

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – April 21, 2025**

Assembly

The McDowell County Board of Commissioners met in Regular Session on Monday, March 17, 2025, at 11:30 a.m., in the Commissioner's Board Room, 69 N Main St., Marion, NC.

Members Present

Lynn Greene, Vice-Chair; Trisha Garner, Patrick Ellis and David N. Walker

Members Absent

Tony Brown, Chairman

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Dustin Burleson, Vaya Health Regional Director; Will Kehler, EMS Director and Brian Flynn, Principle Health Insurance Representative

Call to Order

Vice Chair Greene called the meeting to order at 11:30 a.m.

Vaya Health Update

Mr. Wooten introduced Mr. Burleson to give the Board an update. Mr. Wooten, mentioned that he currently serves on the Board of Directors for Vaya and that Commissioner Garner had been appointed to the Vaya Regional Advisory Board, noting she will be a good addition.

Mr. Burleson began with telling on July 1, 2024 they began as a Tailored Plan for NC that manages behavior, mental, physical health, pharmaceutical and transportation, shifting towards whole person care. Members under this Plan have been diagnosed with moderate to severe mental health, substance use disorder or have intellectual/developmental disability. He went over some perks of being under this Plan - being overall wellness, pregnancies, GED, safety and non-medical transportation. Mr. Burleson explained McDowell County is under the Healthy Opportunities Plan which can provide eligible members food, housing help for interpersonal violence and transportation.

Mr. Burleson told the announcement came from the NCDHHS that Blue Cross Blue Shield will be the Health Plan starting on December 1, 2025 that serves youth and families involved in Child Welfare/Foster Care System. Vaya will work with those families until that date and then they are required to step back, adding they will work with BCBS through the transition.

Mr. Burleson spoke on Hurricane Helene efforts through Vaya, in which they received the HOPE 4 NC Grant which is Federally funded through Homeland Security and FEMA. This grant assists with recovery from the disaster with resources available for coping, mental health, interventions and provides sources of emotional support. He lastly spoke on this grant allowing the ability to hire positions throughout the organization.

Mr. Wooten noted the transition from Vaya to BCBS includes assisting the families that are currently under Vaya's care along with the importance of making sure the members and children are well cared for.

EMS Legislation Update

Mr. Kehler told of being a Director for 18 years and has never spoken to the Board on legislative matters, however he feels there are three items that should be addressed. The first bill is House Bill 219, filed by Representative Pless of Haywood County to repeal the law that authorizes Counties and Cities to franchise ambulance services. This bill would open up private agency ambulances to serve citizens, and would be disruptive to County EMS systems. His opinion is NC is highly respected with a well-run system, ensuring emergency situations do not need several ambulances competing for the same call. The Director added the Counties should have the oversight to how many ambulances are running in their community.

Mr. Kehler moved to House Bill 675, also filed by Representative Pless, requires all NC Credential EMS providers to transition to the National Registry. This would mean no background checks of providers, to which NC has been very strict to ensure an EMS professional has been cleared through a rigorous background check. He explained the criminal background checks that are currently in place is set as a 24- hour informational time frame, clarifying if an EM employee or EMS provider is charged with a crime he and Dr. St. Barnard are alerted within 24-hours of the offense. This allows the Office of EMS to open an investigation. He wants to ensure children and all citizens put in the back of McDowell County ambulances are cared for by competent providers who have not been convicted of a felony, as well as providers who are going into homes have not been convicted of breaking and entering or larceny. Mr. Kehler's opinion is the NC Credential system works well and there is not a reason to change. He pointed out the change to National Registry would mean paying a cost where there is none currently and recertification every 2 years vs. every 4.

He told of speaking with Representative Pless, who wants to decrease the failure rate within the Community Colleges for students who cannot obtain the percentages to pass. Rep. Pless thinks they are set high, which led to discussions of lowering the bar to allow more applicants in and more passing the courses. The Director disagrees to lowering the bar, stating it is set high for a reason.

Vice Chair Greene relayed he is well satisfied with how the McDowell County citizens are taken care by the EMS and law enforcement, as we set the standards for other Counties.

Commissioner Ellis asked Mr. Kehler what Rep. Pless said specifically on the Bill 675, in which Mr. Kehler said he felt a fair number of people were being dismissed from the Community College programs and the Bill would align to test to National standards but would use State standards for testing. Mr. Kehler told he has been a lead EMT instructor for years and has no issue with folks passing the EMT class, therefore he is not looking to lower the standards. He noted if students are not passing the bar or percentage that is required, they do not need to be

put in the back of an ambulance. Mr. Kehler noted just because there is a shortage of staff does not mean you lower the standards, which equates to bad patient care and poor outcomes.

Mr. Kehler introduced the last Bill 257 that deals with taking away the powers of the division of Emergency Management at the State level. Instead of Director Ray, the Director of State Emergency Management leading disasters responsible as the entity for the State, the power would shift to the National Guard. This would place the Adjutant General of the National Guard in charge of the State Emergency Response Team which is known as the SERT. The NC SERT is known across this nation as one of the best State Emergency Response Team. He said they are who respond to swift water and mountain rescues, and the Heart team which is the helicopter voice team. The Director asserted he has no business running the National Guard and the National Guard has no business running the EM in a disaster. He declared Emergency managers are the professionals prior to, during and after an event. He said he is not aware of how this bill came in, but thinks some regions are not satisfied with how their area was handled in an emergency response. He advised putting in place professionals to manage, not upending the system due to incidents in certain jurisdictions.

The Director specified none of the bills make sense, however Bill 257 has huge implications as State Emergency Management does an excellent job that works, telling they were the lead agency in Helene. He noted disasters are locally executed, State managed and Federally supported but it is the local Emergency Manager who has to have the oversight to respond to a disaster with the State to providing support.

Vice Chair Greene concluded Helene showed McDowell County citizens how well our Emergency Services responded and prepared well before the storm hit. He reaffirmed the standard of McDowell County's actions have given the citizens security for any disaster and there is no need to change.

Mr. Kehler spoke on McDowell being well ahead in recovery than most Counties, but the need on recovery is ongoing and this is a distraction taking focus off of the process. He concluded this shift would set back 25 years' worth of ground work that has been prepared for disasters.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to send a letter to our legislative delegation opposing the 3 Bills, with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Health Insurance Renewal Update

Mr. Flynn began the update by telling this has been a better year on net claims. This includes medical and pharmacy, adding they are able to take offset allowances provided by RX rebates and stop loss reimbursements as stimulus. He went over the YTD numbers that show a lower tracking from previous years, the per employee cost, present claims, and told the County is \$1 million less in claim expenses than the previous year.

Commissioner Walker asked what is budgeted for health insurance per employee, in which Alison Bell (Finance Director) answered \$800.00 with the employee paying \$50.00.

Mr. Flynn reviewed the Rx Valet plan for possible savings to County and staff, as it is an international source for competitive global pricing. He demonstrated possible savings by using popular drugs that are on the market and our staff's data of those drugs. Mr. Flynn revealed

there is no cost to the member or County for this Plan, and the drug is shipped directly thru Rx Valet.

He moved to the Stop Loss Renewal that has been and is currently \$90,000.00, with the request to bump up for medical inflation, explaining 3 years ago a knee surgery cost less than now. The request is to go from \$90,000.00 to \$100,000.00, to be able stay on the good side of possible claims. Mr. Wooten discussed this being a gamble, as the unknown to whether there could be less claims or more claims, within a given year. Ms. Bell agreed and stated with previous years the loss would have incurred as there were more claims than this year. She made the example that 1 heart attack would put the claim to \$90,000.00 and any knee replacements would as well.

Commissioner Walker made a motion based on the recommendation of staff, Mr. Wooten and the carrier to increase the Stop Loss Renewal this year, with a second by Commissioner Ellis requesting discussion. Commissioner Ellis asked with the cost decrease would this be a fixed cost to the County, in which Mr. Flynn answered yes. Mr. Wooten commented the reward to change is greater than the risk. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Flynn lastly reviewed an option to transfer the current insurance plan for retirees to a fully insured Blue Cross Blue Shield plan. This would be the same cost and plan for retirees thru a Gold Plan, and would be a savings for the County. He told this is just being introduced and this July 1 or next July 1 would be a good date to look at, reiterating this is not taking anything away to the retiree's but a benefit to the County for longer term. There is a concierge service available for assistance in enrollment. Mr. Wooten cited it would be harder to look at this year, as a new concept and advised further study and discussion.

Commissioner Walker and Commissioner Ellis both agreed to revisit the retiree coverage and consider any changes before January 1, with reassurance that there would be no change to the retiree's current's minimum level of coverage.

DSS Update

Mr. Wooten began with the MOU data and a question asked by the Board last month on the percentage of initiation of all screened in reports being at 91.3%. He told the month of March came up to 94.1%, and told the Board the County is in close proximity from the State's measure of 95%. The County Manager explained this percentage is based on verification by staffing, more/less screen in reports, and the timing within the set 24, 48 or 72 response. He moved to child welfare face to face visits for children in custody, which are structured by the location of the children or with outside agencies making the visits can effect the %'s. We are at 95% which is the State's minimum requirement.

There have been 2 staff hired, one social worker and another by an offer to a graduate that wants to work in McDowell as her hometown.

Commissioner Walker spoke on his appreciation to the Live Like Megan Foundation who is instrumental to the County in child welfare, mentioning the fundraising efforts. He recognized Amber Vess who established this Foundation, with Mr. Wooten speaking of her and other's whose efforts make the children comfortable and safe.

Commissioner Garner asked Mr. Wooten to let the Board know the current number of children in our Foster Care who are not in the County, as well as how many are in group homes.

Mr. Wooten told there is a meeting planned tomorrow, based with the Superintendent and Board representatives from the Education Committee to go over the decrease of funds they receive from Low Wealth Funding. This funding is used as a supplement and will affect the next school year. This is based on several factors such as tax base and population growth. The County manager will share the meeting details with the Commissioners.

Commissioner Walker referred back to DSS MOU data, asking Mr. Wooten to have staff not leave vacant spaces on the report. He instructed to put a zero instead.

Adjournment

Commissioner Walker made a motion to adjourn at 12:32 p.m., with a second by Commissioner Ellis. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Sena Allison

Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown

Chairman