

ESSEX COUNTY YOUTH SERVICES COMMISSION MEETING

THURSDAY, January 23, 2025

2:00 PM – Via ZOOM

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/85956421449>

Attendees: **Hon. Philip J. Degnan** - Designee for Presiding Judge, **Kesha Manning** - Family Division Manager, **Kenneth James** - Assistant Family Division Manager, **Anthony R. Higgins** - Designee for County Prosecutor, **Jon Weber** – County Public Defender, **Rosi Hermida** Designee for Superintendent of the County Vocational School, **Anibal Ramos, Jr.** – County Human Services Department, **Mabel Elmore** - Youth Shelter Director, **Dennis Hughes** – Youth Detention Center Director, **Todd A. Barcliff** – Designee for County Youth Detention Center, **Tyrone Hunter** - Juvenile Family Crisis Intervention Unit – Director, **Lt. John Henriquez** - Law enforcement representative who works primarily with youth/police, **Colette DeGrazia** – Designee for County Alcoholism and Drug Abuse Director, **Apryl Caldwell** - Workforce Investment Board representative, **David Armstrong** – Parent or parent organization of at-risk or justice involved youth, **Kenneth Douglas** – Representative of non-profit community organization of the most densely populated areas within the county, **Lori Scott-Pickens** – Education Sector, **Laquanda Williams** – Child Advocacy, Domestic Violence, and/or Victims’ Rights Group, **Rev. Bernard Wilkes** – Clergy, **Jasmine Joseph-Foreman**, **Erica Cashaw** - Educator Sector, **David Sims** – Mental Health, **Isaiah Fudge** – Civic Organizations, **Sarah Cruz** - **Reggie Bledsoe**, **Taieta El-Amin**, **Shelton Thurman**, **Adejobi Odeneye**, **Josephine Garcia**, **Caryl Lucas** – Representative with knowledge, experience, or interest in local youth, the local community, or the juvenile justice system, **Shalene Hill** – UCC **Kenneth James** – Family Sector, **Ronald Small** – JJC Court Liaison, **Amy Godfrey** – Mental Health, **Susan Biegen** - UCC’s RTJ Pilot Program, **Nicole Williams** – Provider, Leaders for life, **Issaac Medina** – Provider, Aspira, **Andre Narvaez** - **Alicia Holman**, **Flohisha Johnson**, **Nayellie Collazo** – MDT Conveners, **Karina Silva** – Community Service Aide, **Michelle Washington Davis** - Assistant to ECYSC Administrator, **Jason Martinez** - Administrator of Essex County Youth Services Commission

This meeting is being held by the provisions of the Open Public Meetings Act, N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 -10:4-21. Notice of this meeting has been provided on the Essex County Website.

Anibal Ramos asked for a roll call of voting members, which Administrator Martinez administered. 23 voting members were present. Anibal Ramos read the Open Public Meeting Act.

Approval of Minutes:

The minutes from December 12, 2024 were approved and motions were made by Mrs. Lori Scott Pickens and Anthony Higgins.

Old Business:

Anibal Ramos opens by revisiting old business, explaining how last meeting, Mr. Martinez reviewed some of the proposed changes to the organization's bylaws. He goes on to express how he had the privilege of serving as co-chair of the Commission for over 20 years during tenure with the county but due to recent regulatory changes at the state level, the County Human Services Director can no longer serve as co-chair, which will impact his role. As a result, the Board must determine how to proceed with appointing a new co-chair for the Commission. While the judge may continue to serve as co-chair, the role of the second co-chair needs to be redefined. Mr. Martinez previously distributed three potential options for consideration by the voting members of the Commission. Mr. Ramos asks the members if they “prefer to entertain a motion for a recommendation, or should we review the options individually?”

LaQuanda Williams goes on to make a motion, “I move that we accept the current recommendation from the Bylaw Subcommittee, designating the Director of the Youth Detention Center as the co-chair of the Essex County Youth Commission.”

Mr. Ramos thanks LaQuanda. and asks for a second motion to proceed with discussion?

Reginald Bledson seconds the motion, in which the floor opens up for discussion.

Following the discussion, it was determined that 20 members were in agreement. Subsequently, Mr. Ramos formally designated Director Dennis Hughes to take the lead.

Subcommittees Report:

- I. Planning:* Laquanda Williams stated that there are no updates
- II. Monitoring:* Lori Scott Pickens states there are no updates but there will be progress happening in the coming weeks.
- III. Allocation/Proposal:* There was no report from Jon Weber. Mr. Martinez shared that he had discussions with the JJC regarding allocated funds for 2025, including the RFR for this position and potential alternative programs.

ECYSC UPDATES:

Mr. Martinez goes on to discuss the achievements and contributions the Essex County Youth Services Commission has made supporting at-risk youth and court-involved juveniles via its grant funding programs. Although the Commission does not directly provide services, it collaborates with community-based organizations and other stakeholders to ensure effective support and intervention for youth.

- In February 2023, the Essex County Youth Services Commission, in partnership with the United Community Corporation (UCC), hosted a ribbon-cutting ceremony to launch the highly anticipated Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youth and Communities pilot program. This initiative positions Essex County as a pioneering provider of restorative and transformative justice programs within the state. Recognized nationally as a best practice, these programs have proven effective in diverting youth from the juvenile justice system and providing them with meaningful alternatives.

- In 2024, the Commission awarded grant funding to five community-based organizations operating nine distinct youth programs that address various needs, including education, recreation, and positive youth development. Among the funded initiatives are:

The South Orange and West Orange Township Junior Police Academies, which provide youth with opportunities to engage with law enforcement in a structured and educational environment.

The Essex County Prosecutor's Office Summer Internship and Youth Conference Programs, which offer valuable work experience and personal development opportunities for local youth.

Through these efforts, the Essex County Youth Services Commission continues to play a vital role in fostering positive outcomes for youth across the county.

Mr. Martinez goes on to add how The Essex County Youth Services Commission has implemented a youth engagement program designed to support youth on probation by providing intervention strategies and essential services. The program operates through a multidisciplinary team (MDT) led by Essex County employees and has successfully served over 200 youth within the family court system. This initiative has contributed to reducing the length of detention stays while ensuring that participants receive appropriate treatment and care.

Through grant funding, 16 programs were implemented in 2024, collectively serving 1,500 at-risk and court-involved youth. These programs have provided critical resources, treatment, and opportunities for positive development.

Acknowledgment was extended to the Youth Services Commission members, service providers, and stakeholders for their dedication and contributions throughout 2024. Their collaborative efforts are expected to continue fostering improvements and achieving greater success in 2025.

Restorative and Transformative Justice for Youths and Communities Pilot:

Susan Biegen led the discussion on updates for the Restorative and Transformative Justice (RTJ) pilot program. Progress has been made on the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Newark Public Schools, which is currently under review by the district's legal team, with a response anticipated soon.

Ms. Biegen adds how in Meanwhile, program referrals continue to be received, and the homework lab remains fully operational. The lab offers students academic support and a comfortable environment where they can participate in mentoring and social activities. Overall, the program is running smoothly and effectively fulfilling its objectives.

State Community Partnership and family Court Program (Updates and Announcements):

Alterick from Leaders for Life opened the discussion and introduced *Nicole Williams*, who provided updates on the program's progress. Nicole reported that the prevention and juvenile detention programs have been performing exceptionally well, with a steady flow of referrals.

In December, the program celebrated the graduation of nine individuals who earned their high school diplomas. These graduates have since advanced to job readiness training, social-emotional development initiatives, and are actively pursuing higher education opportunities.

The program has also been actively engaged in community service initiatives, including a successful Christmas toy drive and a turkey drive. Additionally, collaboration with the Community Food Bank of New Jersey has provided juvenile detention participants with hands-on opportunities to contribute to their communities, fostering a sense of fulfillment and social responsibility.

Currently, the juvenile detention program is supporting five students, with ongoing efforts to provide consistent mentorship and development opportunities. Ms. Williams emphasized that each day presents new opportunities for achievement, and the program continues to make significant progress toward its goals.

Next to present was *Nicole Grace Watson from the Essex County Prosecutor's Office*, which expressed gratitude to the Youth Services Commission for funding the annual *What's It All About?* Youth Conference. The event took place on December 18th at the New Jersey Institute of Technology (NJIT) campus, with 432 students from grades 7 through 9, representing Newark, East Orange, and Orange, in attendance. For many participants, this event marked their first experience on a college campus.

Carol Lucas, who was present at the meeting, served as the motivational speaker and delivered an inspiring message to the students. The conference featured workshops on topics such as violence prevention, internet safety, and college and career readiness. Additionally, over 24 organizations participated, offering valuable resources and information to the youth.

To encourage student engagement with the exhibitors, scenario cards were created to facilitate conversations with professionals. Special appreciation was extended to Colette and her colleagues for hosting an information table and to Rosie for bringing students from the County Vocational School.

Ms. Grace concluded by acknowledging the overwhelmingly positive feedback received from the event and expressing appreciation for the inclusion of event photos in the Commission's presentation.

Nayellie Collazo, Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) Convener, provided an update on the program's activities. In the fourth quarter, MDT served a total of 211 youth, with 57 new cases and 45 successful discharges.

Regarding upcoming meetings, the next Detention Review Meeting is scheduled for February 27th, and the Detention Alternative Meeting will take place on February 6th. Both meetings will be conducted in a hybrid

format, held in-person at the Sheila Oliver Conference Room in the LeRoy Smith Building and virtually via Zoom.

Additionally, MDT actively participated in various key initiatives, including the Human Services Advocacy Council, the Local Advisory Committee on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse, the Essex County Children's Interagency Coordinating Council, and the Northeast Collaborative Meeting.

Ms. Collazo concluded the report by highlighting these efforts and reaffirming MDT's commitment to providing essential support and services to the youth within Essex County.

Chalene from the Family Engagement program shared recent updates, highlighting impactful experiences and upcoming initiatives. The youth had an opportunity to go shopping in downtown Newark, an experience that was particularly meaningful for one participant who expressed deep gratitude. At the end of the year, the program successfully hosted its first Family Resource event, with plans to organize another in February, with the date currently being finalized. Additionally, the youth recently participated in a community event featuring cookies and hot chocolate, where they received winter coats and assisted with event activities.

The program recently celebrated the successful completion of one participant, marking the fifth client to complete the program. Currently, there are five active participants, with ongoing support provided.

Chalene expressed appreciation to all partners and stakeholders for their continued support and contributions in facilitating referrals and ensuring the program's success.

The meeting continued with no further updates or announcements from the Juvenile Justice Commission (JJC). Both Ronald Small and Amanda Compton-Dover confirmed that they had no additional items to report. The session proceeded without further discussion. The meeting then moved to the public portion, with the facilitator

asking if any members of the Youth Services Commission or members of the public had any announcements or items they would like to share.

Apryl Caldwell shared a reminder about the WIOA (Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act) Open House, which is now held every Wednesday from 10 AM to 12 PM. This change aims to make it easier for people to remember and participate in the orientations. These sessions provide information about WIOA's programs and services, including those for youth, adults, and dislocated workers. Ms. Caldwell also congratulated Director Higgins and announced that Coach Carol Lucas has joined their team. Lucas will be responsible for conducting in-house training for both staff and youth, a welcomed addition to their services.

Director Hughes of the Essex County Juvenile Detention Center (ECJDC) concluded the meeting by thanking the Commission for their excellent work in 2024 and expressing anticipation for continued success in 2025. He extended gratitude to all those who work with the Commission and acknowledged Jason's leadership throughout the year.

Director Hughes then moved to adjourn the meeting, noting that the next meeting is scheduled for March 20th at 2 PM via Zoom. He requested a motion to adjourn the meeting.

LaQuanda Williams motioned to adjourn the meeting, and Apryl Caldwell seconded the motion. The meeting was then officially adjourned.

Adjournment: Next Meeting, March 20, 2025, 2:00, PM via ZOOM or In person:

<https://us06web.zoom.us/j/85492279434>

60 W Market St, Newark, NJ Sheila Oliver Conference Room 14th Fl