

HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE

August 19, 2025

Present: Thomas Kalamas, Vice-Chair; Josh Leviker; Vincent Nortz and Barry Lyndaker. Legislator Moser had been excused.

Legislator Kalamas called the meeting to order at 1:38 p.m.

Legislator Kalamas moved to approve July 14, 2025, committee meeting minutes as recorded, seconded by Legislator Nortz, and carried.

Hospice House Opportunity – Friends of Hospice and Jerry Cayer, LCHS CEO

Joanne Dicob discussed the Friends of Lewis County Hospice's (FOLCH) initiative to establish a hospice home, emphasizing the need for local end-of-life care. The FOLCH committee has engaged with various stakeholders, including Jerry Cayer and an architectural firm, to explore options for the facility. They are considering both new construction and rehabilitation of existing buildings. A Legislative Ad Hoc Committee was formed to investigate the viability and plan model.

A building at 9502 Church Street in Castorland, constructed by New York State for the OPWDD, was described by Linda Noftsier. This building has been unoccupied for five years. Local officials, including Heidi Lehmann, are eager to see the building utilized again. The property features a medical design, with facilities for patient care, and is in good condition, maintained by New York State.

The FOLCH Board of Directors' shared vision for a future hospice home and their ongoing financial support for the Lewis County Hospice Program was highlighted. Recent meetings with Senator Walczyk and the Ad Hoc Committee were discussed, including the need for assistance to realize their goals. Reflections on the progress made over the past year noted a shift in focus from a traditional hospice facility to a comfort care home.

Jerry Cayer shared statistics regarding hospice care, highlighting that 69 patients were admitted in 2024, with a total of 78 served. The average length of stay was 33.6 days, while the national average for Medicare patients was 92 days. In 2025, 46 patients were admitted over seven months, with an average stay dropping to 27.5 days, indicating that patients are entering hospice care later than optimal.

The essentials for establishing a Comfort Care Home were outlined, highlighting the importance of community support and financial backing. The proposed model includes two to six beds initially, with potential growth, and would involve a partnership with a not-for-profit agency for operational management, Hospice support would be overseen by the health system, funded through Medicare.

Legislator Kalamas moved to have County Attorney McNichol draft a resolution showing the board's support for the OPWDD property being declared surplus so it can be transferred to the county for a possible Comfort Care Home, seconded by Legislator Nortz, and carried.

Federal Budget Changes Impacting Social Services – Jennifer Jones, Commissioner of Social Services

Jennifer Jones, Commissioner of Social Services, discussed the implications of federal budget changes, noting that counties will face increased fiscal pressures due to reduced federal support for programs like SNAP. Starting in October 2026, the federal share of administrative costs for SNAP will drop to 25%, resulting in a projected cost shift of \$165,000 for Lewis County. Additionally, beginning in federal fiscal year 2028, states will be responsible for a portion of SNAP benefits, potentially costing the county an additional \$310,000.

Significant changes to work requirements in New York State were outlined, noting that individuals aged 18 to 64 without dependents will now be required to work. Exemptions for homelessness and veterans have been removed, and the age limit for those exiting foster care has been reduced from 24 to 18. Furthermore, it was mentioned that SNAP education funding will be eliminated effective next month.

The implications of changes to the Thrifty Food Plan were highlighted, indicating that SNAP benefits will be reduced and food purchasing for low-income households will be affected. Additionally, updates on HEAP funding were shared, noting that last year, approximately \$2.25 million in benefits was distributed by Lewis County, but future appropriations remain uncertain due to potential eliminations in the president's budget.

Upcoming changes to Medicaid were outlined, including a shift to six-month eligibility redetermination and new work requirements for able-bodied adults. The reduction of retroactive coverage from 90 days to 30 days was emphasized as a critical issue for those requiring long-term care. Additionally, the loss of tax credits and its financial implications for essential health plans were noted by a conference room participant.

Updates on housing programs were provided, noting a Section 8 freeze that has limited new placements and reduced the number of available vouchers to 225, with a waitlist of 287 individuals. The elimination of \$35,000 in funding for the HICAP program, which served 921 people last year, was also mentioned as a significant cut affecting local services.

The following draft resolutions were read:

1. Appropriating funds for Program Year 2025 for the period April 1, 2025 through June 30, 2027 per the Notice of Obligatory Authority.

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2. Authorizing an MOU between Lewis County Community Services Department and Jefferson County Community Services Department for a bi-county Mobile Crisis Program as outlined by the NYS Office of Mental Health and \$370,000.00 as Lewis County's share of state-aid start-up funds for contracted services by CHJC in managing and operating the bi-county mobile crisis program for a twenty-month period.

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3. Authorizing an agreement between Lewis County Department of Social Services and Caregivers to designate qualified personal care aides to provide personal care services as defined in NYS Department of Health regulations for eligible DSS clients with the cost to be billed to Medicaid.

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4. Authorizing an agreement between Lewis County Department of Social Services and TipCo Automatic Systems, LLC for AI virtual assistant software at a cost of \$45,800.00 to design, configure, integrate, test, train, and deploy EVA Phone, EVA Interview, and EVA Companion.

AYE 4 NAY 0

There being no other business to come before the committee, Legislator Leviker moved to adjourn at 2:40 p.m., seconded by Legislator Lyndaker, and carried.

Respectfully submitted,
Cassandra Moser, Clerk of the Board