City of Alexandria, Virginia

Department of Community and Human Services

Social Service Advisory Board Meeting Notes

October 19, 2026

Present: Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff), Brandon Hare (DCHS Staff), Doressa Warren (DCHS Staff), Jenna Mayer (Co-Chair), Karen Carter (Co-Chair), Benjamin Tolly, Abby Curran O' Horrell (Virtual), Michael Kutner, Shawna Gary (Virtual)

Guests: Brandon Hare (Customer Service Team), Doressa Warren (DCHS Benefits Program Manager)

Absent: Angela Almonte (DCHS Staff)

Call to Order/Welcome:

The October meeting was called to order by Jenna Mayer (Co-Chair) at 7:15p.m.

DCHS Customer Service Presentation:

- DCHS Customer Service staff presented on 5th floor lobby operations and answered questions from SSAB members.
    - Client satisfaction survey results were reported in the high 90s.
    - Staff track average, median, and maximum wait times and whether client issues are resolved in a single visit.
    - Walk-outs were described as a very small number, and staff offered to have the Director of Customer Service provide the data.
    - Phone waiting times and dropped calls are tracked separately through the department's phone system.
- New client services include an Express drop-off on the first floor and an online link that sends questions directly to benefit case workers (SNAP, Medicaid, TANF, renewals, and new applications), with a two-business-day response time.
    - The link launched within the last 30 days and is promoted through check-in tablets, posters, flyers, lobby TV, the DCHS website, a QR code, and community partners.
    - Staff also described a new CRS system, built by staff over several months, that makes it easier to navigate program eligibility.
- SSAB members asked how a client with missing mail would be assisted.
    - Staff explained that addresses are verified on screen with the client, notices can be reprinted, and clients may use an alternate mailing address or pick up mail at the agency. Once entered, the address carries through to notices unchanged, so ongoing delivery issues are typically a postal matter outside DCHS's control. Staff were not aware of clients repeatedly returning with the same unresolved issue.

Approval of minutes: The board members reviewed September minutes. SSAB Ben Tolly motioned to approve the minutes, and it was seconded by Karen Carter (Co-chair). Board members unanimously approved the minutes without any changes.

- SSAB members discussed Robert's Rules of Order, and it was noted that the City Clerk has instructed the board to follow Robert's Rules and that minutes should reflect this.

Annual Report:

- Karen Carter (Co-Chair) reported that the annual report was completed using sample reports, meeting minutes provided by Angela Almonte, and the roster and term-limit information provided by DCHS staff.
    - Confirmation of acceptance has not been received, but DCHS staff expect it to be accepted.

HR1 Briefing:

- Lesa Gilbert (DCHS Staff) distributed the department's public HR1 presentation and timeline and provided a high-level overview.

Financial impacts:

- Beginning in 2027, the state will be responsible for benefit costs if the error rate exceeds 6%.
- As of October 2026, the state is required to pay 75% of SNAP administrative costs.

SNAP changes:

- The work requirement age increased from 54 to 64 (effective November 2025). The parent exemption now applies only to children under 14 (previously under 18).
    - Exemptions for veterans, individuals experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth were removed.
- Shelter, medical, and dependent care expenses must now be verified rather than self-attested.
- DCHS is working on a dashboard to track the number of residents impacted, as the number changes with monthly recertifications.

Medicaid changes presented by Doressa Warren (DCHS Benefits Program Manager):

- A requirement of 80 hours of work, community service, or other approved activity applies to the expansion group (about 8,000 Alexandria residents). For the first 12 months, workers may accept client attestation.
    - Exemptions include pregnancy and postpartum, disability, certain caregivers, and adults 65 and over.
- Volunteer Alexandria created a system for residents to register for volunteer work and track hours, which can be printed and submitted to a worker.
    - Ben Tolly shared that his church signed up as a volunteer site.

- Eligibility for the expansion group will be redetermined every six months (previously annually), and retroactive coverage is reduced from three months to one-month, effective January.
    - State notifications went out in August, and DCHS is encouraging clients to confirm their addresses.
- Medicaid ex parte renewals continue; SNAP does not allow them.

Non-citizen eligibility:

- Eligibility has narrowed. Lawful permanent residents remain eligible for SNAP and for Medicaid after five years, and Cuban and Haitian entrants remain eligible for both. Refugees, asylees, humanitarian parolees, trafficking victims, and VAWA withholding recipients are no longer eligible.
- Individuals losing eligibility may qualify for emergency Medicaid, which covers emergency events only (e.g., dialysis, pregnancy) and not routine visits.
    - In response to member questions about emergencies, such as dialysis, staff noted there is no limit on the number of emergency episodes and that specifics would need to be confirmed with DMAS.

Change in SNAP Enrollment and food access:

- SNAP enrollment declined from approximately 12,000 to 9,000 since 2025, and Medicaid enrollment declined by approximately 5,000.
    - DCHS cited ineligibility, HR1, fear and public charge concerns, missed renewals or verifications, Medicaid unwinding, and the political environment.
- SSAB members discussed other issues impacting food access i.e. food banks are receiving less USDA food.
- DCHS maintains an online food resource list, holds two food distributions per month at its building, and is pursuing new partners, including rescue food.
    - DCHS is seeing more families and unhoused individuals at prepared meals sites.

State and local response:

- The Governor issued an executive order directing efforts to help eligible residents maintain coverage, and the state has held town halls and is expanding automation and AI tools (e.g., ex parte renewals, policy bots, error rate review).
- DCHS is expanding SNAP Employment and Training, older adult employment services (55+), and vocational ESL, and is partnering with Alive, Volunteer Alexandria, and the Commission on Aging on food access, volunteer tracking, and advocacy.

Staffing:

- Staff described the impact of frequent policy changes and vicarious trauma. State training competes with caseload demands (1,200 to 1,300 cases per worker; cases are touched at least twice per year).
- Turnover remains high, with approximately 6 to 7 vacancies. DCHS reported that Alexandria's benefits specialist pay is the lowest among neighboring jurisdictions (Fairfax, Arlington, and Prince William).

City Manager's FY2028 Budget Letter:

- The City Manager invited the SSAB to share budget priorities for FY2028. Lesa Gilbert (DCHS staff) noted it was directed to reduce its budget by 3% and must offset any new request.
- SSAB members discussed three focus areas: workers, clients, and the system.
    - Workers: competitive salaries for benefits specialists, and DCHS staff.
    - Clients: ways for clients to track their case status and reduce repeat interactions with the system. Michael Kutner will present a case-tracker concept at the next meeting. Shawna Gary also noted that the CommonHelp website offers updates but is not always accurate.
    - Ben Tolly motioned for the legislative director to attend next meeting to have more about legislative information vs budget direction. SSAB members voted in agreement for the motion.
- Members discussed continued advocacy to Richmond through the legislative agenda. Members leaned toward asking City Council members to prioritize the issue directly, possibly outside of the budget letter.
    - Members will send additional ideas to the Co-Chairs, who will compile them for finalization for the next meeting agenda.

Updates from Board Members:

- SSAB members discussed supporting community outreach.
    - DCHS staff noted that outdoor tabling opportunities are limited in colder months and will gather upcoming events from DCHS outreach staff, including holiday gift events (pickup days and appointments). A table cover for the SSAB has been ordered.
- DMAS is hosting webinars on Medicaid changes. DCHS will share the information along with HR1 flyers and the press kit.
- Members were invited to volunteer with the DCHS holiday gift program, in which families share their children's wish lists.
    - Community partners such as Toys for Tots and the Salvation Army collaborate on the program.

Action Items:

- All members will submit their bios, which will be shared at the next meeting.

- All members will share HR1 information within their networks.
- All members will email feedback on FY2028 budget priorities to the Co-Chairs.
- Lesa Gilbert DCHS staff will send out HR1 flyers, the press kit, and DMAS webinar information, and will follow up with Brandon Hare (outreach events), Christine Levine (holiday event tabling), and LaToya Williams (table cover).
- The Co-Chairs will schedule a preparation discussion with Michael Kutner ahead of his presentation.
    - The Co-Chair will arrange the legislative director's briefing.

New Business:

Sludge Audit Committee proposal:

- A motion was introduced by Michael Kutner to amend the agenda to take up new business was discussed.
    - It was approved by voice vote, limited to 10 minutes, with the understanding that the item will be placed on the next agenda.
- Michael Kutner moved to establish a Sludge Audit Committee to investigate and report to the SSAB on excessive or unjustified friction that makes it harder for clients or providers to achieve their legitimate goals, modeled on an approach used by the government of New South Wales, Australia.
- DCHS described existing oversight, including management evaluations every two years, an additional annual audit, state quality assurance contact with clients, and client satisfaction surveys. DCHS also noted it has a journey map for its programs and services and will ask leadership about similar internal efforts.
- SSAB members raised concerns about the board's lack of system access and enforcement authority and about the effort being perceived as adversarial. Members discussed narrowing the scope to the client perspective and using client journey mapping to share findings with DCHS.
- A motion to table and revisit the proposal was made and carried. Two other motions submitted by Michael Kutner may be reintroduced.
- Michael Kutner will present on his direct experience navigating benefits in Alexandria at the next meeting.

Next Meeting: November 16, 2026

- Time: 7:00 p.m.
- Next meeting location: Department of Community and Human Services Mark Center Drive
- Anticipated agenda items: finalize FY2028 budget priorities, member bio introductions, presentation by Michael Kutner and the Sludge Audit proposal.

Meeting adjourned: 8:51 p.m.