



Tompkins County
COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES BOARD

Tompkins County Whole Health
201 East Green Street
Ithaca, New York 14850-5421

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Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee
March 10, 2026, 10:00 a.m. via Zoom
Meeting Minutes

Minutes Approved
April 14, 2026

Present: James Beaumont; Jeffrey Boles; Nancy Saltzman; Allison Weiner-Heinemann; and Sally McConnell-Ginet

Excused: Sheila McEnery, Walaa Maharem-Horan, and Khaki Wunderlich

Unexcused:

Guests Present: David Kudgus, OPWDD; Nicole Nucci, OPWDD; Kristine O'Brien, Mid State Family and Community Engagement Center

Staff: Harmony Ayers-Friedlander, DCS; Shannon Alvord, TCWH; and Karan Palazzo, LGU Administrative Assistant

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The meeting was called to order at 10:05 a.m. by James. Sally moved to approve the February 2026 minutes, seconded by Nancy; all were in favor with edits.

Privilege of the Floor

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Announcements/Correspondence:

Discussions:

The March DD subcommittee meeting focused on transition services, with presentations from Dave Kudgus and Nicole Nucci from OPWDD and Christine O'Brien from Mid-State Family Community Engagement Center. Dave and Nicole explained OPWDD's transition process, including front-door eligibility requirements, care coordination organizations, and various employment services, such as the Employment Training Program (ETP) and supported employment options. Christine provided detailed information about transition planning in the IEP, covering the requirements for measurable post-secondary goals, transition needs, and coordinated sets of activities that must be included starting at age 15. Both presentations highlighted the importance of early planning, family engagement, and the shift from entitlement to eligibility in post-school services, with particular relevance to upcoming changes in Tompkins County residential services.

OPWDD Transition Services Overview: Dave Kudgus and Nicole Nucci, local school transition coordinators, presented a comprehensive overview of OPWDD transition coordination services. The goal is to improve educational outcomes and help students transition to adult life, including employment and continuing education.

Dave Kudgus explained that OPWDD serves approximately 140,000 New Yorkers, and that Region 2 covers 20 counties and 195 school districts. He emphasized that transition conversations should begin around age 15 for students transitioning at 18. The eligibility process involves multiple steps, including initial contact, eligibility review, and identifying needs, goals, and preferences.

- Eligibility is a thorough vetting process because once granted, it typically lasts for life; Early connection to services is strongly encouraged but voluntary
- Eligibility must be established first by calling the front door and connecting with a front door facilitator
- Qualifying conditions include intellectual disability, cerebral palsy, epilepsy, and autism (and noted that autism eligibility depends on adaptive functioning levels and independence)
- Required documents include psychological evaluations, physical exams, IEPs, and documentation of disability onset before age 22

Care Coordination Organizations – The three CCOs in the area are Life Plan, Southern Tier Connect, and Prime Care

- CCOs provide person-centered care management
- CCOs guide families through the eligibility process and gather necessary documents
- Dave offered to send a sheet outlining CCOs available by county

Community and Employment Services

Dave outlines various OPWDD supports and services, including community-based services, housing options, and employment services. Family support services (FSS) and respite are popular, with FSS not requiring Medicaid. Housing subsidies are available for individuals living independently, not with parents or in group homes. Community habilitation services help individuals learn skills for independence, such as riding the bus, managing medications, and cooking.

Day Habilitation and Employment Services

Dave explains day habilitation services, which are more restrictive and provide support for individuals transitioning out of school. Site-based day habilitation is the most restrictive, while day habilitation without walls allows for community involvement. Nicole is set to discuss employment services in more detail. The importance of employment services is emphasized, with an executive order mandating employment first for individuals transitioning.

Employment Training Program and its benefits

Nicole Nucci, OPWDD Region 2-Local School Transition Coordinator, described ETP as a year-long, time-limited program for individuals needing intensive support, with OPWDD paying minimum wage. ETP is an internship aimed at securing permanent employment with the host employer, supporting students during school hours. The referral process varies for students with two years remaining, who should contact their teacher or principal, while final-year students should contact their care manager.

- Key Takeaways
 - ETP offers paid work experience with comprehensive support services
 - The program is accessible both during the school years and after graduation
 - Successful completion can lead to permanent employment with the training employer

Additional Employment Options – Nicole states there are multiple employment pathways on individual needs and readiness. OPWDD maintains an employment-first approach per Executive Order 40.

- Pathway to Employment: Time-limited program with a maximum duration of 2 years
- Community Pre-Vocational Services: Available for individuals who need volunteer experience before entering the workforce
- Sub-Minimum Wages: Currently still permitted, though future policy remains uncertain
- Extended Supported Employment: Designed for individuals who are already employed and need ongoing support
- Supported Employment Services: Includes comprehensive job coaching, retention strategies, and benefits planning assistance

Access VR and OPWDD Coordination – Nicole explained how Access VR and OPWDD services can work together to support individuals with disabilities.

- Dual Agency Services Are Permitted, and individuals can receive services from both Access VR and OPWDD simultaneously. The common misconception that people must choose one agency or the other is incorrect.
- Service Overlap Restrictions

While both agencies can serve the same person, they cannot provide identical services due to Medicaid billing regulations. Coordination ensures complementary rather than duplicate support.

- Flexible Referral Timing

Access VR referrals can be initiated while students are still enrolled in school, enabling earlier transition planning and service coordination.

- Direct Access to OPWDD Employment Services

Students are not required to use Access VR before accessing OPWDD employment services. Families can pursue the pathway that best fits their needs.

Benefits of Coordination

- Both agencies can serve the same individual at the same time
- Coordinated support between agencies is encouraged and beneficial
- Families have flexibility in choosing service pathways
- Early referrals enable smoother transitions from school to adult services

Additional OPWDD Services- Behavioral, Crisis, Residential, and Clinical Services

OPWDD offers comprehensive support services beyond employment and day programs, including behavioral interventions, crisis management, residential options, and clinical care.

Service Categories

- Intensive Behavioral Services - Designed to prevent placement in restrictive settings through proactive behavioral support and intervention strategies.
- CSIDD (Crisis Services for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities) - Community-based crisis services addressing complex behavioral and mental health needs in real-time.
- Residential Options - Multiple housing solutions available, including housing subsidies, supportive apartments, and Individualized Residential Alternatives (IRAs).
- Assistive Technology - Environmental and vehicle modifications to enhance independence and accessibility.
- Article 16 Clinics -Clinical services include occupational therapy, speech therapy, and other therapeutic interventions. OPWDD eligibility is required for all services, and Medicaid coverage is necessary for clinical services

Self-Direction Options - OPWDD offers flexible service delivery models that give individuals and families greater control over how they receive support.

Budget Changes During Transition - When transition-age students with self-direction budgets move into adulthood, their budget structure will automatically change from a student budget to an adult budget. This transition is carefully managed through ongoing conversations between students, families, and care managers to ensure continuity of services.

Types of Self-Direction

- Agency-Supported Self-Directed Services

This option allows individuals to receive services through an agency while maintaining some control over the service delivery process. Importantly, you can access agency-supported self-directed services without having a formal self-direction budget.

- Self-Hired Services

This model provides maximum flexibility, allowing individuals to directly hire and manage their own support staff. This option requires a self-direction budget and involves more administrative responsibilities.

Important Considerations - Budget types may change when requesting certain services, such as day habilitation. Your care manager will work with you to understand how different service choices may affect your budget structure and available options. Self-direction empowers individuals and families to customize their support services to best meet their unique needs and preferences, while maintaining access to the full range of OPWDD services.

How OPWDD Collaborates with Schools – Nicole states that OPWDD maintains active partnerships with school districts to ensure smooth transitions for students with developmental disabilities.

- Regular Coordination - OPWDD staff work consistently with school districts, students, and families throughout the transition process, emphasizing early connection to avoid last-minute challenges.
- Information Sharing - Families can sign consent forms that enable information sharing between schools and OPWDD, facilitating better coordination of services and planning.
- CSE Meeting Participation - OPWDD representatives can attend Committee on Special Education (CSE) meetings when families request their presence, providing valuable input on available services and transition planning.
- Direct Communication - Schools and families can reach OPWDD through the dedicated school transition mailbox for questions, referrals, and coordination needs.

OPWDD prioritizes early and consistent communication with schools to support successful transitions. The earlier families connect with OPWDD services—ideally around age 15—the smoother the transition from school to adult services will be.

Mid-State Family and Community Engagement Center Introduction - Kristine O'Brien introduced her organization and its mission to support students with disabilities and their families.

- **Organization Overview**
 - The FACE Center is housed at Syracuse University and is grant-funded by the New York State Education Department
 - Coverage area includes Cayuga, Onondaga, Tompkins-Seneca-Tioga Counties, TST BOCES, and Syracuse City School Districts
- **Three-Fold Support Structure**
 - Families: Helping parents and caregivers understand transition processes and their role
 - Community Partners: Connecting with agencies and organizations that support students
 - School Districts: Coaching educators on family engagement in transition planning
 - All three groups must work together to achieve the best outcomes for students

The FACE Center provides comprehensive, free support across the region to all stakeholder groups involved in student transition planning. She emphasized the importance of engaging families in the transition planning process. Kristine referenced the November 2015 Blueprint for Improved Results for Students with Disabilities, highlighting its key components.

- Strong family partnerships
- Specially designed, research-based instruction
- Multi-tiered systems of support

She emphasized that students with IEPs should be viewed as general education students first, with access to inclusive activities, and noted that transition support is a critical component of student success

Transition Planning in the IEP – Kristine explains the transition planning process, beginning with an age-12 assessment and transition assessments at ages 14-15. The role of families in setting high expectations and supporting students' learning at home is discussed. The components of the IEP, including measurable post-secondary goals, transition needs, and the coordinated set of activities, are detailed. The importance of transition planning as an ongoing process, not a one-time event, is reiterated.

Family Guide and Community Map – Kristine explains that the Family Guide is a comprehensive document to help families understand the transition planning process. The Family Guide includes a transition checklist to help families track progress and ensure all necessary steps are taken. The Community Map is introduced as a tool to identify relevant community agencies that can support transition planning. The exit summary, a document that recaps a student's strengths, preferences, interests, and needs, is described as a key tool for transitioning to adult services.

The importance of early collaboration with school districts and families was emphasized. The DD subcommittee is committed to continue working together to improve transition services for students with disabilities.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:00 a.m.

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**The next Developmental Disabilities Subcommittee Meeting is
Tuesday, April 14, 2026, at 10:00 a.m.**