

**CASS COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES BOARD MEETING**  
**February 3, 2020**

**MINUTES**

With quorum present, Chair Steen called the meeting to order at 1:02 p.m.

**Present:** Chad Peterson, Mary Scherling, Brian Hagen, Rick Steen, Glenn Ellingsberg, Ken Pawluk, Duane Breitling,

**Absent:**

**Presenter:** Chip Ammerman, Director; Robert Wilson, County Administrator; Patricia Monson, CMC, PLLC Law Firm

**I. Approval of Minutes**

Ms. Scherling made a motion to approve the January 6, 2020 Board minutes. Mr. Hagen seconded it. Motion carried.

**II. Transition from County to Zone Update**

Mr. Ammerman informed Board members the transition will be a work in progress for the next several months. Some adjustment being made include work space for additional staff that will be hired for Childcare Licensing and Home and Community Based Services and computer access to the State servers for transitioned employees. There is a State server located in Juvenile Court, but this is inaccessible to the rest of the agency. Mr. Ammerman states he will be working with Gene Gartner, Building and Grounds Foreman; Terry Schmaltz, IT Director; and Robert Wilson on the space issues and that Mr. Schmaltz will be having discussions with State IT to address server issues.

Mr. Ammerman reports work continues on defining roles and responsibilities between State and County employees and how that affects supervision, addressing any problems that may occur; ensuring the State has active information, and their responsibility in resolving the issues. He reports there will also be discussions on collaborating with nearby zones to serve the public in a more efficient and effective way. An example is Cass County Human Service Zone administering Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) for Agassiz Valley (Traill and Steele County) residents and in turn, Agassiz Valley provides Home and Community Based county-funded programming to our county residents.

One of the State's goals is to consistently provide services regardless of what zone the client lives in, within parameters established. Each zone will be different in their needs and the demands will be different, but consistent services should be administered regardless of where a family is located. Currently, work is being done on defining the strategies and practices for In-Home Case Management and how it relates to Child Protective Service (CPS) workflow so there is consistency across the state.

The implementations of the practices and strategies for the State, such as the workflow process of Theory of Constraint, continues to be defined. They will continue to look at how this fits with each program and division within the agency.

Mr. Ammerman reminded the Board the hiring of the Zonal Director is due by April 1<sup>st</sup> and the final Zonal Plan will be due in June 2020.

Mr. Peterson questioned if Mr. Ammerman has heard anything on hiring and the additional positions requested. Mr. Ammerman explained the State is not adding full-time positions across the State; they will be re-locating positions when a zone may not require that many staff. The State has added two positions to the CPS team and one Case Manager based on the case load needs of the Cass zone. The relocating of Economic Assistance staff is being re-evaluated. Mr. Ammerman believes Cass will be able to add an additional worker to the Aged and Disabled Unit once the process starts. The State has identified some open Economic Assistance positions due to retirements; however, they have not identified where they will be located. It is unknown when the decision will be made, but Mr. Ammerman stated he is hopeful it will be by June 2020.

Mr. Pawluk questioned employee's access to the State systems and whether they still had access to the County systems. Mr. Ammerman explained they do currently have access to county systems, until they receive their state issued computers. Once new computers are in place, those staff would not have access to the State systems without a State server. At that time, they will no longer have access to the County server. Mr. Pawluk asked if all County employees would at some point be State employees. Mr. Ammerman explained the majority continue to be county employees but believes there will be future discussion in the next legislative session on whether there will be more movement of staff toward State employment. Mr. Ammerman then briefly explained the history behind State taking over Social Service funding per Mr. Pawluk's request.

Ms. Scherling questioned whether the changes that have been made based on the recommendations of the Eide Bailly study will be maintained. Mr. Ammerman stated most of those suggestions were regarding the Economic Assistance division and their process. The State is determining processes and the agency is actively involved in those discussions. It appears those discussions are consistent with the changes that were made from the study. Child Welfare programming is very consistent with past practices other than some monitoring systems, such as implementing the TAB Board. Mr. Ammerman felt they are very consistent with the changes this agency has made. Ms. Scherling asked if Adult Protective Services is being adequately fulfilled. Mr. Ammerman states there are four full-time staff with very high caseloads, in comparison to other areas in the State. This agency serves all of the Southeast region, not just the Cass County Zone. He stated relationships with our community partners is very strong and they use an effective multi-disciplinary team approach.

### **III. Hiring Process – Permanent Zone Director**

Robert Wilson, referenced a memorandum he sent dated February 2, 2020 to the Board members. It states that Chair Steen is the point of contact for the hiring process with assistance from Mr. Wilson and Cindy Stoick, Human Resource Director. The Director position was open from January 3 through January 15, 2020. Eleven applicants were reviewed by the Department of Human Services, Human Resources staff. The top six applicants were sent to Chair Steen for review. Interviews are scheduled to take place on February 6 and February 7, 2020. The interview panel must consist of two Department of Human Service (DHS) officials, which will be Executive Director, Chris Jones, and Human Resource Director, Marcie Wuitschick. Other members of the hiring panel are at the discretion of the Zone Board. The permanent Zone Director must be in place by April 1, 2020. Chair Steen stated he was made aware that some

additional information needs to be gathered. Mr. Wilson explained there were some concerns regarding the requirements of advertising the Director position. The position was posted on the State website and if the Zone wanted to further advertise, they could have chosen to do that. Mr. Wilson reports they were not aware of that and he is attempting to gather more information from Mr. Jones at this time.

Mr. Peterson stated he specifically asked for information regarding advertising for this position and he was told that advertising did not need to occur. He questioned Mr. Wilson on why that answer was provided. Mr. Wilson states he was under the impression that the advertisement for the position was strictly being handled by DHS. Chair Steen interjected, stating when the information was received, it was clear the State was going to manage the process. Ms. Scherling stated she asked that question as well and found this new information disappointing. She questioned whether a delay of the hiring should be done in order to advertise the position in other ways. Chair Steen suggested if a local advertisement needs to be placed, it can; however, he believes the scheduled interviews should continue with the six candidates that have already been identified.

Mr. Wilson stated he is seeking additional information from DHS on one of the applicants who was not included with the initial six received from DHS. Mr. Steen stated the ranking process by the State is very controlled and clarified that the applicants are not public record at this time. Mr. Peterson explained that legislation was created to provide anonymity to those that apply for high positions except for the position finalists. Chair Steen reiterated being aware of one local candidate that did not make the six provided by DHS. Mr. Wilson has requested information from DHS regarding the ranking of that candidate and whether they can include that person in the interview process.

Chair Steen asked for volunteers of the Zone Board who would be available to complete interviews on the dates identified. Mr. Breitling and Ms. Scherling stated their schedules would be open those days and they could participate. Mr. Ellingsberg questioned if the hiring board interviewing the candidates will also be the one to select the Zonal Director, instead of coming back to the Zonal Board for final approval. Chair Steen stated his understanding of the process is that each interviewer will have a scoring sheet. Once interviews are completed, the sheets will be submitted to DHS. DHS will compile them and alert the Board to the highest scoring candidate at which time the Board could offer the position to that person if they so choose. The State has a final say in who the candidate is. Mr. Wilson pointed out the Board makes a hiring recommendation where DHS would provide a final authorization. Mr. Peterson suggested Mr. Wilson also be involved on the interview panel, Mr. Wilson agreed to do so. Mr. Peterson asked Chair Steen when they will know about the other potential candidate. Chair Steen stated they were just made aware of this today and that Mr. Wilson left a message for Mr. Jones.

Ms. Scherling sought clarification on who would be making the recommendations for the Zone Director. Chair Steen explained once interviews are complete and the scoring sheets have been submitted to DHS, he will get a report back from the State with the top ranked candidate. At that time, the Board can agree or disagree on the recommendation. The Cass County Commission will not have a say in the final decision. DHS would need to approve the recommendation from the Zone Board. Ms. Scherling expressed concerns about the need for multiple finalists, not just one, due to open records laws. Chair Steen stated the panel will submit their scoring at which time no finalist will be named. The State would send back their

recommendations to the Board for the finalist. Mr. Peterson suggests making a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) Request on all the candidates' scoring if the State does not provide the scoring to be used as a learning process. Chair Steen does not disagree and will ask for all six or seven scores.

Mr. Peterson made a motion to approve a Zonal Director Interview Panel consisting of Chair Steen, Mr. Breitling, Ms. Scherling and Mr. Wilson. Mr. Ellingsberg seconded it. Motion carried.

#### **IV. Report of CCSS Survey Results and Investigation**

Chair Steen explained the process to be used for reviewing the report. He stated Ms. Pat Monson, attorney, will share the process she used to complete the investigation. The report will then be distributed to all Board members and Mr. Ammerman. They will have approximately 20 minutes to review the report during a recess of the meeting. After being reconvened, the Board members will be able to ask Ms. Monson questions. After the questions are complete, Mr. Ammerman will have a chance to respond. The Board will then have the option to accept the report.

Ms. Monson provided a brief history of why she was asked to investigate which stemmed from issues occurring in the CPS unit that were reported in June 2018 and again in April 2019 when there were additional concerns that gathered media attention. In July 2019 interviews were completed with Family Service employees by Lieutenant Joel Stading of the Cass County Sheriff's Office. His investigation was mainly focused on individuals working within the CPS Unit. He determined it was a very toxic environment; however, it was not legally defined under Title VII and the North Dakota Human Rights Act as a "hostile" environment. He determined there was nothing unlawful in the division to create liability to Cass County. Lieutenant Stading provided his report on October 21, 2019 to the Board. Mr. Ammerman was able to address some of the issues at that time. Ms. Monson stated in the report employees shared being fearful of talking to Mr. Ammerman, due to being retaliated against by supervisors and upper management. Employees reported being verbally reprimanded when attempting to add any comment, input, or improvement ideas. She stated there was increased stress due to supervisors being unavailable to staff cases in order to close assessments. At that time, Mr. Ammerman responded with two concerns: heavy caseloads and hostile work environment, which was due to Secondary Trauma caused by the work the unit does. He offered plans of improvement including improving communications, better job of coaching and teaching staff, and impose behavioral changes on management and supervisors, including himself, Family Services Manager, and both CPS Supervisors. At that time, she stated there were also concerns by the Board of this occurring in other divisions within Social Services and that the Board suggested a survey be conducted regarding the culture and environment within all four divisions of the agency. After the October 21<sup>st</sup> meeting, Ms. Monson was contracted to provide a review of the Social Service's Department.

Ms. Monson prepared an anonymous survey that was electronically distributed to 190 employees within Cass County Social Services. There were 23-25 questions that were ranked according to a designated rating scale. Additionally, there were three essay questions regarding what staff liked best about their jobs, least, and any additional comments. There were 139 responses over four days. She shared comments were analyzed and averaged according to frequency and similarity of response by division.

Ms. Monson reviewed Lieutenant Stading's report, survey results and comments, and completed approximately 40 hours of interviews with 19 individuals from the four different divisions. She prepared a report on her findings, her conclusion, and recommendations. Mr. Ellingsberg questioned who analyzed the surveys. Ms. Monson stated that for confidentiality reasons, she was the only person who reviewed them. All the information from the survey was downloaded into Microsoft Excel and the averaging was done by the Excel software.

The report was distributed to the Board members and Mr. Ammerman with a 20 minute recess beginning at 1:50 p.m.

The Board reconvened at 2:15 p.m. when Chair Steen opened the meeting up for questions for Ms. Monson. Mr. Pawluk questioned who has seen the report. Chair Steen explained just the Board members, Mr. Ammerman, and Mr. Wilson. He stated it will now become public.

Mr. Peterson referenced page five of the report and the 19 people Ms. Monson interviewed, but the report indicates 18. She clarified that as she was concluding the report and she received a phone call from another individual. Page four explains how the 19 were selected, relying on Lieutenant Stading's report, comments and survey results. She stated Mr. Wilson and Ms. Stoick also provided her a list of who in Social Services would be willing to speak with her. She stated some were willing to talk with her openly and others showed reluctance, some cried during the interview process. There were two people that refused interviews with Ms. Monson. Ms. Monson stated credibility determinations were made, with only two witnesses whose credibility was uncertain. Their comments were either not taken into consideration or Ms. Monson was able to corroborate with other interviewees completed.

Mr. Pawluk requested clarification on the rating scale. Ms. Monson explained 1 was "Inclined to Disagree" and 3 was "Neither Agree nor Disagree" or neutral. Mr. Pawluk identified there were many 3's on the average report and questioned if it was consistent with no opinion. Ms. Monson stated that is how she would interpret it. Chair Steen explained Mr. Wilson does have access to an Excel spreadsheet that has all the individual results, which could be further reviewed.

Mr. Hagen stated it appears that based on what is in the report, there have been issues going on for years. Some remedies have been talked about, but he feels that nothing has been done or that what has been done has been ineffective. Ms. Monson points out the majority indicate caseloads and lack of staffing being issues, which is an old issue within all divisions except Administrative. Attempts have been made to add staff, but other divisions appear to handle it better than Family Services. She stated Economic Assistance staff report facing heavy caseloads, but they have supervisors that step in and help. Employees in CPS report not seeing supervisors helping. Ms. Monson points out that the division with the most recurring issues is Family Services.

Mr. Peterson referenced page six and questioned if there is sexism occurring within the agency, indicating he had not heard about that in the past. She reports most complaints originated from Family Services and were minimized and not taken as serious complaints, stating it is always the same people, who are women. She stated people reported the Director referred to them as "complainers" or "whiners". In doing so, this can take on an air of sexism. She does not believe there is an issue with gender discrimination or harassment because she believes the men are

treated the same way. Ms. Monson stated it was not her intent for the report to convey that there is sexual discrimination or harassment.

Mr. Pawluk stated his interpretation of the report is that staffing continues to be inadequate for the demand, which brings other issues forward. Ms. Monson responded that caseloads are an aspect to the issue, but shared significant stress is induced on staff by some management due to the lack of respect and possible retaliation. Ms. Monson explained the interviews she conducted with staff indicated that management within Family Services is not capable, due to a lack of people skills and an inability to interact with staff in a way that makes them feel appreciated. She believes the lack of productivity is directly related to how the individuals are being treated. It was reported to her this has been occurring for years and nothing changes, which creates a sense of hopelessness for employees.

Mr. Ellingsberg stated after reviewing the report, he believes the County may not have provided the training staff need when becoming supervisors. He shared, being a previous County employee, that he feels the County could do better in the future in offering this type of support to management staff. He also stated it appeared some supervisors were promoted due to longevity within the agency, regardless of qualifications. He shared his experience is that many departments hire from within and that it can be difficult to bring someone in from the outside when you might have others who are capable of doing the job internally. Ms. Monson stated she understands that as people put in years of work for the County and they can be rewarded by being promoted. However, if there are people in management that are missing skills then maybe they are not able to do the job. She believes the County is responsible for additional training, outside of orientation, on how to be successful in their positions. Ms. Monson stated one of her recommendations is to invest in training for employees in areas where they are weak and this should be an area of funding in the future.

Mr. Hagen commented about training on a respectful culture where people can communicate easily amongst others. He stated there are a lot of easy things in the report that can be done to change the environment, as long as there is a willingness on the management side to fix that.

Mr. Ammerman was then given a chance to respond to the report. He stated that, although there are several things that he does agree with, there are several areas he feels are tainted to a direction he disagrees with. Some areas include the lack of trying to provide training or cultural direction towards the agency. He strongly disagrees and states this has taken place. He provided to Mr. Wilson a list of trainings that have been provided over last five years. He stated he was disappointed that it was not included in the Board's packet. Mr. Ammerman shared he has talked multiple times at Social Service Board Meetings about trainings done with Sagency, a local consulting firm that assists businesses with organizational coaching, recruitment, etc. He stated Ms. Stoick was involved with these trainings from the inception and Mr. Wilson has been involved in a few trainings as well. Cultural work has been an emphasis in the agency for the last several years. The Employee Committee is an example of a committee that discusses topics to focus on the culture in our agency.

Mr. Ammerman explained Sagency has helped the agency in the hiring process by offering a DSM assessment in an effort to identify driving forces, communication styles, and how the candidates matches with the responsibilities and key accountabilities of the job. The assessment offers the individual's strengths and areas that might need some support. Mr. Ammerman has

been working with the managers, who have then been working with the supervisors, to implement coaching meetings with staff. Sagency has also assisted with the onboarding process and helping individuals be successful in their positions. In order to help new employees integrate into the agency, there are mentors and training programs that are consistently applied at the beginning of their hiring. He shared onboarding in CPS has been inconsistently applied in the past but stated this will be addressed. The final part of the Sagency training is how to work with employees, correct behaviors when it is wrong, how to help productivity, etc. Mr. Ammerman agreed the agency needs to get better, but they are continuously striving for that goal.

Mr. Ammerman stated management shares appreciation of staff and one of the things they look for is recognizing a person's "why". Supervisors and managers are encouraged to recognize this and Mr. Ammerman believes there is a constant occurrence of this happening. He stated Family Service, Economic Assistance, Adult Services, and Administration are all unique with some commonalities. Economic Assistance is more program driven. There are identified processes that must be followed in order to do their federally mandated job. Supervisors can actively engage to assist on a daily basis. In Family Services, it is difficult to assist when employees are out in the field doing interviews and assessments.

Regarding the concern of Mr. Ammerman not being supportive of additional staff, Mr. Ammerman provided a handout of items that have been done in order to assist the CPS staff with managing caseloads. Some of these items include decisions the Board has made on adding staff. He stated he provides data and justification to the Commission for additional staff during the budget time. He understands the reality that the Commission needs to be concerned about all county departments, not just Social Services. This reality is the same for Social Services as an agency. Each one of the agency's divisions need additional staff and Mr. Ammerman recognizes he has to prioritize where the biggest needs are. He recognizes the position of the Board and Commissioners is to make the difficult decisions and understands there are some negotiations and balance. However, from an employee standpoint, he understands they may not be happy or understand the decisions that are being made.

Mr. Ammerman then addressed the statements in the report of him saying they are "a bunch of whiners" and "bunch of troublemakers". He explained when reviewing performance or behavior issues by management, it is common to discuss whether staff have ulterior motives. He shared this is not a large percentage of the employees and the interviews should be put into context. He also stated there are not 190 staff within the agency as stated in the report; there are only 161. He explained all staff are experiencing stress due to caseloads; however, this is not the only contributing factor. Everyone in the agency is a human being, has emotions, and deals with stress differently. Questions used in management discussions are "How are you interpreting things? How are you filtering information coming in to you?" In order to be effective in dealing with other people, one must work that through those things in order to move on with a strategy to help them. The more that management and supervisors see employees and recognize their patterns, the more they can assist in helping employees be successful. Mr. Ammerman stated the report identifies conflict, which occurs in any workplace. He believes communication must be redefined in a way that is professional and respectful with everyone in the agency being respectful to one another, this includes not only supervisors, but other staff.

Mr. Pawluk identified the report shares staff have a lot of criticisms for the director. When listening to Mr. Ammerman talk about the trainings regarding culture, he stated it does not appear they have been effective if the reports regarding cultural issues are still occurring. Mr. Ammerman stated that apparently it has not been very effective in some units and recognized it is also how it is implemented across divisions. Mr. Ammerman thought the agency was making tremendous headway and saw the cultural growth and positive concepts they were trying to instill. Mr. Ammerman does not feel the management staff let him down and stated he has full confidence in all four managers. He believes there are certain characteristics that are learned when in a manager or supervisor position, but no one comes with all the traits needing to be perfect in their role.

There were no other questions for Mr. Ammerman. Chair Steen reminded the Board that a priority would be to take action on the report and encouraged any conversation amongst the Board members to occur.

Mr. Pawluk made a motion to receive and file Ms. Monson's report. Mr. Breitling seconded it. On roll call, motion passed unanimously.

Mr. Pawluk stated getting a handle on training is the most prevalent. Chair Steen agrees with Mr. Pawluk's statement and feels there is an issue if the staff do not feel like anything is being accomplished with the training that has been done. Chair Steen also stated there is a lot of information within the report and there might be some action that needs to be taken going forward. He proposed another Board meeting to be held on Tuesday, February 18, 2020.

Mr. Ellingsberg questioned how to resolve the issue of the "he says/she says" with some of the statements made in the survey and interviews. He stated this is a piece he struggles with as he sees the dedication Mr. Ammerman and all the staff have to the work they do. He stated the report does not provide the percentage of the issues and it's hard to determine how strong of an issue things are. Chair Steen reiterated that the detailed, by respondent, by department report that is accessible to the Board for review. Mr. Ellingsberg requested the board receive a copy of the information.

Ms. Scherling shared the takeaway for her is the criticism of the Board and their inaction in the past. She stated it will be important for the Board to take care of issues that have gone unresolved in the past. Chair Steen suggests Board members take time to read the report and send any questions to Mr. Wilson. Further discussion or action will take place at the meeting on February 18, 2020. Ms. Scherling clarified and Chair Steen confirmed that the additional information being requested is still confidential. Mr. Ellingsberg asked that Mr. Wilson provide the training list that Mr. Ammerman provided him. Mr. Wilson stated he forwarded Mr. Ammerman's list on to Ms. Monson and Chair Steen shortly after receiving it. He believed there was some level of follow-up looking into those trainings identified. He does not believe that the report the Board currently has is void of this information. Mr. Wilson also referred to the reference of the training he attended back in February and shared that, while interesting, it was specific to a process of identifying a series of traits and strengths that would make an employee in a specific position most successful. Mr. Hagen suggests that the Board owes it to the employees to fix the issues once and for all and put together a well thought out plan that is monitored moving forward.

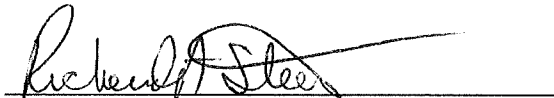


Mr. Wilson provided an update on the phone call he had with Chris Jones during the recess. He explained there was the option to advertise locally. Mr. Wilson did not remember seeing that but is going to try verify that information. He also made the request to receive information about the full list of 11 applicants. Mr. Jones was going to look into whether that information can be provided and follow-up with Mr. Wilson. One other conversation Mr. Wilson and Mr. Jones had was how the six highest scoring candidates were determined based on the weighted interview questions. Those questions and weighted criteria were blindly applied to the list of 11 original applicants, which is how the top six were identified. Mr. Wilson will provide an update when he receives additional information. Chair Steen questioned if Mr. Wilson followed up in regards to the one applicant that did not make the top six. Mr. Wilson stated Mr. Jones indicated he had not reviewed the applicants before they were evaluated based on their interview questions and he would look into that further for additional information.

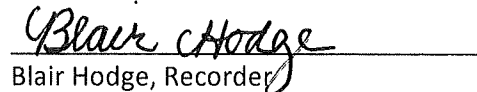
Chair Steen informed the Board the next meeting will be on Tuesday, February 18, 2020 at 1:00 p.m.

**V. Adjournment**

Mr. Peterson made a motion to adjourn the meeting at 3:12 p.m. Mr. Breitling seconded. Motion carried.



Rick Steen, Chair  
Cass County Social Services Board



Blair Hodge, Recorder