



# Onondaga County Legislature

**HASSINA K. ADAMS**  
Clerk

**NICOLE WATTS**  
Chairwoman

**SPENCER BERG**  
Deputy Clerk

## **HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES COMMITTEE MINUTES – MAY 19, 2026** **DAN ROMEO, CHAIR**

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

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

Chair Romeo called the meeting to order on May 19, 2026 at 8:47 a.m. Roll was called. The previous meeting's minutes were approved.

**1. AURORA OF CENTRAL NEW YORK: Kate Weidman, Executive Director**  
a. **INFORMATIONAL: Overview**

*(Attachment No. 1: PowerPoint Presentation; Attachment No. 2: Services for the Legally Blind; Attachment No. 3: Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing; Attachment No. 4: Deaf That; Attachment No. 5: Services for Individuals with Hearing or Vision Loss)*

Ms. Weidman introduced herself as the Executive Director of Aurora of Central New York, a position she has held for approximately two years. She noted prior experience as a board member and in other nonprofit organizations in the community for over ten years.

- Aurora of Central New York provides services to individuals who are blind, visually impaired, deaf, and hard of hearing across Cayuga, Onondaga, and Oswego counties, with offices located at 1065 Gaines Street
- Mission: to improve the quality of life and promote independence for Central New Yorkers with sensory loss
- Founded in 1917 as the Lighthouse, originally serving veterans returning from World War I who had lost their vision in battle
- In 1970, a sister agency – the Central New York Association for the Hearing Impaired – was established; the two merged in 1991 to form Aurora of Central New York
- Annual budget of approximately \$2 million; approximately 30 staff, including direct services staff and contract staff at the VA; serves approximately 1,200 individuals annually
- Aurora is the only organization in upstate New York providing services to both the blind/visually impaired and deaf/hard of hearing populations

*Services for blind and visually impaired children and youth:*

- Children’s Socialization Group – brings children with vision loss together from across the region for adaptive activities; children typically are the only person with a visual impairment in their school or community, so this group provides peer connection; sighted siblings are included so no one is excluded;
  - Recent activities included an adaptive Easter egg hunt and adaptive horseback riding; a sensory activity at Little Rays is upcoming; held on a quarterly basis
- Orientation and Mobility (O&M) Training – teaches children to safely navigate their environment using a white cane and to move around obstacles in their home and community
- Pre-Vocational and Work Experience Training – prepares students for the next step after high school, whether college or employment;
  - Includes career exploration, work skills development, mock interviews, and daily living skills such as cooking;
  - Students recently prepared meatballs from scratch during a February break cooking class using Aurora’s adaptive kitchen

*Services for blind and visually impaired adults:*

- Adaptive Living Services (ages 55+) – teaches skills, tools, and systems to support independent living;
  - Helps clients remain in their homes longer and reduce strain on the healthcare system; addresses common misconception that blindness means seeing only black – many individuals are legally blind but retain some vision depending on their condition or injury
- Training, Aids, and Devices – includes liquid level indicators, check signers, lighted magnifiers, and other assistive tools that allow clients to manage daily tasks such as paying bills and reading personal correspondence independently
- Meta Glasses – a recent development that Aurora considers transformative for individuals with visual impairment; allows users to photograph their environment or open their refrigerator and receive a verbal description;
  - Currently not funded by the Commission for the Blind, but grant funding is being pursued and a donor has offered to fund a cohort for the vision division
- Be My Eyes app – allows a user to take a photo or connect via video call to a live volunteer who helps them navigate their environment (e.g., finding a restroom at the airport)
- Braille Instruction – most individuals who lose vision later in life do not know Braille and rely on technology; Aurora offers instruction for those who wish to learn; one staff member born blind teaches this program
- Employment Training and Job Placement – approximately 30% of legally blind individuals are in the workforce;
  - Aurora works with clients on interview skills, appropriate workplace dress, and mock interviews, and places clients in competitive community employment;
  - All nine individuals currently on the employment caseload have been placed, creating a need for additional referrals

- Orientation and Mobility Training (adults) – teaches adults to navigate their environment safely using assistive tools for independent travel;
  - Aurora has recently hired a full-time O&M Specialist beginning May 26th; O&M and Vision Rehabilitation Therapy (VRT) are rare specialties with very few graduates nationally each year;
  - The new hire relocated from the Philadelphia/South Jersey area after a colleague from the Binghamton area referred him to Aurora
- Peer Support Groups – virtual and in-person; participants discuss adaptive technologies, peer support, and mental health; the group also socializes together in the community
- VA Hospital Contract – Aurora staffs the VA switchboard with 11 employees, 10 of whom are legally blind; all use adaptive equipment such as JAWS screen reading technology

*Services for deaf and hard of hearing individuals:*

- Bedtime Book Series – developed in collaboration with the Literacy Coalition of Onondaga County; provides inclusive programming at local libraries and is expanding to school districts
  - A children’s book is read first in ASL and then interpreted into spoken English to support literacy and language development for youth, particularly CODAs (Children of Deaf Adults) whose primary home language is ASL;
  - A professionally recorded video is available on Aurora’s website so parents and children can read the book together at home;
  - Recently secured extension funding and is in process of bringing the program to Wilbur Park and the West Hill School District
- Children’s Hearing Aid Program – provides low- to no-cost hearing aids for children in need, as hearing aids are often not covered by insurance and children outgrow or break them; includes all testing and fittings; an application process is required
- Employment Training and Job Placement (deaf/hard of hearing) – similar to the blind side; conducted through Access VR
- Interpreter Referral Service – provides ASL interpreters for community organizations and events that require inclusive access
- Social Work Services – assists clients with life skills such as applying for a job, opening a bank account, and navigating insurance, SSI, and SSDI; many deaf individuals grew up without access to the incidental learning hearing individuals acquire and need support developing these skills
- Community Advocacy, Education, and Outreach – includes the Blind Immersion Experience (participants are blindfolded and given a white cane to navigate their environment as a blind individual would, used at the airport, community foundation, and other venues) and a Deaf Culture and ASL educational presentation; ASL has completely different syntax and grammar from English
- Funding gap: there is currently no dedicated funding source for deaf and hard of hearing services beyond Access VR for vocational training;

- All other deaf services (Bedtime Book Series, hearing aid program, social work) are funded through grants and private sources; the new New York State deaf-blind commission is beginning to address this but no formal funding stream yet exists
- Legislative advocacy: Aurora supports a New York State Senate bill requiring pharmacies to provide prescription drug readers and accessible information for individuals with vision loss (staff member took the wrong medication after a pill's size and shape changed without notice); and a State Assembly bill for mandatory insurance coverage of hearing aids for both children and adults

### Questions/Comments

- Mr. Kelly: I work in early intervention and preschool services and I'm familiar with local teachers of the visually impaired – they barely exist anymore and are crisscrossing New York State to service children. How does one pursue a career in orientation and mobility? What is the educational background?
- Ms. Weidman: It is a master's degree program. Undergraduate backgrounds are typically in social work or education. Hunter College is the nearest school with an O&M or VRT program.
  - The new hire relocated from the Philadelphia/South Jersey area after a Binghamton-area classmate referred him to Aurora. VRT programs graduate approximately 10 individuals per year nationwide.
- Mr. Burtis: How many staff does Aurora have?
- Ms. Weidman: We have 30 staff total, including direct services staff and VA contract staff.
- Mr. Burtis: How do people find your services?
- Ms. Weidman: Word of mouth is where we get many referrals. We also provide outreach at senior centers. The Office for the Aging and CONTACT can connect people to us as well. We also receive referrals from the Commission for the Blind, which refers individuals who have been declared legally blind.
- Mr. Kelly: I've always wondered – where does Braille come from? Why is it not just a representation of the letter shapes themselves? What is the science behind it?
- Ms. Weidman: It was invented by a gentleman whose last name is Braille. I believe the system is French in origin but I will follow up on the full history.
- Mr. Romeo: I love the Bedtime Book Series. As someone who reads to their kids every night, I'm glad that opportunity exists. I also studied ASL at OCC and loved it – I would encourage everyone to try it.
- Ms. Watts: In our budget we see that the county funds a small portion of your budget. Who funds the rest – grants, donors?
- Ms. Weidman: Our primary funding sources are the Commission for the Blind, Access VR, the federal government through the VA contract, grants, and donors.
- Mr. Ryan: And are the county funds earmarked for anything or are they general fund?

- Ms. Weidman: They are for our outreach and education program, which is used specifically to educate the older population about our services and assistive devices so they can live safely and independently.
- Mr. Ryan: Your 1,200 participants – what is that service area?
- Ms. Weidman: The majority are from Onondaga County. Cayuga County, primarily the Auburn area, and Oswego County are also served.

**2. DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES: Sarah Merrick, Commissioner**

**b. INFORMATIONAL: Federal Legislative Changes – SNAP and Medicaid (HR1)**

Commissioner Merrick provided an overview of changes affecting SNAP and Medicaid resulting from the federal HR1 legislation passed by Congress in June of last year. She noted that administrative guidance from the federal government through OTDA (Office of Temporary Disability Assistance) and the Department of Health is arriving very slowly and that some details remain outstanding.

*SNAP – ABAWD Work Requirements:*

- HR1 revoked New York State’s ABAWD (Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents) waiver; previously, only Saratoga County – based on its unemployment rate – lacked the waiver
- Under the prior waiver, Onondaga County was in the third year of a three-year federal cycle (October to September); the waiver was ended mid-cycle
- Approximately 3,300 individuals in the ABAWD category were notified in February 2026 that the waiver had ended and that they must now participate in work or volunteer activities of at least 20 hours per week to maintain SNAP benefits
- DSS worked with CNY Works to hold in-person and virtual orientation sessions to reach this population; fewer than 50 individuals participated in the outreach
- Under federal rules, individuals receive three months of benefits within a three-year cycle without having to meet the work requirement; DSS used this period to collect information
- As of May, DSS is in the process of closing approximately 3,200 cases effective June 1, 2026; individuals may reapply, and DSS must process each application from start to finish – most will be denied for failing to meet the work or volunteer requirement
- The new ABAWD cycle begins October 2026 for a three-year period; a second wave of closings and reapplications is anticipated in December 2026, with loss of benefits effective January 1, 2027
- HR1 expanded the ABAWD category from ages 18–55 to ages 18–64; families with children over age 14 are now also included and must meet the 20-hour-per-week requirement
- Exemptions include: individuals under 18, individuals over 64, those caring for an incapacitated person, those receiving SSI, and Native Americans
- Economic impact: the average per-person SNAP benefit in 2024 was \$2,376 annually; the ABAWD closures alone represent approximately \$8–9 million removed from the local economy; with the approximately 5,100 refugees also losing benefits (see below), the total

impact reaches tens of millions of dollars in reduced food purchasing power for local families and grocery stores

*SNAP – Non-Citizen Eligibility:*

- At the end of April 2026, OTDA finally issued instructions on changes to non-citizen SNAP eligibility
- Individuals without a lawful permanent residence certificate are no longer eligible for SNAP; applicants must be in the United States for five years before they can apply for that certificate
- DSS will process changes at recertification over a 12-month period beginning in May 2026; an estimated 5,100 refugees will lose SNAP benefits, with approximately 50% concentrated on the north side of the City of Syracuse
- DSS has mapped the impacted areas and has created a community food resource guide to distribute to affected individuals

*SNAP – Administrative Burden and Cost Shift:*

- Monthly tracking of employment and volunteer activity is now required for the expanded ABAWD population; DSS currently handles this for approximately 4,000 temporary assistance clients, but SNAP has 35,000 cases and the new requirements could affect tens of thousands
- No additional administrative resources were provided by the federal government; effective October 2026, the federal administrative cost-sharing formula changes from 50/50 (federal/local) to 25/75 (federal/local); Onondaga County's local administrative cost will increase by approximately \$1.7 million, to a total of \$5.2 million annually
- New York is one of a small number of states where SNAP is locally administered but state-supervised, making this cost shift directly impact the county budget

*SNAP – Error Rate Penalties:*

- HR1 imposes financial penalties on states with SNAP error rates between 10% and 13%; this range carries the highest penalty tier
- New York State's error rate is approximately 12%, placing it in the penalized range; the projected state-level penalty is \$1.2 billion
- Error rates are determined by the federal government through a statistically significant sample of cases statewide; individual county rates cannot be isolated – Onondaga County's rate is not separately available
- New York City acknowledges it is driving the statewide rate above 10%, placing all counties in the penalized category regardless of local performance
- States with error rates above 13% received a two-year moratorium on penalties under HR1, despite having worse rates than New York State

- The largest sources of errors are: (1) a client failing to provide required information, which nonetheless counts as a processing error; and (2) changes in a client's rent, which must be accurately entered at each recertification
- DSS is exploring AI tools to help identify potential errors before cases are finalized; most case work must still be handled by employees reviewing and entering documentation into the Welfare Management System (WMS), a mainframe-based system that dates to 1959
- Error rate is not a fraud rate; DSS has a dedicated investigations unit that reviews all public benefits programs and recovers approximately \$6–7 million annually in purposeful misinformation cases

### Questions/Comments

- Mr. Romeo: Do you know what our error rate in Onondaga County is?
- Ms. Merrick: This is what is so difficult – error rates are calculated by the state for large counties as a group, excluding New York City. Individual county rates cannot be determined. I believe we are around 10%, but there is no mechanism to isolate our specific rate. New York City admits it is pushing the statewide average into the 10–13% penalty range.
- Mr. Romeo: You mentioned a change in rent as a contributing error factor. Can you explain that?
- Ms. Merrick: If a client's rent changes between recertifications and the updated amount is not entered, it constitutes an error. At recertification we need to make sure we have the correct rent figure along with all other required income documentation.
- Mr. Romeo: So if rent changes, that potentially looks like an error?
- Ms. Merrick: Yes.
- Ms. Watts: Back to SNAP being cut for non-citizens and refugees – what can we do to mitigate the certain hunger that is coming to families, particularly in my district where 50% of the impacted population is concentrated?
  - Our food banks are already overloaded. As a county, is there anything we can be doing to proactively respond?
- Ms. Merrick: Now that we finally know who is going to be impacted, we have mapped the geographic impact areas. I think we need to strategize on how to educate individuals who will be affected – we have created a community food resource guide to distribute to them.
  - We need to look at neighborhood-level approaches to figure out how to serve the food insecure. There is no magic bullet, but at least we can now start thinking strategically about how to shore up these communities.
- Ms. Watts: I would love to be part of a rapid response task force to figure out how to do that.
- Ms. Merrick: Great.
- Mr. Burtis: Back to the HR1 error rates – how do we know those errors exist? Is it through a state audit that reports back to us?

- Ms. Merrick: It is actually done by the federal government. We receive a monthly five-page report that is always a couple months delayed and is truly convoluted. It does not break out results by county.
  - The federal sample is statistically determined and may include very few – potentially only one – case per county. We need to continue pushing back and say there has to be a better way to measure this if a \$1.2 billion penalty is going to be placed on New York State.
- Mr. Burtis: So we process the case, we've told the individual we need documentation, they probably don't have it – but we still process and they still receive the benefit while we wait for the paperwork. It's a processing and a people problem, not an option to withhold benefits until we have the documents, correct?
- Ms. Merrick: There is a point where we must have the documents and if we don't we have to close the case. We try to track this carefully. We have been discussing internally how to better track these data points so we have a stronger argument to counter the error rate, but it is also a volume problem.
- Mr. Burtis: When they do the audit, they could pull as little as one case per county?
- Ms. Merrick: Yes. We have no control – this is happening in Washington. They pull a statistically determined number of cases across New York State and smaller counties may not even have a single case pulled, yet they are stuck with the statewide error rate.
- Mr. Kelly: Based on what you've said, are we essentially handcuffed to the common denominator across Erie County, Monroe County, and others – even if we had our own house in order?
- Ms. Merrick: We are handcuffed. New York City admits they are dragging the rest of the state into the 10–13% range, which carries the highest penalty. It is very frustrating.
- Mr. Romeo: Is there a cap at 13%? What happens if a state is above that?
- Ms. Merrick: States above 13% were actually granted a two-year moratorium on penalties under HR1, so they face no penalty for at least two years despite having a worse error rate. Alaska is one example – their rate is public record and is significantly above 13%.
- Mr. Ryan: Is the change in local cost-share from 50/50 to 75/25 a yearly negotiated rate, or is it just set by policy? Could it be changed tomorrow?
- Ms. Merrick: No – it was changed in HR1 and Congress will have to change it back. It will have to go all the way through as federal law.

### **Questions/Comments**

- Mr. Romeo: What is the state's rationale for decoupling the Medicaid application from temporary assistance?
- Ms. Merrick: The state believes that temporary assistance applications are complex and that coupling them with Medicaid creates potential for increased error rates.

- They want to separate the processes to reduce Medicaid errors. I do not fully understand the rationale, but that is how it was explained to commissioners by the Department of Health at our meeting last week.
- Mr. Burtis: Is the decoupling because of federal oversight of Medicaid error rates and anticipated penalties similar to SNAP?
- Ms. Merrick: I believe so. The federal government is going to monitor the Department of Health on Medicaid the same way it monitors SNAP, and the potential penalties are in the billions.
- Mr. Burtis: These are errors, not fraud – I understand that – but from the perspective of someone who gets audited a lot, errors can border on misinformation.
  - It is disappointing that for something this important, the technology has not been consistently updated. People are being hurt while we wait, and it is costing millions.
  - You would hope they would be working harder and faster toward a simplified process.
- Ms. Merrick: Your words are absolutely correct. For ten years I have been on a commissioners’ task force trying to push for an integrated eligibility system – it has been fits and starts the entire time.
  - We are the users at the local level and I think our antiquated technology is honestly a recruiting issue as well. Our staff are in their 20s and are used to smartphones – they are not used to COBOL, which is what the Welfare Management System platform is based on.
  - It is terrible for our clients but it is really a staff recruitment and retention problem too.
- Ms. Watts: Can we get something in writing on the groups being impacted by both SNAP and Medicaid changes so that if a constituent comes to us we know who is included?
  - And as you get more information, can you keep us in the communication loop – just email us updates as legislators so we can inform people?
- Ms. Merrick: Yes. When information is final and accurate we update our public website – the SNAP ABAWD eligibility information is already posted there.
- Mr. Romeo: I know there have been staffing challenges. Can you talk about where you are right now with capacity to take on this year’s increased administrative burden, and where you think you need to be?
- Ms. Merrick: The next few months will be telling. We are very grateful that the county executive and the Legislature have authorized funding to work with an AI company – we are developing tools that help staff identify and process cases more efficiently
  - We are hoping that buys back time before the heaviest administrative requirements hit. We still have approximately 25 vacancies. We bring in new staff every month; some find the work very difficult and choose to move on.
  - It takes a good two years for people to fully understand these programs. The AI tool works like a closed internal search engine – staff can type a plain-English question such as “What is the SNAP requirement for a 20-year-old?” and get a plain-English answer with regulatory citations.

- We are trying to make it easier for new staff to navigate these complex programs.

C. Adjournment

Chair Romeo noted that the public hearings held the prior week generated a great deal of valuable community input and that he would be scheduling individual one-on-one conversations with each legislator to discuss findings and next steps.

***Motion by Ms. Block, seconded by Mr. Burtis, to adjourn the meeting. MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY.***

The meeting was adjourned at 10:00 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,



HASSINA K. ADAMS, Clerk  
Onondaga County Legislature

ATTENDANCE

COMMITTEE: **HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES**  
DATE: **MAY 19, 2026**

NAME (Please Print)	DEPT/AGENCY/ORGANIZATION
Kate Weidman	AURORA of CNY
Jarah Merrick	DSS-ES