

**STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
MCDOWELL COUNTY
BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS
REGULAR SESSION – March 17, 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

Tony Brown, Chairman; Lynn Greene, Vice-Chair; Trisha Garner and David N. Walker

Members Absent

Patrick Ellis

Others Present

Ashley Wooten, County Manager; Sena A. Allison, Clerk to the Board; Judge Martelle, Chief District Court Judge; Jamie Hite, New Hope Shelter Manager and Will Kehler, EMS Director.

Call to Order

Chairman Brown called the meeting to order at 11:30 a.m.

Safe Babies Court

Chairman Brown welcomed Judge Martelle to speak about the Safe Babies Court program. Judge Martelle introduced himself as the District Judge responsible for running the dockets for Rutherford and McDowell. He told this District has been struggling with substance abuse for a long time and the Safe Babies Court program was awarded to our District due their impression of this Districts court efforts, adding only 5 other Districts in the State offer this program. The Safe Babies Court was established approximately 15 years ago, and the program works parallel with the DSS calendar for families to achieve permanence. He told 93% of cases are resolved in under a year with a 91% statistic of cases that do not return back into the court. The program assists with mental, emotion and spiritual health, in which the whole community is involved for the family's success. Judge Martelle expressed his enthusiasm for the start of the Safe Babies Court, which is projected for July.

Judge Martelle thanked the Board for their continued support, in which Commissioner Walker agreed it would be a way to break a generational cycle, with the Judge saying how difficult it was for them to be given the program, due to the competition from other larger County's with more funding.

Vice Chair Greene asked Judge Martelle to let the Board know whatever he needed in order to make this program successful, in which he said he would and gave thanks for the Board's support in restructuring the format of the court room. He spoke on how this allows for children to testify remotely permitting less trauma, and is more family friendly.

Chairman Brown thanked the Judge for his efforts to having this program be awarded to McDowell County.

New HOPE Services Update

Chairman Brown asked Jamie Hite to give an update on New HOPE Services. Ms. Hite told of being the only domestic violence and sexual assault agency in McDowell County. The agency has been in existence since 1983, in which their mission is to support, empower, increase the safety of the community as well as outreach and social change. Ms. Hite highlighted a few of the services offered:

- Emergency shelter to house victims, children and pets
- Safety planning and risk assessment
- 24-hour crisis hotline
- Transportation to the shelter and to various appointments
- Case management
- Assists in filing domestic violence protective orders and restraining orders
- Court advocacy for support
- Job search, training and life skills
- Legal aid referrals for free attorney
- Financial assistance and housing navigation
- Outreach program to share educational, school and church resources
- Provided shelter in 2024 to approximately 45 women and 35 children
- Healthy Opportunities Pilot program assisting qualified members in paying their 1st month's rent, security deposit and other utilities and home good needs.
- Weekly Food Box that is serving 20 families currently
- 200 individuals in McDowell being served in some capacity through this program in the last few months
- Disaster Relief for Hurricane Helene at a distribution site on Baldwin Ave on Wednesday's from 12- 2:00 p.m.
- "Fabulous Finds" thrift store that sells donated items, with the profit going back to the agency

Ms. Hite noted without the County's support in funding, they would not be able to meet the match required of 20% to ensure receiving the grants they need. She told this year they have received \$253,924.59 in grants, with the 20% match being \$50,785.92. Ms. Hite then thanked the Board for the County's support of \$26,000.00. She told they do receive donations throughout the community as well as the profit from the store that keeps their lifesaving services for victims of abuse available.

Commissioner Walker mentioned he was happy to see they partner with Freedom Life Ministries, in which she told of persons who were employed by Freedom Life who had actually went through New HOPE for services.

Chairman Brown gave the Board's appreciation to all the work they do for the community.

Emergency Operations Plan Update

Chairman Brown invited Mr. Kehler to give an update, who recognized both his Deputy Directors in the Boardroom and gave accolades to the work they do for the community of McDowell.

Mr. Kehler had given the Board an outline to review on the McDowell County Emergency Operations Plan. The Plan that allows for updates on guidelines to manage disasters, as well being a requirement of FEMA in order to be compliant for reimbursement of natural disasters.

The Director requested the Board consider approving this Plan. Commissioner Walker asked if this Plan was already approved by the City of Marion and the Town of Old Fort, in which Mr. Kehler answered yes.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to approve the Plan as presented by the EMS Director, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

DSS Update/Administrative Items

Mr. Wooten spoke to the Board on the MOU data that was collected by DSS staff. He cited this is what gives the measures on what the department does each month. Commissioner Walker asked Mr. Wooten to have DSS staff work on the screen in percentages as this is significant to the safety of the children.

Mr. Wooten told the Board a Helene Fee Waiver has been asked by at least one church for reimbursement to their costs incurred during the post Helene response. This request totals \$470.00. Mr. Wooten stated he knows the Board is sympathetic to organizations who gave to the community for Helene recovery, while cautioning the County does not have means by FEMA, State or Federal funds to cover these type requests. The County manager suggested if they did approve any waivers to put a cap limit, in which the Chairman noted several churches contributed to serve the community out of the goodness of their hearts.

Commissioner Walker asked Mr. Wooten what his opinion was, he answered there may be funding later but he would be hesitant to pay due to a deficit to the County, in which Vice Chair Greene asked if the previous Boards had ever done reimbursements of this kind, with Mr. Wooten answering no.

Commissioner Walker made a motion to deny the request due to never reimbursing an organization in the past, and if there is money that becomes available from FEMA, that this group to notified they can apply for it, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Mr. Wooten spoke in regards to one of the leasing tenants at the Universal Building, the County owns. He told of a tenant who paid slow, with staff having to initiate the eviction process, whereas the tenant paid after the court hearing. Mr. Wooten noted the lease is coming up for renewal and requests the Board denies his renewal.

Commissioner Walker made a motion not to approve the renewal of the lease, per the recommendation of the County Manager, with a second by Vice Chair Greene. The Vice Chair added he was in attendance of this eviction hearing along with the County's Finance Director and the tenant is not who paid to get the lease up to date, it was his partner. Vice Chair Greene noted it was apparent to him, this would continue to be an issue. Commissioner Walker asked if the space could be easily leased, whereas Mr. Wooten said Mr. Abernathy is aware and has already made calls to get occupancy. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Adjournment

Vice Chair Greene made a motion to adjourn at 11:59 a.m., with a second by Commissioner Walker. By a vote of 4-0, the motion passed.

Attest:

Sena Allison

Clerk to the Board

Tony Brown

Chairman