

**HEALTH, SOCIAL, EDUCATIONAL & ENVIRONMENTAL COMMITTEE MEETING
HELD IN ROOM #318
PUTNAM COUNTY OFFICE BUILDING
CARMEL, NEW YORK 10512**

Chairwoman Sayegh, Legislators Crowley & Nacerino

Tuesday

6:30 PM

November 14, 2023

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 P.M. by Chairwoman Sayegh who requested that Legislator Nacerino lead in the Pledge of Allegiance. Upon roll call Legislator Nacerino and Chairwoman Sayegh were present. Legislator Crowley was absent. Chairwoman Sayegh noted that Legislator Addonizio will sit on the Committee in Legislator Crowley's absence.

Item #3 - Discussion/Update/Putnam Hospital/Transformation and Stabilization Plan/Putnam Hospital President Dr. Mark Hirko

Dr. Hirko thanked the Legislators for the opportunity to provide an update and added that the Hospital is hoping to provide quarterly updates moving forward. He stated it is the end of their fiscal year and noted that since their last update there has been improvement in many areas. He stated in the three (3) years he has been President of the Hospital, they have added close to \$8 million of capital improvements to the facility. He stated, as previously announced, they have restarted their comprehensive women's health program and now have two (2) Nuvance OBGYNs. He stated they are seeing an increase of baby deliveries and are encouraged. He stated the busiest service has been the reboot of cancer care and they have actually outgrown their chemotherapy center and are looking to retool into a comprehensive cancer care center. He stated their emergency room has been very busy. He stated there is a lack of primary care providers in the region, so Nuvance has negotiated a deal with GoHealth to open an urgent care office in Carmel in 2024. He stated another area of growth has been surgical services and they have added two (2) general surgeons. He stated the ICU (Intensive Care Unit) has grown as well as utilizing transfer centers like Danbury Hospital and Vassar Hospital, which is a step forward for integrating healthcare in the region. He stated as far as the workforce, the Hospital is very close to being fully staffed again. He noted that, during COVID, the turnover rate for new employees was close to 98%, and now it is about 12%. He stated they have revamped the way they are onboarding people and finding other ways to hire people so that they are prepared for the workload. He noted that 60%-70% of non-profit healthcare systems are losing money. He stated there has been a major change in how healthcare is being asked for by the population and in what the insurances are willing to pay.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned what Dr. Hirko sees as the main health challenges in Putnam County.

Dr. Hirko stated the main concern is economics. He stated we have an aging population and changing demographic. He stated they need to change what is being offered, considering the number of the population in Medicaid age, particularly cardiovascular services, and urgent care. He stated another focus is mental health and psychiatric services as it has been difficult to

transfer patients out because there is nowhere for them to go. He noted another concern is violence in the hospital. He stated since hospital access has reopened since COVID, there have been attempted attacks on physicians and staff. He stated the Hospital has had to increase its security and limit access. He stated he would rather be proactive with security.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned if there is an update on the Hospital's stance on medication assisted therapy for patients with opioid use disorders.

Dr. Hirko stated they have partnered with their EMS/EMT services who are now able to administer Narcan and other medications for opioid overdoses. He stated they have also worked to coordinate care with local rehab centers. He noted they constantly apply for grant funding and some of those grants pertain to this issue.

Chairwoman Sayegh noted that the County's plan for a Stabilization Center is on hold. She questioned if there is any space at Putnam Hospital for a Stabilization Center.

Dr. Hirko stated they are willing to discuss it because there were meetings about it, and the Hospital thought there was an arrangement made to utilize space there.

Chairwoman Sayegh stated possibly that can be revisited.

Dr. Hirko stated the space was limited but it was close to the emergency room, and it was believed that it would work.

Chairwoman Sayegh commended the Hospital on its reopening of the Birthing Center. She questioned if the Hospital has a role and plan to combat disparities in pre-natal care for minority populations.

Dr. Hirko stated they have been working with the County on developing the needs assessment for the State. He stated this has been an area of recommended focus for all hospitals. He spoke to the services that are available for women's health.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned if the Hospital accepts Medicaid.

Dr. Hirko stated yes.

Chairwoman Sayegh stated the County's "Bridge Alliance" will be meeting to bring together a broad network of healthcare providers as well as law enforcement agencies with a goal to reduce both fatal and non-fatal overdoses. She extended a personal invitation for Dr. Hirko, or a representative, to attend.

Dr. Hirko thanked Chairwoman Sayegh for the invitation and stated they would see what could be worked out.

Legislator Nacerino thanked Dr. Hirko for his update. She stated Optum has a very strong presence in the area. She questioned what the relationship is between Optum and Nuvance.

Dr. Hirko stated they still work together, and he has a monthly meeting with Optum leadership. He stated they will always work with their partners in healthcare. He stated Nuvance doctors will take the place of Optum doctors who leave the Hospital.

Legislator Addonizio requested clarification on the GoHealth centers that are coming to the area.

Dr. Hirko stated they are urgent care centers. He stated these centers are a partnership between Nuvance, GoHealth, and Northwell. He explained that GoHealth doctors will refer patients to Nuvance doctors if they do not have prior history with another doctor. He stated the Hospital has a well below average admittance rate in the emergency room, which shows that people are coming there for issues that are better suited for an urgent care center. He stated this partnership will help alleviate the wait times in the emergency room at the Hospital. He noted another primary care office will be opening in Mahopac in early December.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned if there is adequate staffing for psychological evaluations in the emergency room.

Dr. Hirko stated the Hospital is the seat for psychiatric residency for Nuvance and they also utilize telehealth with doctors on call.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned what type of follow up care is given to someone who comes to the emergency room for a psychological evaluation but is not admitted.

Dr. Hirko stated they have a program where the person is not admitted but they come back into the Hospital daily for care. He stated where they are seeing the problems is after this program ends. He stated they are working with the State and looking for funding to help fill this gap.

Legislator Castellano stated there is an urgent care in Brewster and he has received feedback from the ambulance corps that people do not want to go to the hospital, so they ask to go to urgent care, and it is adding strain on the ambulance corps.

Dr. Hirko stated Nuvance is working on a more formalized arrangement with the ambulance services, including even an internal ambulance service.

Legislator Ellner requested clarification on if the psychiatric beds are full.

Dr. Hirko stated they have 20 beds and yes, they are full.

Legislator Ellner facilitated further discussion regarding Medicare. He added that he has heard from residents that they are being pushed to go to Danbury Hospital.

Dr. Hirko stated that is only for higher-end issues, such as traumas, heart attacks, and strokes. He stated a hospital like Danbury has a higher capacity for critical care. He stated Putnam Hospital must work together with their partners in healthcare.

Legislator Jonke thanked Dr. Hirko for coming to the meeting. He stated the Hospital is very important to everyone in Putnam County. He stated you never know when you will need to use it.

Lynne Eckhardt, Southeast Resident, questioned if the Hospital has been approached about the Stabilization Center now that it is known that it will not be at the planned location.

Dr. Hirko stated no they have not been approached.

Chairwoman Sayegh thanked Dr. Hirko.

Item #4 - Discussion/Peers Influence Peers Program/Board Chairman Stephen Velichko

Chairwoman Sayegh stated when this Committee was reviewing the 2024 Budget, she found that Peers Influence Peers (Peers) was no longer funded. She stated the Committee decided to place the requested amount of \$36,000 into sub-contingency so that the future of the program can be discussed. She stated tonight they would like to hear more about the program and its successes.

Peers Chairman Velichko thanked the Committee for the invitation to come speak. He noted that he is now the President of Peers. He recognized everyone in the audience who is with Peers. He stated Peers produces original films, public service announcements, and documentaries. He stated they have explored the issues of alcohol abuse, street prescription drugs, bullying, domestic abuse, self-harm, eating disorders, etc. He stated they teach young people communication skills, leadership, and community. He stated there have been a lot of changes over the last few years. He stated their original film from 2019 “Saved by the Bell” is available on their website. He stated in 2020 they completed a public service announcement regarding the dangers of vaping as well as approximately 75% of a film called “Lockdown” about gun violence. He stated then-Peers President Frank Reale passed away and the world shutdown due to COVID. He stated at the time their program was completely in person, so they were not permitted to meet due to the restrictions. He noted that the vaping public service announcement is now available on their website. He stated they also began work on youth LGBTQ+ issues. He stated in 2021 there was no funding from Putnam County and Peers had to reinvent themselves and went fully remote. He stated it was very challenging, but they met remotely and discussed issues in the community. He stated they continued this through the summer months because the students requested that it continue, as they did not have the support from their schools. He stated in June of 2023 they presented their work from 2022 which included topics such as: healthy dating communication, body image, social media, depression, etc. He stated they also completed the vaping documentary and a film about a gay man coming out and accepting himself. He stated they will be showing their piece on gun violence at their 30th Anniversary Celebration and it was the last project Peers President Reale worked on. He stated each year they ask their youth what problems they are facing socially at school, in order to help decide what to focus on. He stated their next project’s focus has not been decided but it will be a documentary. He stated they have already presented at Putnam Valley High School and are looking to present at the other high schools in the county as well. He stated they are also looking to partner with other community organizations. He stated over the years, there have been over 600 active members and 2,000 students have participated in their programs. He stated their audience is national and

international. He stated their success has come from the support of Putnam County and the County is credited in these messages. He stated this program has 30 years of success and the greatest things its produced are the people who have graduated through the program. He listed notable alumni of the program. He requested that some people in the audience who have been through this program speak about their experiences.

Andrew Hard stated he joined Peers eight (8) years ago as a shy high school freshman. He stated a friend introduced him to Peers and saw that it was full of selfless people who cared about the community. He stated he graduated from Marist this year and now works for Major League Baseball. He stated his boss told him he was hired due to his work with Peers, because it showed he was a good person with a good moral backbone. He stated Peers is about helping others, but it is also about finding yourself.

Ryan Moynihan stated he joined Peers through a friend at Putnam Valley High School. He stated Peers is not just a team, it is a family. He stated it has given him the confidence to speak about his autism and overcame bullying. He stated he stepped away from Peers in 2017 but came back during COVID in 2020. He thanked Peers President Velichko for helping the program get back on its feet.

Ally Pittman stated she was a member of Peers from 2010-2013. She stated she was severely bullied and struggled finding a purpose. She stated she created a documentary called "I Felt Like a Nobody." She stated Peers helped her find confidence and overcome her stutter. She read a quote from C.S. Lewis pertaining to the special bond of the people at Peers.

Peers President Velichko thanked those who spoke. He stated success is measured in many ways and the lives that are saved are priceless. He asked that the County please consider supporting this program.

Chairwoman Sayegh stated there is no doubt that Peers is a wonderful program and has an impact. She stated the County must utilize the funds from taxpayers in a prudent matter. She stated in the past the program was funded through the Department of Social Services (DSS) through a contract.

Peers President Velichko stated each year, DSS contracts Peers to provide either a long format film or multiple short format films based on what the County is looking to educate students on.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned if Peers received County funding in 2023.

Peers President Velichko stated no, the last funding was in 2022. He clarified it was for the school year that ran September 2022 to June 2023. He further clarified that the County has funds for the school year which began September 2023, but they have not been released to Peers yet.

Legislator Nacerino stated there are really two (2) considerations here for the Committee. She stated they need to discuss releasing the funds and the funds that are in sub-contingency for 2024.

Chairwoman Sayegh requested Deputy County Executive James Burpoe provide clarity from the Administration.

Deputy County Executive Burpoe stated he believes Peers usually receives the funding in October or November. He stated he believes Peers still owes one (1) video that was paid for.

Peers President Velichko stated yes that was the unfinished 2020 video “Lockdown” on gun violence that they will be submitting in May 2024.

Chairwoman Sayegh clarified that the 2023 funds have already been approved by the Legislature and are in the hands of the Administration. She stated tonight we are talking about the 2024 funds.

Legislator Jonke questioned if the County is the only source of funding for Peers.

Peers President Velichko stated the County’s funding accounts for just over 90% of their budget. He stated they do have some local businesses that support them.

Legislator Jonke stated it sounds like a great agency. He questioned if they have pursued other funding sources, such as at the State or Federal level.

Peers President Velichko stated they are at that stage right now and exploring other options.

Legislator Jonke stated this program should be bigger than it is.

Peers President Velichko agreed wholeheartedly. He noted that Putnam County gets the credit for the messages that Peers spreads.

Chairwoman Sayegh questioned where the access point is for the taxpayers of Putnam County to see the work that Peers does. She stated she could not find them on the Peers website. She suggested putting them on the County website.

Peers President Velichko stated he would like to find a way to make their work more accessible because it is made by the students of Putnam County. He noted that their website is peerspartnership.org.

Legislator Nacerino thanked Peers President Velichko and the other Peers members for attending. She explained how when the Committee reviewed the budget, they were unsure of where Peers stood. She stated Peers plays a vital role in raising awareness to sensitive and important topics for our youth. She agreed with putting some of the Peers videos on the County website. She stated she will certainly support their endeavors moving forward.

Chairwoman Sayegh suggested incorporating this program with the County’s Youth Bureau. She stated maybe Peers should be treated as an outside agency, instead of within the County’s budget. She noted that County Executive Byrne has stated he feels the same way.

Legislator Addonizio thanked Peers for coming this evening. She stated they have touched so many lives and are a wonderful organization that she is proud to support.

Legislator Nacerino stated the County needs to better facilitate Peers applying for funding.

Ms. Eckhardt stated the Peers website is woefully out of date.

Peers President Velichko stated he will work on that.

Chairwoman Sayegh stated she appreciated all the testimonials for Peers tonight. She stated we really believe in the program.

Peers President Velichko noted that many former students who wanted to come but now live out of the area or had other obligations. He stated approximately 20 made video testimonials. He thanked the Committee for the opportunity.

Peers Chairman Stephen Velichko Sr. noted that Peers President Velichko is a product of the program and started when he was in high school. He stated when past-President Reale passed away, it was a time of turmoil and took time to rebuild. He stated the strength of the family of this program is tremendous.

Peers President Velichko stated he would like to speak with each Legislator separately to inquire on if there are any causes they believe should be brought forward.

Item #5 - Approval/Budgetary Amendment 23A066/Social Services/Contract Renewal for Child Advocacy Center

Chairwoman Sayegh made a motion to approve Budgetary Amendment 23A066; Seconded by Legislator Addonizio. All in favor.

Item #6 - Approval/Budgetary Amendment 23A069/Health Department/Adolescent Tobacco Use Prevention Act Fines

Chairwoman Sayegh made a motion to approve Budgetary Amendment 23A069; Seconded by Legislator Nacerino. All in favor.

Item #7 - Other Business - None

Item #8 - Adjournment

There being no further business, at 7:55 P.M., Chairwoman Sayegh made a motion to adjourn; Seconded by Legislator Nacerino. All in favor.

Respectfully submitted by Administrative Assistant Ed Gordon.