Chafee Advisory Group Meeting
September 16th, 2025

Minutes

Attendees: Nancy R. Andre, Tanya Berry, Anthony Cameli, Mary Coogan, Hailey D'Elia, Josefina Ewins, Patricia Jordan, Niambi London, Randi Mandelbaum, Jonathan Marsh, Stephanie Mills, Kasey Vienckowski, Alicia Frye, Courtnee Giles, Alyssa Gonzalez, Kerry-Anne Henry, Jenn Hourin, Walther Perez, Ifeanyi Pole, Diane Travers, Safa Simmons, Barbara Washington, Sukanya Varadhan, Candace Webb

Absent: Laura Albanese, Konniesha Moulton, Kelly Nestor, Dan Rhoton

I.   **Welcome & Introductions -** Niambi London and Jonathan Marsh

II. **NJ4S -** Jenn Hourin and Sukanya Varadhan

Program Overview
- NJ4S Purpose: Address youth mental health concerns post-pandemic.
- Launch Date: September 2023, by DCF.
- Model: Hub and Spoke.
    o 15 regional hubs across the state, aligned with NJ court percentages.
    o Hubs staffed by: Director, support staff, prevention specialist, licensed clinicians.
    o Deliver services locally (in-school, community).
- Advisory Boards: Each Hub has one.
    o Advise on programming, community connections, meeting community needs.
    o Comprised of: Community partners, faith-based organizations, parents, youth, others.

NJ4S Tiers of Service
- Tier 1: Universal Support
    o Universal (Tier 1) supports include virtual and in-person workshops, webinars, assemblies and training.
    o They are available to students (grades Pre-K through 12), their families and school staff.
- Tier 2: Evidence-based Small Prevention Groups
    o Small Group Programming (Tier 2) includes early identification and focused prevention interventions.
    o It can be delivered through small group interventions, brief individualized prevention programs, mentoring, or low-intensity classroom support to students identified as at- risk.
    o Tier 2 interventions also include linkages to existing community programming and resources.
- Tier 3: Brief Clinical Interventions
    o Brief Clinical Interventions (Tier 3) include assessment and brief individualized therapeutic interventions for youth while they are being referred and connected to a community provider to support ongoing mental health needs.

- Tier 2 & 3 Eligibility:
    - All public middle and high school students (K-12).
    - Parents/caregivers in NJ4S participating schools.
- Service Request Process (Tier 2 & 3):
    - Requested by school via online data system application.
    - After application, hubs hold consultation with school.
    - Arrange service provision or community referral.

Accessing NJ Statewide Student Support Services (NJ4S)
- Tier 1 Services:
    - Anyone can view these services.
    - Available on the NJ4S public-facing webpage at www.nj.gov/dcf/nj4s.html
- Can connect with an NJ4S Hub in your county.
    - 15 Hubs across the state, some with multiple counties.
- Tier 2 & 3 Services:
    - Application required.
    - Process:
      1. School signs up in NJ4S portal (school is "reached").
      2. School submits application (school is "engaged").
      3. Hub has consultation phase with school (avg. 2 days).
      4. Intervention initiated and school receives services.

NJ4S Program Reach & Engagement
- Eligible Schools (Public Middle & High, Grades 6-12): 1,131
- School Year 2023-2024 Data:
    - Schools Reached (signed up in data system): 684
    - Schools Engaged (submitted application for Tier 2 or 3 service): 292
- Current Numbers (as of discussion):
    - Schools Reached (signed up in portal): 883 (jump from 684)
    - Schools Engaged: 553
- Tremendous program growth since launch.

Tiered Programming Data
- School Year 2023-24:
    - Tier 1 Events Provided: 6,236 (21% focus on mental health/wellness)
    - Tier 2 Small Group Interventions: 277 (focus on mental health/wellness)
    - Tier 3 Interventions: 866 (most students from high-need school districts)
- Preliminary Data Analysis for 2024-2025 School Year (Increase in numbers):
    - Tier 1 Events Provided: 6,653
    - Tier 2 Interventions Provided: 788 (184% increase from Year 1)
    - Tier 3 Interventions Provided (brief one-to-one counseling): 2,025 (133% increase from previous year)

Tier 2 Services & Referrals
- Tier 2 services: small group workshops, focus on particular skills.
    - 65% evidence-based.
    - 35% evidence-supported or combination programs.
- 4,700 unique students served in Tier 2.
- Referral system in place to avoid duplicating services.
    - Referrals to community centers or other organizations.
    - Warm handoffs for Tier 3 to counselors/community services.
- Needs index used to identify high, moderate, and low-need schools.

- First year: 710 referrals made.
  - 72% from high-need schools.
  - 16% from moderate-need schools.
  - 12% from low-need schools.
- Reasons for referral:
  - 64% mental health related (loneliness, sadness, isolation, lack of belonging, lack of enthusiasm for school).
  - Smaller percentage for behavioral issues (discipline, fighting).
  - Other categories also exist.

NJ4S Service Delivery & Reach
- 97% of referred students successfully received services (NJ4S or community).
- Tier 2 services include: coping/support training, anger management, life skills (high demand).
- Diverse array of students served (age, gender, race, ethnicity).
- 13,000 students engaged in NJ4S Tier 2 or Tier 3 services.
- Over 16,000 when including students, teachers, and parents.
- 1,143 total Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions delivered.
- Most participants were middle schoolers, with 7th graders receiving over 3,000 services.
- High school services show fluctuation; 295 services for 11th graders, potentially an anomaly in the first year's data.

Geographic Coverage
- Services provided across New Jersey, with a visual map showing saturation by zip code.
- Darker colors indicate more saturated areas (red to the right of scale), lighter colors less saturated (blue to the left).
- Significant services provided in Sussex, Burlington, and Ocean counties.
- Comprehensive coverage throughout the state.

Program Evaluation
- Evaluation spans several years.
- NG4R involved implementation: comprehensive analysis of tier two services.
- Ethnographic observations: 11 tier two services, 2 tier one services to assess delivery and student response.
- Information consolidated and fed back to Hubs for adjustments.
- Formative brief coming soon with a deep dive into qualitative components.
- Interviewed 35 key stakeholders in 5 pilot Hubs for evaluation.

NJ4S Program Impact & Essex - Diane Travers
County Operations
- Student quote: "NJ4S guided me, gave resources to calm down, reduce stress. Still use those things."
- Skills taught by NJ4S stick with students beyond weeks/months of service.

Essex County NJ4S Overview
- Essex County: largest Hub.
- High-needs school districts: Newark #2, Camden #1
- Essex County work representative of other 14 Hubs.

Tier 1 Services in Essex County
- Last year: over 350 Tier 1 services provided in Essex County.
- October: 67 Tier 1 activities already booked.
- Trend: upward, after 2 school years building awareness and buy-in.

Tier 1 & Tier 2 Services
- Tier 1 services: presentations, workshops, professional development for school staff/educators.
- Tier 1 serves as advertisement for Tier 2 evidence-based prevention groups.
- Tier 2 groups offer more skills/information (e.g., 10-week program vs. workshop).

Prevention Consultants & Service Areas
- 32 prevention consultants in Essex County, trained in smaller evidence-based prevention groups.
- Schools served: middle, high, and K-8 models (serving 6th-8th graders in K-8 schools).

Evidence-Based Prevention Groups
- 21 distinct programs; 22 programs trained in.
- 1 program (Tier 3) requires licensed clinical staff.
- List developed with hub advisory board and county-wide needs assessment (parents, students, community members, educators).
- Some programs not yet requested.
- Services marketed via an evidence-based guidebook.

Program Outreach and Engagement
- 129 eligible schools in Essex County.
- 96 high-needs schools.
- Marketing continues to schools not yet utilizing services.
- Increased requests for Tier 1 activities this year.

Parent Programs and Engagement
- Evidence-based practices offered to parents.
- "Active Parenting of Teens" provided to high schools.
- Parent groups offered on Zoom platform due to logistical challenges.

Key Program Offerings
- "Regression Replacement Training": Anger management, coping skills (heavily utilized by middle schoolers).
- "Girls Circle" and "Council for Boys and Young Men":
  - Designed to foster self-worth, healthy relationships, positive behaviors.
  - Two biggest asks.
  - Explore topics like healthy relationships, personal values, masculinity, toxic masculinity, social media influence.
- Staff represent diverse communities, religions, cultures.
  - Spanish-speaking prevention consultants.
  - Haitian Creole-speaking prevention consultants.
  - Male prevention consultants (men of color) serve as mentors.

Prevention Consultants and Tier 3 Services
- Prevention groups delivered in multiple languages based on student needs.
- Male prevention consultants are men of color, acting as mentors (e.g., Council for Boys and Young Men).
- Impact largely from relationships between students and prevention consultants.
  - Consultants seen as role models and caring figures.
  - Engaging curriculum provided.
  - Students initially reluctant often sad when groups end due to positive relationships and skill acquisition.

Tier 3 Services in Essex County
- 10 clinicians in Essex County.
- Services provided in schools or community; in-home therapy available.
- Summer services: in homes, library private rooms, parks, or neighborhood walks.
- 98% of services take place in schools during the school year.
  - Breaks down barriers; parents don't need to transport students to outpatient centers.

Trauma-Informed Treatment
- Needs assessment identified trauma treatment for youth as a major need in Essex County.
  - Overarching need for majority of students.
  - Evident in Tier 3 referrals and Tier 2 prevention groups.

- Clinicians trained in Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS).
  - CBITS is a Tier 3 evidence-based group.
- Clinicians additionally trained in the racial trauma module (add-on to CBITS).
- CBITS group includes three individual sessions with a clinician.
- Clinicians link students to additional services after group completion.

Clinical Program Enhancements
- CBITS program (Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools) offered.
- Clinicians trained in NASW grief certificate program due to student struggles with grief and loss.
- Clinicians and prevention consultants trained by Partnership to End Addiction:
  - Substance use overviews
  - Trend analysis
  - Prevention strategies
- Prevention consultants additionally trained in prevention science.
- Centering family involvement series for clinicians to improve family engagement.
- Strong emphasis on including parents, caregivers, resource parents in treatment.
- Family sessions offered; sibling sessions for conflict resolution.
- Staff trained in eating disorders due to high referral demand.
- Staff trained in EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing), a brief intervention for trauma, depression, and anxiety.
  - EMDR helps reprocess trauma.
  - Clinical services up to 12 weeks in schools, with linkage for ongoing services.
- Organization was one of three early hubs partnered with the Pediatric Psychiatry Collaborative (PPC).

Partnerships and Services
- PPC partnership grew from shortage of child/adolescent psychiatrists in New Jersey.
  - PPC connects adolescent psychiatrists with pediatricians for consultation.
- PPC partnership provides psychiatric evaluations for students needing further assessment.
  - Evaluations determine diagnostic approach and potential medication needs.
  - Used for students with school shooting threats to assess risk and needs.
- Clinicians administer Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale at first intake and if suicidal ideation occurs.
  - Goal: 100% linkage for students experiencing suicidal ideation to intensive services.
- PPC supports assessing students post-crisis.
  - Organization does not assess actively in-crisis students; referrals received after assessment by mobile response or hospital ER.

Contact and Social Media
- Managed by Family Connections; NJ4S website accessible via Family Connections website and independent website.
- Social media presence on Facebook, TikTok, Instagram with resource videos.

Parental Involvement & Referrals
- Parent consent is required for Tier 3 services.
- Referral process involves:
  - School social worker or teacher identifying student need.
  - Parents reaching out to school for support.
  - Students advocating for themselves.
- Jotform consent sent to parents (students also on consent).
- Clinician sets up intake appointment at school and begins services.
- Students are considered equal partners in treatment.
- Referrals also made to CSOC services (e.g., CMOs) for continued care after 12 weeks of Tier 3 services, especially for crisis situations.

Referral Process and Funding
- Close collaboration with CMO, Partnership for Children of Essex.
- Educational liaison from CMO helps families connect with CMO services and PerformCare.
- This partnership is a primary referral source.
- Connections also formed with outpatient services in Essex County.
- NJ4S services are fully funded by the Department of Children and Families.
- No insurance information requested until a PPC referral is made.
- Other NJ4S agencies may have varying relationships with CMOs in their areas.
- Strong initial connection between NJ4S and CMOs, but some have seen a decline in communication.
- Education piece is a key connection point.

Funding and Referrals
- Completely funded by NJ Department of Children and Families.
- Insurance information only requested for PPC referral or LCADC substance use assessments.
- All 15 Hubs offering Licensed Alcohol and Drug Counselors (LCADC) substance use assessments in schools this school year.
  - Essex County is in planning stages, ready to go.
  - Ongoing treatment needs to be provided in community at a spoke location.
- Essex County will offer up to 12 weeks of substance use treatment.
- Referrals for ongoing treatment will utilize NJ Family Care Medicaid/third-party insurance.
  - At point of referral, families prepared for next step to be covered by insurance.
- Clinicians and staff are state contract, potentially grant-funded.

Referral Success Definition (Jenn)
- Success defined by:
  - Match between need and service provided.
  - Correct connection made (e.g., DV counseling to DV connection).
  - Client showing up for services.
- Follow-through on completion for some level, but not sure if measured in statistics.
- Data shown was more about match and attendance for services.
- Other data on completion exists, but not in the slide presented.

Service Gaps & Engagement Challenges
- Asked if counties lacked services, how services were created, or if kid's needs weren't being met/connected to services.
- Jenn clarified whether question was about NJ4RS being sole provider in an area, leading to high service numbers.
- Some counties' data reflects higher need schools reaching out.
- Southern part of state shows greater need for services; NJ4S is often the only provider.
- Hudson has many services, but also other community organizations filling gaps due to being a more urban district.
- Factors influencing service uptake:
  - Needs index of schools.
  - Availability of other services.
  - Hubs' ability to forge relationships with schools.
- Hubs make effort to go onsite, help schools set up with 'connects' for service requests.
- Requires receptive schools; busy/overwhelmed school staff lead to lag in engagement.
- Some schools are not engaging currently.

Service Engagement & Reports
- Working to understand why schools are not engaging: time constraints or other issues.
- Report coming out in October, largely qualitative, will include student quotes on services, hub staff, caregivers.

- Other quantitative reports and presentations available upon email request.
- Addressing issues of statewide school representation and reflecting needs across the state.

Resource Strain
- CMOs are stretched thin; concern over services not being utilized despite need.
- Resource constraints are an issue, not CMOs directly.
- Some counties' resources are quickly depleting.

Q&A Highlights
- Parental Consent: For Tier 3 services, a parent/guardian must sign a consent form before services begin.
- CMO Referrals: The Essex hub has a strong, formal partnership with their local CMO for connecting families to ongoing services. Other counties may have different levels of connection.
- Funding: The NJ4S program is fully funded by DCF; personal insurance is not required for services provided directly by the hubs.
- Service Gaps: High service volume in counties like Sussex and Ocean may reflect a greater need and fewer alternative community resources.

III. **Soluna App Presentation -** Walther Perez
- Resource for New Jersey youth, ages 13-18.
- Aims to show what Soluna looks and feels like for users.
- Users need zip code and date of birth for authorization.

Platform Introduction
- First interaction: Goal section.
- Young person can develop goals with:
  - Coach (in session)
  - Counselor (scheduled session)
  - Someone in a different organization.
- Example goal: improve presentation skills.
  - Struggle: creating actionable goals and breaking them into key steps.
  - Current action: presenting to the audience.
- Goals can be developed with coaches, counselors, or people outside those roles, including various organizations.

Mood Logger & Platform Features
- Mood logger for young people to outline feelings.
- Retrospective look at mood over time (e.g., last 30 days).
- Feeling: "pretty good," "very high energy," "very pleasant."
- Use cases: work, family, or intersection of both.
- Helpful for tracking progress and highs in the month.
- All features available in English and Spanish.

Program Features & Accessibility
- All tools and interactions available in Spanish.
  - Coaches and counselors speak Spanish.
- Soluna Inverse: set of topics for young people to explore.
  - Preset curriculum outlining content pieces.
  - Example: "creating connections" content.
  - Includes text message story narratives, podcasts, and prompts for self-reflection.
- Content includes:
  - Leaning into values
  - Creating minds and body
  - Raising diverse voices

Impactful Content
- "Melena's text: my family and I are undocumented"
  - Discusses navigating conversations in a mixed-status family.
  - Helps young people dealing with similar stress.
- Content on navigating imposter syndrome:
  - Provides grace for first-generation college students entering new environments.
- "Anti-hustle movement: what it is and why it matters"
  - Reframes the idea that hard work is the sole measure of success, especially for young people in challenging circumstances (e.g., New Jersey).

Soluna Tools - Free Write & Prompts
- Free write section available on Soluna.
  - Allows users to journal thoughts without prompts.
  - Highlighted as a free feature, unlike paid versions on other platforms.
- Prompts of the day available.
  - Users can execute different prompts or ask for new ones.
  - Examples of prompts:
    * "When you're having a bad day, what's one thing that consistently cheers you up?"
    * "How can you use breath work to help calm your anxiety? Take a few deep breaths and write about how your body responds."
    * "What role does vulnerability play in your relationships? How comfortable are you letting your guard down?"
    * "What's a recent moment where your body surprised you with its strength, physically or emotionally?"
- Users engage with free write and prompts in different ways:
  - Some write daily.
  - Some write only when they feel like it.
  - Some lean on prompts for structured writing.
  - Prompts offer questions users may not have considered.

Soluna App Features
- Thought shaker provides affirmations for self-love and motivation.
- Includes a 'Star Board' for de-stressing, similar to a fidget tool.
- Noise cleanse feature offers white noise for centering.
- Community peer forum available, moderated and embedded.
  - Platform demo version; content shown is not real.
  - Example discussion topic: "What does a healthy fight look like?"

Community is a safe space for healthy dialogue, not a social media platform.
- Users cannot post personal identifiable information.
- Coaching/counseling sessions:
  - Drop-in coaching: 2-15 minutes, 2-8 hours.
  - Bookable counselor sessions: flexible timing within hours.
  - Coaches/counselors have expertise in various topics (e.g., sleep, relationships, LGBTQ+ navigation).
  - Expertise derived from lived experience and mental health professional training.

Help Resources and User Engagement
- Quick find help resources available for community resources (e.g., food pantry, legal services).
- Content use varies:
  - Saving and reading content on the go (school, work commute).
  - Using tools for immediate self-relief.
  - Figuring out how others engage with particular questions/struggles (e.g., sleep issues, new school season).

- o Booking counselor sessions or dropping in on coaching sessions.
  - Progression of engagement: starting with tools/content, then peer community forum, then one-on-one with a counselor.
  - User journey is a natural progression but may differ for each individual.

IV. **Housing Work Updates –** Kerry-Anne Henry
- Funding for FYI (Foster Youth to Independence) program included in the latest budget iteration.
- Goal: Take advantage of FYI funding opportunities in the next 6-12 months.
- Work involves partnering with PHAs (Public Housing Authorities) across the state to increase access to FYI vouchers for young adults aging out of care.
- Current FYI sites to be shared, plus new sites coming online in 3-6 months.
- Goal: Ensure young people in any county have access to FYI resources.
- PHAs apply for vouchers to HUD; child welfare agency verifies eligibility and pairs vouchers with services.
- Currently supporting over 100 young adults across New Jersey through the FYI intervention.
- Expansion of FYI into additional counties anticipated in the near future.
- Suggestions were made leveraging county commissioners, mayors, or legislators to encourage reluctant counties to apply, especially as "stuff is drying up."

Funding Opportunities & Community Engagement
- Encourage counties to apply for funding.
- Leverage local politicians and advocacy groups for community discussions.
- Question why funding opportunities aren't utilized in communities.

DCF's Youth Supportive Housing Model
- DCF's long-standing involvement in youth supportive housing.
- Transitioning the model into a standardized manual intervention this year.
- Model based on "Connect to Home" by DCF, developed over the last decade.
- Collaboration with providers to create a practice profile for the work.

Federal Changes and Housing Implications
- Potential implications for DCF's supportive housing portfolio due to federal changes.
- Federal government direction on "housing first" and similar programs.
- Working with DCA and others to access resources amidst funding changes in the next few months.
- Shared information about the federal Executive Order (EO) on "housing first" and a New Jersey's lawsuit filed in response.
- HUD and other federal agencies to release instructions on EO implementation.
- Broad-reaching implications depending on developments in the next few months, including DCA's prevention efforts.

DCF Statewide Housing Sessions & Young Adult Housing Needs
- Next DCF statewide housing session: September 30, 2025 at 2 PM.
  - o Topic: Working with New Jersey Office of Faith-Based Initiatives on tapping into faith-based funding sources.
  - o Contact KerryAnne Henry for listserv access or recordings.
- Housing Insecure Young Adults:
  - o Close to 1600 young adults on active caseload flagged as housing insecure (undercount).
  - o FYI program is one intervention.
  - o Over 200 slots in transitional living interventions (TLPs).
  - o Efforts to enhance TLP services, flipping to evidence-based models (e.g., My First Place in Middlesex and Somerset counties).

Housing Support for Young Adults
- Services being enhanced, flipping to evidence-based models.
- Number of young adults aging out of care has decreased.
- Increase in young adults needing housing, particularly in the adolescent housing hub.
- Young adults closed with DCF reaching out to hub for support.
- Gaps in data sharing across systems for young adults not connected to DCF but involved with COC or shelters.
    - Data sharing agreement needed to understand scope of need for FYI and other housing interventions.

Q&A Discussion on Housing
- An estimated 1,600 young adults on the active DCF caseload are flagged as housing insecure. This is an undercount.
- The number of young adults aging out of care has decreased, but the number needing housing support has increased.
- Age range for data is 17 to 24.

Key takeaways
- NJ4S
    - NJ4S Program Growth: The NJ4S program, launched in September 2023, has shown tremendous growth, reaching 883 schools and engaging 553 schools for services.
    - NJ4S provides tiered interventions (universal support, small prevention groups, brief clinical interventions) with a significant increase in Tier 2 (184%) and Tier 3 (133%) services in the 2024-2025 school year.

- Soluna Youth Platform
    - Soluna is a digital mental health platform for New Jersey youth aged 13-18, offering goals tracking, mood logging, diverse content, journaling prompts, affirmations, and access to coaching/counseling sessions.
    - Soluna provides a moderated peer forum and quick find help resources, available in English and Spanish.

- NJ DCF Youth Housing Initiatives
    - NJ DCF is expanding youth housing support, now assisting over 100 young adults with FYI vouchers and standardizing its youth supportive housing model into a manualized intervention.
    - Key concerns include advocating for increased PHA participation, addressing data sharing gaps, and monitoring potential federal policy changes.

2025 Chafee Advisory Group Meeting Dates:
March 25, 2025
June 3, 2025
September 16, 2025
December 2, 2025

All ideas reflected are not endorsed by the agency.