

Executive Council Meeting Report

February 19, 2020

A. The Dept. of Health and Human Services has failed to hire Child Protective Workers

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) had a request on the Council agenda to transfer approximately \$11 million among lines within the existing DHHS budget. Ordinarily, this is a ministerial function and is not the subject of much debate. However, this time, the prerequisite approval of the transfer by the Legislature's Fiscal Committee was on a 6-4 vote and there were concerns expressed by legislators that DHHS was not forthcoming in their rationale for the transfers. The decision by DHHS to be rather close-mouthed continued during the Council meeting and I had to cross-examine the new Commissioner to get out what was happening.

The short version is that DHHS sought permission to transfer over \$3.3 million from the portion of their budget that pays child protective workers. Child protective workers at the Division of Children, Youth and Families analyze the safety of children who may be abused or neglected and make recommendations for their continued safety. New Hampshire has a critical shortage of child protective workers and the existing staff has had caseloads that were, at times, five times recommended maximums. The presentation that we received tried to obscure the fact that money designated to pay newly hired child protective workers went unspent because the DHHS couldn't keep up with the hiring and turnover in this very difficult job. \$3.3 million dollars during the period of July 1, 2019 through December 31, 2019 is a lot of money not to spend. DHHS only asked permission to transfer the money to other uses because the appropriation would lapse because it could no longer be spent for the purpose the Legislature intended.

Rather than hiding this problem, DHHS should have brought it forward earlier and worked with the Council to explore what could be done to improve hiring. We know that the workers are underpaid. The Council could remedy this in the short term by considering a pay premium for the workers at issue. The state does this for nurses in the Department of Corrections and at the Glencliff Home. The Governor and DHHS could have sought permission for a pay premium when it was realized that hiring was faltering. The Commissioner of DHHS promised a wage study—but this will take time. I urge an immediate exploration of other methods to improve recruitment in the meantime and, I also urge the Governor to approve the factfinder's report and move the state employee's labor contract forward with its modest 2% per year wage increase that is about the level of inflation.

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B. Unused Foster Care Money

The transfer of money by DHHS also included a transfer of \$725,000 of unspent money out of the line items for foster care. The Council received very little explanation for why this money was not spent during the first half of the year, but the failure to spend money on foster care appears to be related to the delays in processing child abuse cases, see above, and tends to belie the wisdom of outsourcing foster care recruitment efforts to private religious agencies that limit their recruitment of same sex couples. We need to break through this bottleneck and focus on the children who are at risk by robustly hiring state employees to support existing foster parents and soliciting new foster parents.

C. Tuition Reimbursements for Employees

The Council approved three employee stipends for career-related college courses. I fully endorse this program because it supports the career growth of state employees. However, I question the wisdom of the vast majority of these stipends being given to employees who take courses at a private college in southern New Hampshire. I am baffled at the failure to pitch for these employees to attend state colleges and universities. New Hampshire is 50th in the nation in terms of support for its public colleges and universities. The least we can do is to give these public institutions the opportunity to pitch for these tuition dollars.

D. Nominees Confirmed

David G. Collins, Bedford, NH to the Air Resources Council

Rosemary Ford, Nashua, NH; Peter Simoneau, Merrimack, NH; Rickey Persons, Laconia, NH and Ashley Woods, Manchester, NH to the Board of Licensure of Interpreters for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing

Christopher Nicolopoulos, Bow, NH, as Commissioner for the NH Insurance Department

Marc Roy, Amherst, NH to the Medical Review Subcommittee

Jacqueline Rzasa, Manchester, NH to the Recreational Therapy Governing Board

E. Nominations Made

Horace F. Henriques III, Lyme, NH and John S. Brandt, Concord, NH to the Adult Parole Board

Kirsty Ridings, Wolfeboro, NH to the Athletic Trainers Governing Board

Jason F. Vanier, Gilford, NH to the Board of Hearing Care Providers

Jill Patronagio, Mont Vernon, NH to the Board of Veterinary Medicine

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Jason Greene, Kensington, NH and Robert Field, Manchester, NH to the Fire Standards and Training Commission

Kimberly A. Chabot, Henniker, NH; John A. Curran, Londonderry, NH and Thomas F. Reid, II, Epsom, NH- Justice of New Hampshire Circuit Court

Steen H. Steiner, Center Conway, NH to the New Hampshire Real Estate Commission

Robert W. Guldner, Alexandria, NH to the NH Veterans Home Board of Managers

Victoria Bunker, New Durham, NH to the Rivers Management Advisory Committee

Paul J. Parisi, Salem, NH to the State Fire Marshal, Division of Fire Safety, Department of Safety

F. Lowest Wages Paid

Brookstone Builders Inc., Manchester, NH, agenda item #80, was awarded a \$941,087 contract. They report their lowest hourly wage is \$33.00/hour. They also report they are not planning any lay offs.

G. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Governor and Council will take place on March 11, 2020 at Council Chambers beginning at 10 a.m. Breakfast, which is open to the public, will be hosted by Councilor Russell Prescott at the Department of Revenue Administration at 8 a.m.

H. Judicial Confirmation Hearings

The Governor nominated three individuals to be Circuit Court Judges. They are Kimberly Chabot of Henniker, Thomas Reid of Epsom and John Curran of Londonderry. The Council will hold confirmation hearings for these nominees on March 11, 2020 beginning at 1:15 p.m. The Governor continues to refuse to nominate a Supreme Court Justice to fill the slot that has been vacant since August, 2019.