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### Autism Advisory Council

December 6, 2021, at 1:00 p.m.

Electronic Meeting

<http://dls.virginia.gov/commissions/aac.htm>

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The Autism Advisory Council (the Council) met electronically with Delegate Joshua Cole, chair, presiding.<sup>1</sup> The meeting began with introductions and opening remarks followed by presentations and discussion. Materials presented at the meeting are accessible through the [\*Commission's meetings webpage\*](#).

#### **Presentation: Services Provided by the Virginia Institute of Autism**

*Dr. Ethan S. Long, President and Chief Executive Officer, Virginia Institute of Autism*

Dr. Long provided an overview of the Virginia Institute of Autism's various programs and services, including the James C. Hormel School in Charlottesville, which serves approximately 70 students ages six to 22 who have level II or level III autism spectrum disorder (ASD); an outpatient behavioral services program, which provides applied behavioral analysis (ABA), early intervention, and other services to approximately 70 families in the organization's service region; and the Center for Adolescent and Adult Autism Services, which provides a range of programs for enhancing the quality of life for individuals 18 years and older. Dr. Long noted that the organization was founded by families of kids with ASD and that it has emphasized from the beginning the use of evidence-based strategies and services that benefit both individuals and their families. Dr. Long also described the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the institute and explained that the organization's biggest challenge at the moment is recruiting and retaining staff. Regarding legislative priorities, Dr. Long identified rate setting, the transition of Children's Services Act services to the Virginia Department of Education (DOE), and public-private partnerships as areas that would benefit from further examination. The presentation was followed by member questions and discussion, exploring issues related to the availability of adult transition services, how the Virginia Institute of Autism is funded, and the importance of developing capacity in ways that allow programs to remain flexible and build on their successes.

#### **Presentation: Services Provided by the Grafton Integrated Health Network**

*Scott Zeiter, Chief Strategy Officer, Grafton Integrated Health Network*

Mr. Zeiter provided a timeline of the Grafton Integrated Health Network's development as an organization, highlighting state partnerships that enabled the organization to grow into the vast network of programs and services that it constitutes today. Founded in 1958, Grafton has locations in Berryville, Front Royal, Richmond, Strasburg, and Winchester, as well as Charles Town, West Virginia, and is the largest children's residential provider in the Commonwealth. The organization specializes in serving children with severe ASD and comorbidities and has worked closely with agencies of the Commonwealth to develop group home models that keep children in the community and reduce the need for training centers. Mr. Zeiter noted that Grafton

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<sup>1</sup> **Members Present:** Delegate Joshua G. Cole (chair), Senator Emmett W. Hanger, Jr., Senator J. Chapman Petersen, Delegate Glenn R. Davis, Delegate Kaye Kory, Delegate Kenneth R. Plum, Dilshad Ali

**Members Absent:** Dr. Polly Panitz

has continually worked to hone best practices for the care of children with severe ASD and that staff members have been successful in both eliminating the use of seclusion and reducing the use of restraint by 99 percent. As an organization that primarily provides residential services, Mr. Zeiter underscored the tremendous impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had on Grafton, noting increased costs and challenges with staff recruitment and retention as major impediments to its operations. Regarding legislative priorities, Mr. Zeiter identified provider reimbursement for psychiatric residential treatment facilities and rate setting as areas to be examined further.

### **Presentation: Services Provided by the Virginia Department of Education**

*Dr. Samantha Hollins, Assistant Superintendent of Special Education and Student Services, Virginia Department of Education*

Dr. Hollins described the role of the Department of Special Education and Student Services in providing instructional leadership to school divisions, teachers, and other entities and summarized recent developments in programs and policies affecting students with ASD. She reviewed recommendations from the Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC) in its 2020 study, *K-12 Special Education in Virginia*,<sup>2</sup> particularly in the areas of eligibility, individualized education plans (IEPs), transitions services, teacher training, and program monitoring and compliance, and how DOE had addressed each recommendation thus far. Dr. Hollins noted that special education currently represents DOE's most critical hiring shortage and that the codification of JLARC's recommendations will allow for greater resources to be committed to these endeavors. Dr. Hollins also reviewed ASD initiatives specific to the Commonwealth, including DOE's applied studies cohort study, the Self, Health, and Relationship Education (SHaRE) social emotional learning curriculum, the Virginia Public School Behavior Analyst Network (VAPSBAN), and the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence (VCU-ACE). She emphasized that DOE's goal is to place students with ASD in the least restrictive environment possible and that novel approaches to behavioral intervention have shown promise toward this end. Member questions and discussion centered on the availability of services throughout the Commonwealth and the importance of involving parents in the development and implementation of IEPs.

### **Member Discussion**

Following the presentations, members engaged in a general discussion of topics raised. There was an inquiry into the extra year of eligibility for special education services that DOE established in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Dr. Hollins provided a brief overview of how that policy revision had been utilized thus far. The issue of staff recruitment and retention addressed by the three presenters was echoed during the member discussion, who noted that the caregiver shortage compounds the Medicaid waiver waitlist issue, making it difficult for families to receive help in a timely manner. There was discussion of the need to increase rates for caregivers, and Mr. Zeiter explained how the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed the shortcomings of many public-private business models, as organizations are limited in their ability to respond to instabilities in the market by passing increased costs along to consumers.

The meeting adjourned at 2:40 p.m.

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<sup>2</sup> The majority of these recommendations were codified by HB 2299/SB 1288 in the 2021 Special Session I of the General Assembly.



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For more information, see the [\*Commission's website\*](#) or contact the Division of Legislative Services staff:

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