



Onondaga County Legislature

HASSINA K. ADAMS
Clerk

NICOLE WATTS
Chairwoman

SPENCER BERG
Deputy Clerk

HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES – APRIL 21, 2026 **DAN ROMEO, CHAIR**

MEMBERS PRESENT: Mr. Romeo, Ms. Denton, Ms. Block, Mr. Kelly, Mr. Burtis

ALSO ATTENDING: Chairwoman Watts, Ms. Hernandez, Mr. Ryan; also see attached list

Chair Romeo called the meeting to order on April 21, 2026 at 8:50 a.m. The previous meeting's minutes were approved.

- 1. DEPARTMENT OF ADULT & LONG TERM CARE SERVICES:** JoAnne Spoto Decker, Commissioner and Executive Director of the Office for Aging
 - a. **INFORMATIONAL:** Overview

Attachment No. 1: PowerPoint Presentation; Attachment No. 2: Brochure; Attachment No. 3: Information Sheet; Attachment No. 4: NY Connects Resource Guide

- JoAnne Decker, Commissioner, joined by Deputy Commissioner Maria Mahar and Nate Overdyke, who just joined two weeks ago as a public information specialist
- The Department of Adult and Long-Term Care Services is dedicated to improving the quality of life and overall well-being of adults aged 18 and older, providing support through a coordinated network of direct services, programs, and local resources designed to meet the diversity of needs
- Our mission reflects the evolving reality of aging; adults are living longer, healthier, and independent lives. Our goal is to support independence by ensuring individuals have access to the services and resources they need to thrive
- Department comprises four key units: the Office for Aging, Adult Protective Services, New York Connects, and the Long-term Care Resource Center
- Together, our programs offer guidance, protection and access to essential services
- Funded by the Onondaga County Legislature, NYS Department of Health, NYS Office for the Aging, NYS Office of Children and Family Services, and additional grants
- We remain committed to enhancing community wellbeing by promoting knowledge, access, equity, and advocacy, and by fostering a safe and healthy environment for all
- Onondaga County population (2022): 476,516; approximately 26% are over the age of 60, and I am very proud to be in that group

Office for Aging

- EISEP (Expanded In-Home Services for the Elderly Program): an in-home, non-medical care program supporting frail individuals aged 60 and older who are not enrolled in Medicaid
- Program provides case management, personal care, respite care, and more, helping clients stay safely in their home and maintain their independence

- The program offers assistance with daily living tasks housekeeping and essential activities, cleaning, laundry, bathing, dressing); services offered on a sliding scale fee, ensuring accessibility based on a client's financial situation
- Care managers conduct in-home assessments to evaluate individual needs and develop appropriate service plans
- EISEP supports family caregivers by offering short-term respite, allowing the time to rest and attend to personal matters.
- Services delivered through licensed agencies or a consumer-directed model, allowing participants the flexibility to hire and train their own aides
- Fall prevention being a key factor in healthy aging we are proud of the increase distribution of the personal emergency response system none as PERS to our clients with mobility challenges.
- 165 clients currently served with PERS (Personal Emergency Response System) through the Office of the Aging
- 47,518 hours of care delivered in 2025, equivalent to 5.5 years of 24-hour care within the same period

Questions/ Comments

- Ms. Denton: Would any clients overlap across these programs?
- Ms. Decker: Yes, a client can receive EISEP services and also receive Meals on Wheels, for example
- Ms. Denton: How many staff handle these programs?
- Ms. Decker: The Office for Aging has 11 staff, in addition to multiple contracts with other agencies

Presentation Continued:

Office for Aging, Food, Meals, and Nutrition Assistance

- Vital part of the Office for Aging
- Senior nutrition services address the growing demand among seniors for nutritious food, meals and supportive services. Our team provides nutrition screenings and individualized assessments for those at risk of poor nutrition and diet counseling following NYSOFA guidelines and provided by a registered dietician
- Operate more than 30 dining sites throughout Onondaga County serving individuals age 60 and older; these congregate meal sites do more than provide nutritious food, they help seniors save money, stay active, and build social connections, as a result, we've seen a 52% increase in meals served
- Meals on Wheels delivers meals directly to seniors unable to attend the program has grown 45%; provides nutrition and an important safety check for people living alone
- Farmer's Market Nutrition Program, supporting low-income seniors and our local farms. This year, funding increased from \$75,000 to \$112,500, allowing distribution of 4,500 coupon books to be used to purchase fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables
- Monthly nutrition education programs offered to help seniors make informed, healthy choices
- Our nutrition program is one of the most stellar in New York State, in large part thanks to Maria, who is a registered dietitian

Questions/ Comments

- Mr. Kelly: How did the blizzard box program go this year, given the return to more typical Central New York winters, and what were the budgetary impacts?
- Ms. Mahar: We start planning in August and September to start the meals and information with them. The blizzard bags went out in October because we don't want to wait until the day of, and that was in

December; we sent another batch out when it started getting worse again; we also take care of the other home-delivered meal agencies not included in the funding

- Mr. Romeo: Can you explain what a blizzard box is for those unfamiliar?
- Ms. Mahar: It's a box with stable meals, for example, a can of beef stew or goulash, raisins, juice boxes, boxes of milk, crackers, just enough for three days worth of meals. And then what happens also, during the summer, we also send out water bottles and reminders that it's going to be hot and that if they need any help, they can call our office
- Mr. Kelly: Especially with the rise of energy prices, it's important to have those reminders to people; it poses risks to older adults who don't have the same level of thermoregulation
- Ms. Mahar: And also when there is a storm, they already have their boxes, but all the case workers call the people who don't have anybody to help them. Especially if they don't have neighbors, we will check in on them. In addition to their food, we make sure they have their medication, especially for those who are diabetic
- Mr. Romeo: How do seniors receive farmer's market coupons and how does the process work?
- Ms. Mahar: In June, we received the coupons; we target senior centers in areas that do not have easy access to fruits and vegetables and people with health disparities
 - We email them and ask how many they need, and set those aside. And then we go to the different markets throughout the county and distribute. Each person gets a packet with five coupons worth \$25, and it's one per person in a household
 - It used to be one per family, but now each person can get it. Our biggest distribution site at the market, seniors just walk up, sign a piece of paper declaring they meet the criteria, and that's it

Presentation Continued:

Office for Aging, Caregiver Support and Education

- We offer information and consultation for family caregivers
- Information and consultation provided for family caregivers through in-person and virtual discussion groups; caregivers share experiences and find peer support
- The Institute for Caregivers, in operation for more than 25 years, offers public education on various topics relevant to family caregivers
- Care givers have many restrictions on flexibility and time, so these are provided either in person or through zoom
- Animatronic pet program: NYS Office for the Aging supplies animatronic pets at no cost, distributed primarily to individuals living with dementia. They're adorable and a lifesaver

Office for Aging, Collaboration with the Department of Social Services, Economic Security Division

- County serves as secondary certifier for HEAP (Home Energy Assistance Program); provides assistance to seniors, makes home visits for seniors unable to apply in person and holds multiple HEAP outreach events throughout the county
- This year (2025) assisted 477 callers with HEAP-related questions

Office for Aging, Community Services Programs

- Transportation is among the most requested services; seniors who can no longer drive, have lost a primary driver, or cannot use public transportation are reaching out for help
- Providers are seeing increased demand for transportation to support medical appointments, congregate meals, shopping, and socialization to support their mental and social health
- Volunteer transportation providers include Jordan Elbridge Transportation and SETH (Senior Adult Transportation), which operates in Bridgeport, Minoa, and Kirkville

- The diversity of agencies involved with the United Ride program provides thousands of rides per year, especially the much-needed door-to-door transportation for individuals with disabilities who cannot leave their homes
- We've provided over 30,000 rides in 2025
- Time Savers: a minority and women-owned enterprise established in 2009, providing shopping services to frail seniors unable to shop independently and have no one to assist them, providing thousands of trips
- 812 units of shopping service provided in 2025
- Additional services from Office of the Aging:
 - Legal services for low-income seniors through Legal Aid Society of Mid-New York
 - Neighborhood Advisor Program providing information and assistance through contracted agencies;
 - Project Fix (partnership with Catholic Charities) providing small in-home repairs
 - And the relatives as Parents Program in collaboration with Syracuse Housing Authority, supporting relatives caring for children

New York Connects

- A statewide program established in 2006; offers free, impartial information and assistance to Onondaga County residents navigating long-term care services and providers. Serving individuals of all ages and all payer sources
- Provides comprehensive, unbiased guidance connecting people to programs and support that best meet their needs
- Established statewide in 2006, it's a trusted go-to source of service assistance from birth to beyond
- Notable increase in contacts from professionals, clients, caregivers, seeking help related to low income housing, Medicaid and home-based services, underlying the critical need for accessible, reliable information and support.
- Onondaga County receives one of the highest levels of NYS Office for the Aging funding outside of New York City
- Provide service through home visits, accommodate walk-ins, phone counseling and online resource guide as well as printed copies. *NY Connects, Onondaga County Resources Guide on file with the Clerk*
- Significant growth in: 547% increase in individuals seeking transportation programs; 53% increase in families seeking facility-based services
- Satisfaction surveys distributed as required by NYS Office for the Aging; client feedback highlights that many residents were unaware of available services until contacting New York Connects. People don't know what they don't know

Adult Protective Services (APS)

- Photos of hoarding cases were distributed to the committee to illustrate the scope of conditions caseworkers encounter

Hoarding Photos on File with the Clerk

- Provides services to at-risk individuals with physical or mental impairments to keep them safe from harm due to their inability to care for themselves or abuse/neglect by others
- Conducts in-home investigations; offers case management and legal interventions; Adult Protective Services acts as guardian when a person has no one fit to make legal or financial decisions on their behalf

- Collaborate with internal and external agencies that can provide support. Referrals up 8% from 2024; 514 cases moved to assessment in 2025
- Current goal is to align with the increased complexity of the needs of adults.
- From 2024 to 2025, there was an increase in the complexity of risk factors, such as untreated mental health, up 8%, financial exploitation, up 10%, and untreated medical conditions, up 15%
- APS guardianship cases at unprecedented levels;
 - When I worked at APS in the mid '90s, we had only two guardianship cases
 - Nursing homes are increasingly bringing residents to Article 81 guardianship, sometimes without the department's prior knowledge; current guardianship cases up 11%
 - Number is expected to grow
- From mid 2024 to 2025, funds were used to provide emergency housing, visiting home aids, and other services, food, clothing, transportation, and furniture
- 285 assisted hoarding cleanups in 2025, up 54% from the prior year

Long-term Care Resource Center

- Provides medically based care management for Medicaid-insured adults and individuals with disabilities of any age
- Two primary programs to deliver hands-on support;
 - The Personal Care program partners with licensed home agencies to provide trained home aide staff
 - Consumer Directed Personal Assistance model allows clients to hire, train, and manage their own personal assistants. Including the ability to fire
- Nursing team holds at minimum a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, if not higher
- Additionally, we offer PRI (Patient Review Instrument) screenings provided free of charge for community members seeking to assess a loved one's care needs and determine appropriate levels of support beyond independent living
- PRI's instruments typically cost \$200, while we do it free of charge. This PRI service continues to be a growing critical need.

Outreach and Special Events

- 122 events held in 2025, reaching over 4,000 community members
- Senior Celebration Luncheon held annually with some Legislators Attending; 2026 event scheduled for May 14th
- 2025 Elder Abuse Conference held
- Onondaga County Adult Protective Services selected as one of the only county agencies in New York State to be featured in the documentary film HOAP (Heroes of Adult Protective), currently in production

2025 Initiatives Accomplished

- \$205,000 awarded to 19 senior centers through the Senior Center Grant Award Initiative, sponsored by County Executive McMahon
- Two new congregate dining sites opened: one in Skaneateles and one in Syracuse at Syracuse Community Connections, 100 people came to celebrate
- New York Connects fielded 5,870 counseling calls in 2025. These calls aren't just simple requests for information, they're counselling calls.

Questions/ Comments

- Ms. Block: How are we doing with care managers in the community? Has the number increased in the last couple of years, has it decreased, where are we at with care management?
- Ms. Decker: It's been our experience that it's the same; there hasn't been a decrease, so it's stable
- Mr. Kelly: I like to echo a lot of the same points every time. We're lucky enough to have folks like you in to meet with us but for people that don't know the economics of things like falls or nursing home care,
 - It's really amazing what we do to keep people independent and healthy and mobile and living in the community
 - Not only does it really improve their quality of life, but it presents significant cost savings to the taxpayers
- Ms. Mahar: We always use the statistic that one year's worth of meals equals one day in a nursing home; our goal is to keep people at home; a lot of people with an Adult Living Score (ADL) score of three or more should be in a nursing home, but we keep them in the community
 - It does reduce the cost of Medicaid and it works; we have a really great community because we have a lot of volunteers who deliver meals and make telephone calls
 - In North Syracuse, they actually have a waiting list to become a volunteer, illustrating the exceptional level of community engagement in Onondaga County
- Mr. Burtis: I'd just like to take the opportunity to say thank you as an individual who is aging myself and as a man taking care of my aging parents; you don't know what you don't know until you get in this predicament
 - I can't say enough about your staff and also the volunteers and outside agencies doing just God's work; and of course, just checking up on people and making people feel seen is so important; mental health plays a large role in this age group and all of these things together are very helpful
- Ms. Mahar: It's more than just a meal; with each delivery, the person gets a case manager, and that case manager will start to make referrals; they walk in and they can see whether they need their house cleaned, whether they need to talk to someone, whether they need help with economic resources
 - We have counseling services, classes, we connect with OASIS, and we have fall prevention and health promotion activities like bingo at the senior centers, Tai Chi, and Walk With Ease in partnership with the zoo where people with arthritis take very small steps and eventually they're walking a mile
 - The Walk With Ease program restarts in May; it is an evidence-based program originating in California in which participants with arthritis begin with very small steps and gradually work up to walking a mile, with the added incentive of doing so while seeing animals at the zoo
 - If you walk into our department, you can tell they are very happy to be working there
- Mr. Romeo: What is the department's relationship with nursing homes?
- Ms. Decker: Yes, and particularly during COVID, we got to be really close with the nursing homes; our nursing unit is very small, we have four nurses, but we are able to reach out to any of the nursing homes that need our help and assistance
- Ms. Mahar: It's a reciprocal relationship with the nursing homes; they reach out to us to come and do presentations; JoAnne knows every single administrator, so if someone needs to go to a nursing home or we have somebody that needs services, she can make that connection
 - Some facilities like Loretto have the PACE program, and we work with them on Meals on Wheels and health promotion programs; our relationship with the nursing homes has always been great because they know that if someone can't stay at home anymore, with our services, the next step would probably be the nursing home
- Ms. Decker: The issue with nursing homes is that they are full, and that's also a real problem

- Mr. Romeo: So there's a need for more capacity locally; what about oversight or accountability for nursing homes or senior housing? Do we have any role in that?
- Ms. Decker: We don't have oversight; the Office for Aging does not have oversight, but we have good relationships with them
- Ms. Mahar: We don't go and audit them, but if we get a call, we will go and check in; we kindly remind them of the importance of being good stewards of older adults and how we can help them do a better job; we don't police them but we do try to help them with resources
- Chairwoman Watts: In preparation for this meeting, I had the chance to tour a number of our affordable senior housing in my district; a consistent message I was hearing is that the push-in services that existed before COVID are not taking place anymore post-COVID, such as haircuts and yoga and things of that nature
 - I was wondering if you could speak to the potential of getting more of those services back in, what that would look like, and if there are budgetary needs associated with that
- Ms. Mahar: We can't do haircuts, but we do partner with Christopher Community on different services; we do health promotion every month, we connect them with SNAP-Ed, we have Walk With Ease, we make sure they are part of the farmer's market coupon distribution
 - We also have the SHARP program, where caseworkers go out, do an assessment, and refer people with mental health issues to HelioHealth; during COVID, people got used to being alone or in their apartment and what we're trying to do now is go out and get people out of their apartments again and start socializing
- Ms. Watts: Are any of these programs offered inside the buildings or do all require residents to leave?
- Ms. Mahar: It's both; we go in the buildings or they come to a fair; there are some people who just don't want to leave the apartment but we do partner with all the Christopher Community programs
- Ms. Watts: One of the big things I kept hearing about was quality of life transportation; they can get to doctors, they can get to food, but they can't get to nature or recreation; are they not aware of a program that exists for that or is that in fact a gap?
- Ms. Decker: Generally our senior centers arrange for that; we support senior centers through funding and if they're looking at an opportunity to go to a nature center or the lake or a park, they do that themselves; we provide the funding and the senior centers do whatever they need to do to help the people that go there
- Mr. Kelly: There aren't any restrictions on programs like GoGo Grandparent, right? If I ask GoGo Grandparent to take me to Green Lakes, that would be an option?
- Ms. Decker: GoGo Grandparent is one of our most popular programs; in the first year in 2024 we got a little over \$100,000 and in 2025 that went down to about \$64,000-\$65,000, so we had to limit the rides to one round trip per month
 - The rides were restricted to Onondaga County after it was found that some seniors were using GoGo Grandparent to travel to New York City and beyond, including out of state
 - Some would request a ride within the county and then continue on to New York City, where Lyft and Uber surge pricing significantly accelerated the use of funds
 - In addition to ride restrictions, GoGo Grandparent also increased its own administrative rate due to Lyft and Uber pricing, contributing further to the funding pressure
 - In 2026 we are back to a little over \$100,000 because of a grant from the county executive; rides are restricted to Onondaga County because some seniors were using it to go to New York City and that ate up a lot of funding very quickly since Lyft and Uber rates are much higher there
- Ms. Mahar: Seniors have told us things like now I can watch my grandson play baseball, or now I can go get my hair done, or I can go to the airport; it is a wonderful program and we are watching it carefully; right now we are pretty steady and I think it's meeting the needs of the community; of course we will evaluate it and if there is more need we will readjust our criteria

- Ms. Watts: Yes, but I would be curious how this works for individual users and how someone would access it
- Ms. Hernandez: I just want to say it is an honor to serve on the aging committee as a legislator and to watch the work that is done and watch the diversity of the committee itself; we have also partnered with an organization that helps our new Americans, which is a blessing because we often forget about the diversity of our cultural seniors;
 - I want to continue to be on that committee; I know a lot of my seniors in my district on East Fayette Street don't really know about the GoGo Grandparent program, so I am eager to work with you on more outreach
 - I also want to say to Chairwoman Watts, we have been working to make sure our seniors get to the parks and I spoke with Commissioner Brian about adding a larger shuttle because when senior organizations go there, there is no room because the trail is so small
- Ms. Decker: We are honored and we want to thank you for being on our Aging Services Advisory Board and being such a wonderful and caring board member

2. COUNTY LEGISLATURE: Nicole Watts, Chairwoman

- a. DISCUSSION: Public Hearing Relative to How County Services Can Address the Needs of Children & Teens (May 13 at 12:00 p.m. and May 14, 2026 at 6:00 p.m.)
 - One public hearing to be held open across two sessions to provide flexibility for those who work during the day: May 13, 2026 at 12:00 p.m. at the County Legislature (Room 407 Court House) and May 14, 2026 at 6:00 p.m. at a location to be confirmed
 - Purpose: to hear from the community about how county services can better address the needs of children and teens; not intended to address individual cases but to identify systemic gaps and potential improvements
 - Hearing design allows for digital submissions between the two sessions in addition to in-person testimony
 - Committee expressed consensus in favor of keeping the Central Library as the proposed location for the May 14th evening session, pending availability confirmation
 - Following the hearing, the Legislature will work with the administration to determine what actions can be taken, whether administrative adjustments or legislative funding

Questions/Comments

- Mr. Burtis: So, you're going to have two?
- Mr. Romeo: It is one that is going to stay open for that period of time; we will have two times where we allow the public to present to us, so it will be one public hearing that stays open; we are also limited in the number of public hearings we can hold as a committee for the year, so we want to leave availability open for another one
- Mr. Kelly: Thinking out loud, I think there is potentially a tradeoff between quantity and quality; I wonder if we could try to narrow it down, so this hearing is what can the health department do better to address these needs, what can DCFS do better, what can DSS do; just trying to think of how to make this as beneficial to all parties involved as possible
- Ms. Denton: I think that's a good point, but if we keep it more general then we can tie those departments to the comments we hear and see a gap; I think if we keep it more general, especially with the first one, we try it and see where we are; I think based on this one we will know a lot more for if we do this again

- Mr. Romeo: We were trying to find a way to make it as restricted as possible while also leaving it open; one of the concerns about bringing up a specific department was people bringing personal feelings and it becoming something we didn't want it to be
 - That is why we added the target of how county services can address; we were also happy that we came up with the children and teens piece, though I am okay with changing it to children and families; leaving it broad helps people bring whatever kind of idea that none of us have ever thought about before
- Mr. Kelly: Are there any actionable steps planned based on the feedback we receive from the community? What is the process moving forward?
- Mr. Romeo: Depending on what comes up, we will decide if there are things we can work on; maybe we hear something and say that is something we want to find out more about and can continue to investigate; maybe it is something where we talk to the administration and they say it is already happening or we did not think we could do that right now
 - One of the things we do not want is individual needs addressed; this is meant to be how our services can better address needs broadly; if somebody has an individual concern, we will listen, but we will have people there who can connect them with the right department that night
- Mr. Burtis: I think you are going to have to take what you get; whatever is going to happen is going to happen and we can't tell anybody what to do; we just have to be flexible and see what comes up

3. **DISCUSSION OF CORRESPONDING OUTSIDE BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS:** Nicole Watts, Chairwoman

a. Review of Submitted Resumes and Candidates for Board and Commission Vacancies

- Ms. Watts: Goal is to fill all vacancies by the next session; some positions require County Executive appointment and the committee's role is to make recommendations
- Mr. Romeo: I have the list here, these are the recommendations I will be making;
 - Aging Services Advisory Board: Legislator Block recommended
 - Emergency Medical Services Advisory Board: Legislator Kelly currently serving; recommended to continue
 - Health Advisory Board: Legislator Romeo recommended for the formal legislator appointment; Legislator Kelly invited to continue attending in a non-voting capacity, given his relevant expertise, pending County Executive approval
 - Onondaga Tobacco Asset Securitization Corporation: Legislator Ryan has expressed interest and is recommended for one vacancy; Chair Romeo will fill the second vacancy if no other member expresses interest
 - Youth Board: Legislator Meaker is currently serving and has expressed interest in continuing; recommended to remain
 - County Veterans Service Advisory Board: Legislator Burtis expressed interest and is recommended for the legislative vacancy
- Ms. Watts: Part of the reason we are connecting these to the standing committees is so that we can have a feedback loop; if you sit on these different boards and there is anything of note that pertains to the Health and Human Services Committee, please make sure we are having that communication in both directions

C. Adjournment

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: **HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**

DATE: **APRIL 21, 2026**

The meeting was adjourned at 10:06 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



SPENCER BERG, Deputy Clerk
Onondaga County Legislature

| NAME (Please Print) | DEPARTMENT/AGENCY |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| David Skavay | CCE ONONDAGA |
| J. Ann Spoto-Becker | ALTCB |
| Maria Nye | ALTCB |
| Nate Overdyk | ALTCB |
| Jason Doan | FINANCE |
| KYLE MADDEN | LEGISLATURE |
| Troy Waffner | OCDOF |
| Danny Liedka | VISITSYS |