



Justice Services  
Department

## THE STEPPINGUP INITIATIVE

May 12, 2025

**Attendees:** Abena Bediako, **Community Safety Department**; Tabatha Bradford, **Carolina Outreach**; Michele Easter, **Duke Psychiatry**; Kelli Egnaczak, **Justice Services Department**; Derek Fitts, **Safe Babies**; Wendy Jacobs, **County Commissioner**; Eric Johnson, **Alliance Health**; Patricia Knaudt, **Justice Services Department**; Nikki Nowlin, **Carolina Outreach**; Roshanna Parker, **Justice Services Department**; Lao Rubert, **Local Reentry Council**; Nicole Schramm-Sapyta, **Duke Institute for Brain Science**; Renee Shaw, **Justice Services Department**; Selma Smith, **Carolina Outreach**; Marc Strange, **Justice Services Department**; Helen Tripp, EMS; Doretta Walker, **Judge**; Angela Winchester, **NC Department of Adult Corrections**

### Minutes

- **Safe Babies-Derrick Fitts and Honorable Doretta Walker, Judge:** Every seven minutes, an infant or toddler in the United States is removed from their home and placed into foster care. Nationally, one-third of children entering foster care are under the age of three. In North Carolina, 38.84% of children in foster care are five years old or younger. The Safe Babies initiative is designed to address the critical developmental needs of these young children by ensuring that all planning and decision-making processes prioritize strong, early relationships with parents and caregivers. The goal is to create safe, stable, and nurturing environments for babies and toddlers.

Safe Babies represents a shift in the child welfare court system—from a traditionally adversarial model to a trauma-informed, collaborative approach. This partnership brings together judges, child welfare professionals, families, individuals with lived experience, and community members. The team includes a judge, a site implementation team, a community coordinator, child welfare staff, and a robust community team that connects families to essential resources.

By offering trauma-informed support and services, Safe Babies aims to improve long-term outcomes for families. The initiative seeks to achieve timely permanency for children, break cycles of generational trauma, prevent maltreatment, and resolve issues through inclusive, roundtable discussions rather than conventional courtroom proceedings.

In Durham, a specially designed room on the second floor helps reduce the intimidating atmosphere of court. It features a television, books, posters, and other comforting items to make families feel more at ease. Judge Walker has invited everyone to visit the space and consider joining the active community team. One committee member recommended incorporating local resources such as the Diaper Bank and Book Harvest to further support families.

- **Psychiatric Advance Directives (PAD)-Michele Easter:** A Psychiatric Advance Directive (PAD) is a person-centered tool that allows individuals to state their treatment preferences while they still have capacity. Unlike guardianship, a PAD is temporary and is activated only when a person is deemed incapable of making their own decisions. There are two main types: an Advance Instruction, which is a list of preferences, and the appointment of a healthcare proxy or power of attorney to act on the individual's behalf. Despite their potential, PADs are not widely implemented due to challenges in communication, activation, and access. To be effective, PADs must be readily available to healthcare providers and proxies, who need proper training. Potential solutions include assistance programs, combining PADs with crisis management plans, and simple identifiers like a wristband or dog tag. The PAD was compared to the DNR and most forms that the state has provided for advance directives for the end-of-life care are still challenging. The discussion highlighted that individuals often need to see the personal relevance and benefit of advance care planning before its value becomes clear to them.
- **Subcommittee Updates**
  - **Access to Care**
    - **Forensic Community Support Team-** The process is progressing as planned. A decision was made to begin the contract on July 1st to avoid contract initiation with only two months remaining in the fiscal year. A rollover contract was not feasible. Meanwhile, a dedicated small group is still refining the referral process, optimizing turnaround times, and developing training protocols.
    - **MHC/MHCEI-** The MHCEI grant will end in September of 2025. All the data has been submitted to Tonya to complete the evaluation process. A meeting has been scheduled to discuss the preliminary findings of the data. An additional meeting has been scheduled with AOC to help facilitate discussions regarding moving forward, what is next.
    - **Peer Support-** Renee will work with Robin to get this subcommittee started.
    - **Housing Subcommittee-** The larger committee has explored short-term options for housing. However, a report and recommendation will have to be completed, and it is not believed that the report will discuss funding for this budget that comes out now. Related to non-congregant housing Commissioner Jacob reported that she has asked that the board hear the recommendations that came out of the pre-shelter housing subcommittee.
- **Partner Updates**
  - **Carolina Outreach** reported this was their first meeting with the Stepping Up committee and happy to be invited to hear the information shared.
  - Following recent federal grant terminations totaling over \$800 million, the **National Association of Counties (NACO) Justice and Public Safety Committee** reports nationwide impacts. The decision also led to the immediate termination of Mark Stovell,

coordinator for the Stepping Up National Innovator Counties program. The funding cuts affect not only various programs but also the jobs of dedicated staff members. Commissioner Jacobs confirmed that she is unsure how the grant terminations will specifically affect Durham County. She has requested clarification from the county manager and other relevant officials.

On March 26, the EMS department received a "stop-work" order for a Medication-Assisted Treatment (MAT) grant that funded a peer support specialist. While funds were later found to reinstate the position for May 9 to September 30, 2025, the specialist had already been separated. There is also speculation that the federal government will cancel the FR-CARA grant, which supplies EMS with life-saving drugs like buprenorphine and Narcan and supports the overall MAT program. The potential cancellation has not been officially confirmed. The county still has significant unspent opioid settlement funds available, which could potentially be used to mitigate the effects of the lost federal grants. The termination of these grants is part of a larger issue with significant consequences across the country. Advocates are concerned that cuts to public safety grants, especially those targeting opioid addiction, will set back progress in addressing the overdose crisis.

#### **Upcoming SUI Meeting Dates for 2025 Meetings**

July 14, 2025

September 8, 2025

November 10, 2025