 108, which means the City manager will have to report back to Council if they do not decide to include childcare in future City developments. Relatedly, Austin Public Health, United Way for Greater Austin, and CM Tovo's office continue to work with the Housing and Planning Department to create a child care map for the City's Rental Housing Development Assistance (RHDA) program application. Housing and Planning has discussed increasing the minimum standards for applicants, such as requiring child care services for a family development if located in a "child care desert."

- iii. Child Care Regulations translated Listed Family Home Standards into Spanish- Cathy McHorse

AVANCE has been advocating for these standards to be translated into the native language of a large number of family-based child care providers. Fortunately, they have now been translated. This was a good first step, and AVANCE is still waiting on the full minimum standards to be translated into Spanish.

- iv. Digital Inclusion and Early Childhood- Anna Lisa Conlin

The City's 2021 Digital Inclusion Fellow, Khotan Harmon, would like to come back to present to the ECC in future. Harmon recently met with Chair McHorse and Members Conlin and Huston. At the meeting, the ECC members provided Harmon with more information about the child care landscape and digital needs. Chair McHorse hopes that one outcome from these discussions with the Digital Inclusion Fellow is more hardware and software support for child care services.

d. Winter Storm Review Task Force final report update- Aletha Huston

Member Huston gave updates to the members about the final report and recommendations which were presented at a City Council work session on August 24, 2021. The report and recommendations are based on findings from 5 online community sessions led by a city-appointed task force with representatives from all quality of life commissions. Huston said the Task Force did not hear from anyone about families with young children during the community sessions, but that families with young children likely had added hardships during the storm, such as access to diapers, etc. The Task Force recommendations are largely about advanced planning for disasters. Many of the emergency response and planning decisions can only be made at the state level, however there are some ways in which the City could be more prepared for future storms. City could be ready to clear roads so people can get to heat, for example. The City could also make different decisions about how to allocate electricity.

Member Alvarez shared about being a Spanish speaker on the hotline during the Winter Storm where he heard some of the hardships that parents with young children faced, like accessing warm meals. Alvarez mentioned the Pandemic Equity Committee which will be ongoing for the next year. Alvarez agreed to connect ECC members and others with this group and hopes it goes beyond just encouraging people to be better prepared for disaster and that it leads to action on the City's part to be better prepared.

Chair McHorse wanted to bring recognition to the local breweries during the storm that provided lots of water to child care providers.

e. ECC topics to take to Joint Inclusion Committee- Raul Alvarez

i. ECC topics to take to JIC

Member Alvarez provided update on the JIC August meeting. The JIC heard a presentation from the new Civil Rights Officer from the Civil Rights Office, which now has 16 people. There was also a presentation from Economic Development Department about disaster recovery and programs like RISE funding (COVID-19 Relief in a State of Emergency) and employment assistance. ECC members did not provide any topics for Member Alvarez to take the JIC.

3. STAFF UPDATES

a. COVID-19 updates

Staff liaison Rachel Farley (Austin Public Health program coordinator) reported that the City is still in Stage 5 of Austin Public Health (APH) risk-based guidelines. Number of new hospital admissions has been decreasing, as well as the 7-day moving average of cases and the positivity rate. The current positivity rate as of the week of 9/4/2021 is 10.4%. The positivity rate among children has decreased over the last 4 weeks to below 10% among children younger than 1 and children 1-9. For 10-19 year olds, the positivity rate has dropped from 19.2% to 11.6%. A 10% positivity rate is an indicator of high transmission. The positivity rate for the City is calculated from the test result data provided by Austin Public Health's test collection partners. Data comes from test results of people getting tested for various reasons, including those who have symptoms, have been exposed to someone with COVID-19, or want to get tested before they travel.

The City and County are still moving forward with American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding. A summary of the City's ARPA funding for early childhood has been provided as a backup document to this meeting. Austin Public Health continues to work with the COVID-19 Child Care Task Force and the Schools Response team on COVID-19 prevention and mitigation measures. APH also continues to support child care providers and local schools through the email inboxes for both groups, the nurse line, and the epidemiology team.

At end of staff updates, Chair McHorse commented on the COVID-19 fatigue that child care providers are experiencing, especially considering that there is no vaccine yet for children under 12 years. ECC members were encouraged by McHorse to consider ways the ECC can support local child care providers.

FUTURE AGENDA ITEMS

a. Census data trends

Vice Chair Worthington and Member Conlin shared that limited data from the 2020 US Census has been released. The release includes demographic information used for redistricting planning. The American Community Survey data will likely be released by the end of 2021 and will include the demographic information, like age, that will be most useful to the ECC members.

ADJOURNMENT – Chair McHorse adjourned the meeting at 9:55 a.m.