**Catastrophic Illness in Children Relief Fund Commission**

**Open Minutes**

**December 6, 2023**

The meeting was called to order by the Vice Chairperson P. Shanley Hansell at 9:32 a.m.

P. Shanley Hansell announced that in compliance with the New Jersey Open Public Meetings Act, the specifics as to time and place of this meeting were sent to the Office of the Secretary of State and the Department of Personnel for filing and posted on the official bulletin boards provided by those offices for notice of public meetings. Also, notices were prepared for two newspapers to inform the public of this meeting.

J. Prontnicki conducted a roll call of members as follows:

**Present:**

Janice Prontnicki, Chairperson

Phyllis Shanley Hansell, Vice Chairperson

Jeffrey Carrick

Ralph Condo

Dawn Mergen

Lisa Asare

Manuel Paulino

Carl Underland

Anthony Valenzuela

Howard Weinberg

**Guest:**

Caroline Gargione, DAG

Kidanemariam Meshesha, NJ Department of Health (guest of Dawn Mergen)

**Staff:**

Christian Heiss, Executive Director

LorieAnn Wilkerson-Leconte, Deputy Executive Director

Amy Taklif, Senior Analyst

Janet Valentin-Forte, Secretary to the Commission

John Fallucca, Fiscal

**Adoption of Agenda:**

J. Prontnicki made a motion to adopt the proposed meeting agenda for the December 6, 2023 meeting. The motion passed unanimously.

**Public Comments:**

None.

**Approval of Minutes of October 2023 Meeting:**

J. Prontnicki made a motion to approve the open meeting minutes from October 4, 2023, as presented. The motion passed with 8 votes in favor; R. Condo and L. Asare abstained due to absence from the October meeting.

J. Prontnicki made a motion to approve the closed meeting minutes from October 4, 2023 as presented. The motion passed with 8 votes in favor; R. Condo and L. Asare abstained due to absence from the October meeting.

**Treasurer’s Report:**

C. Heiss reported that the Commission will review 28 applications, including 16 eligible, 10 ineligibles and 2 reconsiderations, with potential payments totaling $479,106.29.[[1]](#footnote-1) There is an estimated $20.5 million dollars in the Catastrophic Illness and Children Relief Fund which is sufficient to cover the applications being heard at this meeting. $6.37 million dollars are remaining in the fiscal 2024 budget, after all payments for the today's commission meeting are made. The State Office budget reflects $1.96 million dollars remaining for fiscal year 2024. A proposed Fiscal Year 2025 budget was submitted to the Personnel and Finance Committees for review, then disseminated to the commission. The Provider and Family Budget, $8.3 million dollars, will remain stable for the next fiscal year. The completion of the IT system upgrades in the current year will allow the State Office to reduce the FY 2025 Operations Budget line.

R. Condo inquired about the potential transfer of funds between Fund accounts to support additional activities such as expanded outreach. C. Heiss stated that the Commission exceeded the budget in fiscal year 2018 and 2019, but in the past 10 years, on average, the State Office has spent about $6.6 million. Since 2019, the State Office has not expended the $8.3 million budget, and the surplus is rolled over to the next year, resulting in the current available funds of $20.5 million dollars. R. Condo recommended keeping the family and provider budget at $8.3 million due to changes that may quickly increase overall payments, such as implementation of the new application system and reductions in the application of family responsibility.

**Fund Operation’s Report:**

Since July 1, 2023, the State Office received 111 applications, of which 32 are processed or closed and 79 are still in process. Currently staff are processing 101 applications and there are 0 that are unassigned, with the oldest application received in October 2022. One appeal was received from the last commission meeting, which needs to be decided no later than May 2024.

**Executive Director’s Report:**

C. Heiss reported that the application portal system project is approaching the final stages. Additionally, the State Office received two bids in response to the Request for Proposal (RFP) for an upgrade to the internal “CRM” system, which closed in early November. The new system upgrade will be a more advanced version of Microsoft CRM. The funding for both projects were approved in previous fiscal years. The application portal funding was committed in fiscal year ’23, and the funding for the CRM upgrade is in our current fiscal year budget.

**Outreach Report:**

L. Wilkerson-Leconte highlighted that she and A. Taklif are collaborating with the Division of Disability Services – Traumatic Brain Injury Fund to cross-promote each program; regional trainings will commence in March 2024.

The State Office staff will join Special Child Health Services staff and case managers at their quarterly state-wide meeting on December 12, 2023, to facilitate more improved coordination. R. Condo complimented the State Office on collaborating with other programs and State Offices.

L. Asare requested additional information about the State Office’s collaboration with the Office of New Americans. L. Wilkerson-Leconte noted that the State Office engaged the ONA to request their assistance with crafting language to be used in the new application portal, to make sure that potentially eligible populations (such as lawfully residing asylum seekers and refugees) are not excluded from accessing the Fund.

DAG C. Gargione clarified that while NJ FamilyCare has implemented a program which allows coverage of all children in New Jersey regardless of their immigration status, the Fund’s statute does not allow the Commission to serve undocumented immigrants, including children with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. A legislative change would be required for the Fund to cover those children.

L. Wilkerson-Leconte stated that instead of the planned winter media event, the State Office plans to use infographics to communicate with elected officials and key stakeholders, submit press releases to local and online media outlets, create regular content for social media, and develop a series of PBS commercials in 2024.

**Closed Session:**

At 10:10 a.m., J. Prontnicki made a motion to go into closed session to review applications. The motion passed unanimously.

At the beginning of the closed session C. Heiss showed the Commission a draft infographic, which can be customized by county, legislative district, or other geography, to demonstrate the Fund’s impact to stakeholders. He also walked the Commission through a mock-up of the new electronic application system.

**Review of Applications:**

**Eligibles:**

J. Prontnicki made a motion to approve the eligible applications, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Reconsiderations:**

J. Prontnicki made a motion to approve the reconsidered applications, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Ineligibles:**

J. Prontnicki made a motion to approve the ineligible applications, as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

**Unfinished Business:**

C. Heiss reported that C. Gargione reviewed the Fund’s current residency policies and laws and in her opinion the Commission is covering the appropriate populations (see discussion above, under Outreach). C. Heiss noted that further discussions are needed regarding the potential gap between the services that NJ FamilyCare is covering for undocumented immigrants and what the Fund can cover.

**New Business:**

C. Heiss sent the annual report to the Commission, for review prior to the meeting. The Fund spent $4.4 million dollars in Fiscal Year 2023 on grants to 149 New Jersey families. The average award per application was $27,304. The State Office has had a stable application volume in the past three fiscal years, which is lower than it was back in 2018 and 2019, but not significantly lower than over the past 10 years.

J. Prontnicki asked if the State Office will continue to have an annual report, as we see today, or if it will be changed or discontinued due to feedback the State Office has received that few people are reading the report. C. Heiss stated that, by legislation, the State Office is required to release a full annual report with the data and analysis provided. L. Wilkerson-Leconte recommended that a one-page infographic, in addition to the annual report, could improve uptake of the information.

J. Carrick made a motion to approve the annual report for state fiscal year 2023. R. Condo seconded the motion. The motion passed unanimously.

C. Heiss noted that there is a bill under consideration by the New Jersey Legislature, Senate Bill #2716, to cover licensed clinical social workers as independent health care providers under NJ FamilyCare. NJ FamilyCare does not include independent licensed clinical social workers in their network, so families that receive services from those social workers must pay out of pocket. The bill would allow LCSWs to become independent NJ FamilyCare providers, which could reduce the unpaid expenses for Medicaid families in New Jersey.

D. Mergen made a motion to adjourn the meeting. All Commission members voted in favor. The meeting adjourned at 10:55 a.m.

1. Due to typos in preparatory materials, potential payments for the December 2023 meeting actually totaled $481,556.80. See the Closed Minutes for discussion. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)