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COMMISSION ON DISABILITIES  
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ROBIN TOUSEY-AYERS  
Chairperson

## Commission on Disabilities Meeting Minutes

City Hall 4<sup>th</sup> Floor Conference Room

**September 15, 2014**

Present: Jenifer Blemings, Iva Long, Tricia Palluzzi, Matthew Ranelli, Maria Rivera, Jack Tsai and Robin Tousey-Ayers

Staff: Michelle Duprey and Paula Pernal

Guests: Sally Esposito and Jonathan Slifka, Governor Daniel Malloy's Liaison to the Disability Community

Meeting called to order at 5:15 p.m.

### Minutes

Robin asked the Commissioners to take a few minutes to review the July Minutes for proposed changes. There were no changes.

Jack made a motion to accept the July minutes.

Tricia seconded the motion.

Iva abstained from voting because she was not present at the July meeting.

July minutes are approved.

### Chairperson's Report

Robin reviewed the topics to be discussed with the guest Jonathan Slifka. Michelle suggested that the Commission discuss with Jonathan Slifka disability issues related to the State of Connecticut. Michelle stated that two issues that concern the State of Connecticut right now are wheelchairs-durable medical equipment and assisted suicide. Michelle stated that the Commission may also wish to discuss other issues with Jonathan Slifka such as the status of P & A or physical access at State buildings.

Robin asked each Commissioner to introduce themselves to the guest Sally Esposito.

Sally Esposito lives in New Haven and works for the State of Connecticut Education Resource Center and hopes to become a member of the Commission.

Robin asked the Commission members if they were comfortable with their topic to discuss with Jonathan Slifka. Iva mentioned that through her son and his peers, she doesn't believe that the public is aware that New Haven Police Department is trained on mental health. Michelle stated that the New Haven Police Department has a very extensive training component on mental health through the Police Academy. Iva mentioned that this information needs to be disseminated to the public population. Robin mentioned the "60 Minutes" piece televised from Yale New Haven Hospital concerning the lack of space for mental health patients.

Robin asked Paula to provide the Commission members with copies of hand-outs concerning Jonathan Slifka.

Robin discussed the press conference conducted by Mayor Toni N. Harp regarding the Anniversary of the American's with Disabilities Act. Robin stated that Michelle and the Chief of the Fire Department, Allyn Wright, spoke at the press conference about the importance of the American's with Disabilities Act. Robin stated that the press conference was in the newspaper, but not recorded. Robin stated that Mayor Toni N. Harp is on board with the Commission.

Robin stated that the Commission should re-visit with the Board of Alders or attend a meeting with the Board of Alders to expand the membership of the Commission.

Robin stated that she sits on the Traumatic Brain Injury Council and that Jonathan Slifka attended the last meeting.

Matt stated that is attending the Advisory Commission for Hearing Impaired for the State of Connecticut. Matt stated that the Advisory Commission is taking up the issue of access to standardized testing. Matt stated that this Commission is under Department of Rehabilitation Services.

Sally stated that the State of Connecticut Education Resource Center ("SERC") focuses on special education and research for individuals with disabilities. SERC is located in Middletown but it can be accessed on-line to all Connecticut residents.

### **Department Report**

Michelle stated that she is gearing-up for the next legislative session. Michelle stated that the Candidates Forum takes place on October 9, 2014 at Manchester Community College. Michelle stated that the Candidates Forum coincides with the Gubernatorial Debate so unfortunately none of the candidates will attend the Candidates Forum. It

Michelle stated that she attended the Developmental Disability Council Annual Meeting. The Council developed a caucus and nominated Michelle.

Michelle raised the state statute that restricts housing for people with disabilities next to other housing for people with disabilities. Michelle discussed this state statute to the Commission members. Michelle stated that this state statute needs to be addressed during this legislative session.

Michelle stated that she would like the Commission to have a meeting outside the regular monthly meeting or have an employee of LCI attend the regular monthly meeting to discuss the elevator issue. Michelle stated that she continually has landlords that have elevators in disrepair for long periods of time and hardly anyone can enforce them to make the repairs. Michelle stated that perhaps an ordinance could empower staff of LCI to enforce landlords to make repairs and maintain elevators. Matt stated that he did speak to Erik Johnson, the Director of LCI and he was willing to work with the Commission on this issue. Matt stated that it might be fruitful to have a meeting with Michelle, Tricia, Erik Johnson and the Fire Chief before asking anyone to attend the Commission meeting. Matt stated that he will schedule the meeting. Michelle agreed. Matt stated that he will report back to the Commission about the meeting at the October Commission meeting.

Robin stated that the Mayor mentioned that the Fire Trucks only have access to the 12<sup>th</sup> floor, so safety and accessibility are important to Mayor Toni N. Harp. Tricia discussed the issue of the areas of refuge that are located in buildings that house the disabled, assisted-living and the elderly.

### **Presentation with Jonathan Slifka (Summary)**

Robin discussed the Mission of the Commission on Disabilities

1. Universal Accessibility in New Haven
2. Contributions to Society of Citizens of New Haven with Disabilities

Robin mentioned that the main “ask” at the Commission’s presentation before the Board of Alders in March and before Mayor Toni N. Harp in July was increasing membership of the Commission to represent as many districts as possible.

- **Introductions** - An introduction of each Commission member takes place.

Jonathan Slifka stated that he serves on the West Hartford Disability Commission.

- **Commission on Disabilities** - Robin Tousey-Ayers presents the main focus areas of the Commission.

- **Disability Services** – Michelle Duprey, Esq. shared that 26% of New Haven residents have disabilities that have a high unemployment rate in New Haven and should be included in any jobs initiatives.

Survey conducted in 1999 as a benchmark-located on City website.

- **Promoting Universal Accessibility** – Matthew Ranelli presented the issue of elevators in high rise buildings. Individuals with mobility issues are unable to enter or exit these buildings because elevators are broken, out of service or not ADA compliant. The Commission wants to work with Livable City Initiative (“LCI”) and the Building Official to provide them with greater authority to enforce violations. This may require changing state regulations. The Commission will create a proposal after meeting with LCI.
- **School Climate** – Patricia Palluzzi presented on the importance of training throughout Connecticut for teachers and paraprofessionals in special education; the importance of structure and trust; the need for implementation of newer technology; training about bullying for children with disabilities. She stated that certain towns approach services & training differently. She stressed that children with disabilities must become productive members of society.
- **Mental Health Gaps and Safety Nets** – Iva Long presented on the issues of aging out of the school system and the expansion of The Affordable Care Act. Iva also mentioned that the issue of housing children in adult emergency rooms and short term stay psychiatric units should be addressed. Iva asked Mr. Slifka what were the costs associated with educating the general public on mental health and the climate for national supports for individuals with disabilities. Iva stated that her son and his peers, not knowing that the Police Department have been trained extensively in mental health, become nervous and afraid when they get into situations that they have gotten off their medication and have encountered the Police. Iva asked Mr. Slifka how will public be made aware on a statewide level that when the police come, they do so in a positive way, and that they have been trained in mental health.
- **Equal Employment for Persons with Disabilities** – Jenifer Blemings presented information from the U.S. Census Bureau Reports - 1 in 5 individuals have a disability and that New Haven has higher statistics. The population of disabilities account for the largest number of people living in poverty in the U.S. and that 80% of people with disabilities are unemployed.

Benefits of employment include not only income, but also purpose in life.

Individuals with Disabilities may require reasonable accommodations that may cost as little as \$600.

There are Six Broad Disability Categories:

1. Deaf or Serious Hearing Impairment
2. Blindness or Serious Visual Impairment
3. Physical Impairment related to physical, mental or emotional condition affecting concentration or memory
4. Difficulty climbing stairs or walking
5. Difficulty with self-care, dressing and/or bathing
6. Decreased ability to function independently related to a physical, mental or emotional condition

Individuals with disabilities are often thought to have a mental or emotional impairment. Individuals with invisible disabilities are often thought as faking it. Both are not true.

Need more specialized equipment.

Move beyond Tolerance to Acceptance.

Move beyond Acceptance to Appreciation.

- **Inclusion of Veterans with Disabilities** – Jack Tsai presented on veterans coming back with physical & mental disabilities. Two main issues that veterans struggle with are: access & increased outreach for mental health services and unemployment. There has been a federal initiative to end homelessness for veterans that clearly designed towards veterans with disabilities. Also veterans are Heroes – they can be inspirational figure for disability community, success stories for children. Veteran speakers before School Children are well received-good resource. The Commission conducted a panel discussion event at Wilbur Cross High School.
- **Broadening the Membership of the Commission** – Maria Rivera asked Jonathan Slifka for recommendations for new members for the Commission.

Jonathan Slifka stated the he is working on the same issues, with the exception of veterans at the moment, at the State Capitol.

Robin mentioned the issue of accessible state buildings. Mr. Slifka shared a personal story about the broken elevators during his first day as Liaison to the Disability Community in Hartford. Robin also mentioned that the public is no longer allowed to enter the Capitol Building through the back door nearest to/from the handicap parking area outside unless you are a staff person. Michelle stated that this is an access issue because the front door is non-compliant. Mr. Slifka stated that he had a meeting with Legislative Management because of the elevator issues and he was reminded that the State of Connecticut is tenants. Mr. Slifka stated that Legislative Management has a laundry list of items that they are working on, some of which will be completed by January and some might take longer both financially and logistically. Michelle stated that she has raised these issues with the Department of Justice.

Robin suggested that Mr. Slifka discuss other disability specific groups that he has met with. Robin stated that the Commission has addressed the issues related to coverage for wheelchairs under durable medical equipment insurance; assisted suicide task force; direction of Office of Protection & Advocacy.

Jonathan Slifka stated that his role is newly created cabinet-level position in January 2014 within the Office of the Governor. This is the first position of its kind in the State of Connecticut. Mr. Slifka stated that he has met with probably three (3) with different types of disability accessible advocacy groups:

1. Intellectual Disabilities
2. Developmental Disabilities
3. Disabilities Commissions

Jonathan Slifka stated that he has convened a working group through the Governor's office since July 2014 to address the waiting list issues within the DSS system.

Jonathan Slifka stated that he is a member of the Governor's Labor & Employment Disability Committee. Mr. Slifka stated that this Committee was established by statute in the 1950's by veterans. Mr. Slifka stated that the membership is all volunteers and should be no less than 20 and no more than 30 and now they have 5. The Governor's Committee met a month ago and Mr. Slifka offered to be Chair of the Committee and to bring-in resources. The first meeting is scheduled for October 29, 2014.

Mr. Slifka stated that he has received positive feedback from the Office of Protection & Advocacy.

Mr. Slifka stated that he has not had a lot of interaction with the physical disability world. Matt asked Jonathan how he plans to deal with balancing fiscal responsibilities and the physical disability community. Jonathan stated that he met with the Office of Protection & Advocacy and DSS concerning the issue of wheelchair regulations. Jonathan stated that there is no savings in providing used wheelchairs.

Mr. Slifka stated that he has reached out to every town in the State of Connecticut and has only heard back from three towns. Jonathan stated that this Commission is on track.

Robin stated that the Commission has made numerous efforts in the area of the Arts for individuals with disabilities and provided examples.

### **Old Business**

None.

### **New Business**

None.

### **Other Business**

None.

### **Public Comment/Announcements**

Matt stated that Michelle will speak at the Connecticut Bar Association (“CBA”) on Disability Law & the Planning & Zoning Section on the Americans with Disabilities and outreach law.

Matt made a motion to adjourn the meeting.

Jenifer seconded the motion.

Motion to adjourn the meeting was approved unanimously at 7:04 p.m.