

Social Services

BOL Meeting Minutes - Final



Committee Chairs: Christopher Johnson

800 Michaelan Office Bldg.
148 Martine Avenue, 8th Floor
White Plains, NY 10601
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Tuesday, April 13, 2021

4:00 PM

Committee Room

CALL TO ORDER

Joint with the Committee on Appointments

With a quorum present, Chair Johnson called the meeting to order at 4:12 PM.

Pursuant to Governor Andrew Cuomo's Executive Order No. 202.1, "Continuing Temporary Suspension and Modification of Laws Relating to the Disaster Emergency," which temporarily suspends portions of the New York State Open Meetings Law.

A section of the order, "Suspension of law allowing the attendance of meetings telephonically or other similar services," provides for the suspension of "Article 7 of the Public Officers Law, to the extent necessary to permit any public body to meet and take such actions authorized by the law without permitting in public in-person access to meetings and authorizing such meetings to be held remotely by conference call or similar service, provided that the public has the ability to view or listen to such proceeding and that such meetings are recorded and later transcribed."

Others in attendance: BOL: Legislator Woodson-Samuels, Legislator Terry Clements, Melanie Montalto and Dayana Gómez; GUESTS: Commissioner Leonard Townes, Kenneth Burr, Al Kim and Terence Toal, Jr.

Present: Committee Chair Johnson, Committee Vice-Chair Covill, Legislator Barr, Legislator Shimsky, Legislator Williams and Legislator Boykin

Absent: Legislator Borgia and Legislator Tubiolo

MINUTES APPROVAL

I. ITEMS FOR DISCUSSION

Guest: Commissioner Leonard Townes - Department of Social Services

1. [RES-2021-84](#) **APPT-Commissioner of Dept. of Social Services-Townes**

A RESOLUTION to confirm the appointment, effective February 25, 2021, of Leonard Townes as the Commissioner of the Westchester County Department of Social Services.

Submitted by COMMITTEES ON APPOINTMENTS AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Commissioner Townes appeared before the committee to discuss his qualifications for this appointment. He shared about his upbringing and education, both of which contributed to his interest in helping people. After college, his career path evolved towards social services and all of the changes that he envisions to provide people with opportunities to improve their

quality of life. He worked in several areas such as Mount Vernon and Yonkers, which later solidified his career choices. After a lot of work as Deputy Commissioner of Social Services in White Plains, he decided to apply for Commissioner when the opportunity became available.

Chair Johnson asked the Commissioner to speak on where he sees the Department of Social Services right now and where he envisions it going. Commissioner Townes said that he wants to develop leadership within the Department in order to increase dialogue and developing feasible ideas and improve decision-making abilities. He also wants to increase education for people that currently live with certain fears ranging from inaccessibility to services to financial struggles. As Deputy Commissioner, he brought in a consultant to help evaluate the needs of the Department, which was halted due to the pandemic.

Legislator Woodson-Samuels asked the Commissioner to speak on assisting homeless clients with obtaining housing, specifically those in underserved communities. Commissioner Townes expressed that homelessness is a critical concern but they are at the highest amount of vacancies in shelters due to many people being able to find housing. He wants to continue helping them become stable and properly prepare to lead economically sustainable lifestyles. He also shared that the federal government has been helpful with respect to funding to help prepare for when the eviction moratorium is lifted. Additionally, education on services and their accessibility are also important to share with people as well in addition to other ideas that he and his team are coming up with.

Legislator Clements asked about the Commissioner's vision for the families who have lost loved ones who were critical to the families' well-being due to the pandemic. Commissioner Townes emphasized that he has been working with the Department of Mental Health in addition to having received funding from FEMA to help people overcome these challenges. They have been in the works to develop proper planning to help these families and individuals that will need the assistance.

Chairman Boykin asked about training and if he will be cross training the silos within the Department of Social Services. Commissioner Townes shared about a motivational interviewing training technique that will help staff to improve their services. He feels that exposing the teams to different aspects within the department will be helpful to provide them with a well-rounded idea about all parts of the Department, which will improve education within it as well.

Legislator Covill asked him for his thoughts on some of the rules and policies made for the Department. Commissioner Townes emphasized that he is currently reviewing as much as possible to see what has worked and what needs improvement for future changes if possible.

Legislator Shimsky asked about the advantages and disadvantages about being promoted internally or hiring from the outside in. Commissioner Townes shared his stance and elaborated on his experience thus far as someone who ascended within the Department of Social Services. Legislator Shimsky also asked if he has ideas on how to bring new ideas for a refresher. He reiterated that he would like staff to feel like they are able to provide ideas and display their talents within their job, which can in turn help clients in the future as well.

Legislator Barr reiterated the benefit of having Commissioner Townes serving in this role.

Legislator Woodson-Samuels made note that the resolution will be amended to reflect an expiration date for February 25, 2026 since it is a 5-year term.

On motion of Legislator Barr, seconded by Legislator Covill, the above item was signed by committee. The motion carried by the following vote:

Aye: Committee Chair Johnson, Committee Vice-Chair Covill, Legislator Barr, Legislator Shimsky, Legislator Williams and Legislator Boykin

Absent: Legislator Borgia and Legislator Tubiolo

II. OTHER BUSINESS

III. RECEIVE & FILE

ADJOURNMENT

Moved by Legislator Covill, seconded by Legislator Shimsky, the Committee adjourned at 4:47pm.