

The Blair County Department of Social Services
Advisory Board Meeting
Thursday, October 2, 2025 at 11:30 AM
SASMG, 157 Lakemont Park Blvd, Altoona

Board Members Present: Kyle Siskron-Leonard, Donna Gority, Jane Petroski, Susan Franco, Jeff Colbert and Ken Dean

Board Members Absent: Susanna Tomlinson, Chris Cohn, Steve Martynuska, Mike Stubler, Rhonda Cadle and Commissioner Burke

Others Present: Tricia Johnson, Cindy James, Missy Gillin, Melissa Gordon, Erin Kay, Aimee Burns, Jamie Henry, Kelly Popich and Jennifer Kensinger

MINUTES

1. Welcome and Call to Order

- Donna Gority welcomed everyone and called the meeting to order.

2. Public Comment

- No public comments were received.

3. Approval of the August 7, 2025 Advisory Board Meeting Minutes

- *Due to lack of quorum, the August 7, 2025 meeting minutes were tabled until the December 4, 2025 meeting.*

4. Board Operations – Tricia Johnson, Director, Department of Social Services (DSS)

- Tricia reported that some board members are up for reappointment. Donna will send out emails to those members, so that they can fill out a talent bank application, if they are interested in serving another term.
- Tricia requested that the commissioners approve additional board members beyond the current thirteen appointed.
- The amended DSS by-laws were approved by the commissioners.
- Tricia reminded the attendees that during the December meeting a free will monetary donation to a non-profit agency/organization will be collected. Conversation revolved around splitting the donations between the H.O.P.E. Drop-In and the Warming Center.

Sue Franco made the motion to have both the H.O.P.E. Drop-In and the Warming Center be recipients of the monetary donation, equally divided between the two. Jane Petroski seconded the motion. All in attendance agreed. An email will be sent out to those not in attendance.

○ **Leadership Coalition Update**

- The Coalition has been discussing allocations of mental health retained funds, but no decisions will be made until the final amount of retained dollars is established. Recommendations will be shared with the Board during the December 2025 meeting.
- DSS has received instructions from the State regarding the Income & Expense (I&E) report.

5. Mental Health Committee Report

- Ken commented that Amanda Smith's presentation about the UPMC Behavioral Health Pod was quite informative.

6. Developmental Programs Committee Report

- Tricia commented that Lori Karageanes' support services presentation was highly informative.

7. County Reports

Social Services Director – Tricia Johnson

- Currently, Federal and PA budgets are at an impasse.
- Tricia stated that DSS has not received its 2025/2026 allocation.

- July invoices were paid. The county halted payments after that. Providers were sent “stop payment” letters.
- Tricia stated that the soonest a budget decision could be made would be November 2025 with money flowing, possibly, by late December 2025 or early January 2026.
- Tricia reported that Patty Muriceak, DSS Fiscal Officer, is doing a wonderful job. DSS is still trying to recruit a Fiscal Tech and Community Development Specialist.
- DSS is not applying for any grant funding.
- The 2025/2026 Human Service Block Grant (HSBG) Annual Plan was sent back by the State asking for some revisions.

Mental Health – Tricia Johnson

- Cindy stated that she had to revise the HSBG Annual plan at the State’s request. Those revisions are awaiting commissioner approval before being resubmitted to the State.
- A presentation by Sean Burns, H.O.P.E. Drop-In Executive Director, is being planned for the next Mental Health (MH) Committee meeting on Thursday, November 6, 2025.
- September was suicide awareness month. Lots of events were held.
- Local Outreach to Suicide Survivors (LOSS) team, headed by Nikki McHugh, launched on September 1, 2025. To date, they have not been called into action.
- Recent trainings included: Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) and MH 1st Aid.
- Community Resource Fair will be held on October 21, 2025.
- Student Assistance Program (SAP) Networking day is still being planned for early November.
- Tricia added that DSS was approved for additional training funds.
- Emergency Preparedness Committee is planning a Train Derailment emergency for November 13, 2025. This event is geared toward providers and agencies rather than consumers.

Intellectual Disabilities – Melissa Gordon

- A report was included in the agenda packet.
- Melissa reported that Southern Alleghenies Service Management Group (SASMG) is being reviewed by the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) for their Quality, Assessment and Improvement (QAI). ODP was to visit in-person, but the review will now be virtual.
- SASMG is in the process of looking for additional providers for Blair County. A big struggle is finding additional residential providers.
- SASMG is also having to turn away or have people wait for nursing services. After several inquiries, SASMG did secure four (4) nursing providers. All 4 do provide services to children under the age of 18. SASMG does meet with new providers for training.
- The Multi-Year Growth Plan was submitted to ODP. ODP asked SASMG to simplify their plan.

Early Intervention (EI) – Kelly Popich

- A report was included in the agenda packet.
- Kelly reported that EI is reviewing data to ensure it is complete and accurate before final reports are used for local determinations and the annual performance report.
- EI is developing an Infant/Early Childhood Mental Health training survey to look at sustainability.
- EI has been impacted by the state budget impasse. So far for 2025/2026, Medical Assistance and Infant Toddler Families (ITF) waivers are being paid. Due to no county allocation, SASMG payments are on hold. A “stop payment” letter has been sent to providers. Follow-up conversation with providers, especially evaluators, to discuss their needs and any possible service interruptions.

Quality Assurance & Housing Coordinator – Missy Gillin

- Missy stated that some providers have cut back services and laid off staff due to no funding.
- The Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) came to an end of September 30, 2025. DSS is in the process of working on a final close-out report.
- Housing Assistance Program (HAP) funding is also on hold due to the budget impasse, making rental assistance funds scarce.

- Kyle stated that some assistance programs at Center for Community Action are on hold. They are still adding names to their rental assistance waitlist.

8. Ex-Officio Reports

CONTACT Altoona – Erin Kay

- A report was included in the agenda packet.
- Erin reported that Fall training is planned for the end of October through the beginning of November 2025.
- Erin participated in the ASIST and MH First Aid training.
- CONTACT Altoona participated in the VA Suicide Prevention and Out of the Darkness walks.
- Erin gave presentations at Blair Senior Services and Peer Star.
- In her update, Erin listed several upcoming events that CONTACT Altoona will be participating in.
- Erin will attend a Lunch ‘N Learn at Family Services regarding domestic violence.
- Erin also added another PMT client from Tartaglio.

NAMI (National Alliance on Mental Illness) – Aimee Burns

- A report was included in the agenda packet.
- NAMI participated in several events in August and September.
- School counselors from Hollidaysburg and Tyrone reached out to NAMI to do a school presentation.
- A “In Your Own Voice” presentation was done at the Altoona Public Library.
- Qscapes, an aquarium shop in the Logan Valley Mall, is doing a “Plant Bingo” and asked NAMI to attend. All proceeds will benefit NAMI.
- Aimee listed a number of courses that NAMI is offering.
- NAMI did get to expend all of their Crisis Intervention Team (CIT) grant funding.

The Arc – Maria Brandt

- Maria was not in attendance.

ID Providers – Lorrie Hetager

- Lorrie was not in attendance, but Melissa Gordon reported that Direct Support Professionals (DSP) were recognized in September. In honor of that recognition, SASMG asked providers to submit one name of a DSP who went above and beyond. SASMG did give a gift to each of the staff members nominated. Providers and agencies also recognized their DSPs in various ways.
- October is Down Syndrome Awareness Month. Melissa did not know if there were any events planned.

Open Forum/Feel Good Stories:

- Tricia stated that she would like to get better representation from the commissioners’ office for the DSS Advisory Board and Leadership Coalition meeting. There is no longer a commissioner assigned to DSS. Tricia floated the idea of changing days and/or times of the meetings or request commissioner representation on a quarterly basis.
- Donna announced that “Human Resources: A Staged Reading” will be performed at 7:30 p.m., tonight, in the Misciagna Family Center for Performing Arts at Penn State Altoona. “Human Resources” is a collection of documentary poetry by Erin Murphy.
- Donna is to forward the talent bank application link to the board members who are up for reappointment.

Donna closed the meeting and thanked everyone who attended.

The next Social Services Advisory Board meeting will be held on Thursday, December 4, 2025 at 11:30 a.m. at SASMG, 157 Lakemont Park Blvd, Altoona, PA

The next Mental Health Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 9:00 a.m. Blair HealthChoices, 81 Holliday Hills Drive, Hollidaysburg, PA

The next Developmental Programs Committee meeting will be held on Thursday, November 6, 2025 at 11:30 a.m. at SASMG training room, 157 Lakemont Park Blvd. or Virtual Meeting