

## II. Planning Council/Body Activities

### a. **Planning Council/Body Accomplishments** - Planning Council/Body accomplishments from March 1, 2021, through February 28, 2022.

1. **Mandated Duties:** During the FY21 Planning Year we continued to struggle through the challenge of how to maintain the volunteer base of the Planning Council. While some of our membership consists of individuals employed and paid by agencies the majority of our membership base is volunteers with a historical membership of over 51% of Consumers.

The Metropolitan Atlanta HIV Health Services Planning Council, its leadership, members, and staff successfully navigated the turbulent waters of COVID-19 during year one, but year two displayed a decline in membership. With added effort, including the energetic leadership of the Planning Council Chair (Morris Singletary). We were able to successfully meet the mandates of our council. We are pleased to have accomplished all required operations during this period while simultaneously responding to various challenges which are discussed in section b.

- Appointed and seated FY20 Planning Council Members
  - Completed FY20 Priority Setting, Resource Allocations, and Directives
  - Implemented Needs Assessment
  - Worked with the contracted vendor in the implementation of the Needs Assessment including challenges associated with fraudulent attempts
  - Meeting Calendars were published and advertised
  - Provided Planning Council Refresher Training and Training in Motion (ongoing training)
  - Reviewed and Developed Standards of Care
  - Compiled EIIHA Activities/Updates
  - Administered the Assessment of the Efficiency of the Administrative Mechanism
  - Continued implementation of the Integrated Work Plan
  - Monitored Housing Opportunity for People with AIDS (HOPWA) Program and its impact on Persons Living with HIV within the Atlanta EMA. Provided input through the committees of the Planning Council. Coordinated meetings with key stakeholders.
  - Worked with the Ryan White Part A Recipient in preparation of the HRSA site visit.
2. **Standards of Care:** Jointly, the Quality Management Committee (QM) of the Planning Council works with the Recipient's Quality Management Program to update Standards of Care. The review of Performance Measures happens annually; with the committee and recipient staff reporting jointly on EMA standards. This unique blend of functions allows for input from Consumers and other Stakeholders on quality improvement needs.

During the FY21 planning year, the Consumer Caucus continued to work with the QM process by participating in the Quality Management Committee meetings on a regular basis and by having scheduled meetings with the Consumer Caucus and QM staff throughout the year.

3. **Consumer Engagement:** As an added effort to ensure the participation of Persons Living with HIV who were recipients of Ryan White Part A services. The Consumer Caucus in partnership with the Ryan White Part A office and Quality Management team worked to develop various tools during the Fy2019 year which focused on the involvement of those mostly impacted, the client. The Denver Principle of “Nothing for us, without us” became the theme for client based work during FY2019. As a result Consumer were very engaged in the development of ‘linkage to care” tools and surveys as well as the development of “consumer surveys”.
4. **Needs Assessment:** The Assessment Committee of the Metropolitan Atlanta HIV Health Services Planning Council conducted a Needs Assessment at the start of the Planning Council year. The Assessment was rolled out to individuals living with HIV and were in care as well as those who were not.

The Assessment was developed by the Assessment Committee and reviewed by the Consumer Caucus. Several modifications were made to allow for ease in use. The data collection was coordinated through a contracted vendor and marketing for the Assessment was conducted inhouse.

Extra efforts were taken to gain participation through incentives as well as marketing. Posters, fliers, and social media were branded to create high energy and to encourage participation by utilizing the Planning Council Chair as a familiar face within the EMA.

**Planning Council Challenges** - Planning Council challenges during the reporting period (March 1, 2021 through February 2, 2022) which impeded improvements in HIV Care Continuum outcome targets.

#### 1. The Pandemic – The Nature of the Challenge

- Fulton County as the host agency for the Ryan White Part A Program remained challenged by the ever-changing landscape of the pandemic and the need to maintain the healthcare of all citizens.

In as much, the County remained in a virtual service mode for most of the year allowing face-to-face meetings only in limited and controlled amounts. Meetings could be no greater than 5 persons, seated 6 feet apart. This presented a tremendous barrier on in person meetings.

Having served for one year during the pandemic the process of virtual meetings became familiar and easy to navigate. What was problematic was the awareness of members becoming “Zoom Fatigued”.

The Metropolitan Atlanta HIV Health Services Planning Council experienced a serious decline in Consumer attendance of our meetings since the start of the pandemic. Historically, our Consumer Caucus attendance has averaged 30 individuals outside of staff. Additionally, participation in committee meetings and Planning Council meetings have shown the same rate of attendance. Atlanta (Fulton County) has been nationally applauded for its retention of Consumer participation; and while we

continue to have the involvement of our consumer members the decline of participation is concerning. Since going virtual we saw a decline of half of our membership participation. Fortunately, our numbers always supported a higher than 33% membership rate and allows for this reduction; however, the decrease in attendance brings us very close to the border of non-compliance.

Initially, various touch points like setting up a Facebook group to increase social interaction and inspire others to attend, we also asked that attendees reach out to friends, and encourage participation, we even employed text messaging as a way in which to engage our caucus attendance. After employing several different systems we still experience an ongoing decline.

As the spread of COVID-19 continued to impact the metro Atlanta area, we became concerned that consumer engagement was declining to a critical level. After employing several different systems we still experience an ongoing decline. After hearing and talking to several members we came to understand a different perspective and rationale for serving meals/snacks during our meetings.

The notion that there may be a more intrinsic reason for doing this came after some members suggested their displeasure for not being able to have meals delivered. It seemed that there may be an unexplored benefit to serving meals outside of nutrition.

As is customary for the clinical field we turned to science and the science supports the importance of meals especially in relation to socialization.

Research from the University of Oxford revealed the more often people ate with others, the more likely they are to feel happy and satisfied with their lives. The science further supported that there is a strong correlation between socialization and meals. Most cultures throughout time have placed great emphasis on the coming together around meals, and interestingly none of this has had anything to do with the most primal need for food.

Being isolated from one another due to a pandemic has taken a tremendous toll on all of us. Removing the opportunity of working in a virtual environment infused with food in my opinion has lessened our chance of maintaining that cohesion.

These reasons do not stand alone, there is also the very human need for appreciation and reward. In every meeting we see the immediate reward of agency participants attending because of their respective jobs, and subsequent pay, the Ryan White and Planning Council staff included; but clients who attend receive no reward and the satisfaction of knowing that one is a part of something great does not measure up to the food induced endorphins one receives when eating.

So food and a sense of well being have historically been tied to our meetings and operating without this elements has shown how that food and socialization play a huge part in client retention and involvement in the work of the Planning Council.

***The plan to overcome the challenge*** – As the numbers continue to trend downward Fulton has relaxed its meeting protocols allowing for some face-to-face meetings. The Council will continue to meet virtually, facilitating face-to-face meetings under certain conditions.

- ***Progress in implementing the plan to overcome the challenge*** – The meeting ban was lifted at the start of February and the Planning Council and its committees are continuing to meet virtually. Plans have been made to roll out small committee meetings in “distance safe” environments. Virtual meetings will continue to be a part of the meeting platform.

## 2. Membership

- ***The nature of the challenge*** – The Planning Council showed a drastic decline in membership during the FY2021. This was primarily noted through a decline in meeting participation. Historically the Planning Council’s Membership consists of 55 voting members and a larger representation in non-voting (At-Large) members.

The decline was first noted in a falling off in virtual participation. Meeting participation on average hovered between 86 and 125 members participating. While membership never dropped below quorum it was obvious that the strong network of Consumer participation had declined significantly.

When members were polled on why they were no longer attending meetings some expressed various conflicts, and lack of motivation, as well as a few, expressed technology challenges.

Not having face-to-face meetings proved to challenge the long-standing intangible social fiber of our meetings where participants support one another on various levels including encouragement, medical adherence, and the energy gained from social interaction.

***The plan to overcome the challenge*** – The Planning Council will continue to meet the guidelines of Fulton County Government. Where and when possible staff will transition to Council and Committees back into in person meetings. This is especially important as we move towards the development of the Integrated Plan.

## 3. Housing

- ***The nature of the challenge*** – The availability of affordable housing continues to be a problem within the Atlanta EMA. While the Atlanta EMA does not fund housing the Planning Council’s Housing Committee does have a strong relationship with members of the Community who express concerns with a level of frequency. The FY2021 planning year demonstrated a continuation of prior years of housing concerns.

Previously the Housing Committee served as an advisory body for the City of Atlanta’s HOPWA Program and during this fiscal year the HOPWA Grantee elected to form its own advisory committee.

This has resulted in anecdotal conversations through the Consumer Caucus and the Housing Committee about the uncertainty of the committee's role and leverage within the HOPWA organization.

- ***The plan to overcome the challenge*** – The new Chair of the Planning Council (Bruce Garner) in an effort to maintain connectivity between the two organizations has joined the advisory committee for the City of Atlanta. The Chair serves as a conduit for information as well as a source of feedback from the Planning Council and its members.
- ***Progress in implementing the plan to overcome the challenge*** – There are additional conversations around how the two entities can work closer together. Several housing groups have been formed to address the housing disparity amongst individuals living with HIV and the Housing Committee is engaging in the different conversations and identifying ways in which to foster housing – HOPWA and non-HOPWA funded.

**b. Challenges related to compliance with planning council/body legislative requirements**

**1. Mandated Representation (Reflection and Reflectiveness)**

- ***The nature of the challenge*** – The Atlanta EMA continues to experience challenges in obtaining consistent representation from the mandated slot of ***State Medicaid Agency*** representatives. The pandemic also revealed the need for a more aggressive campaign to ensure greater representation from younger demographics.
- ***The plan to overcome the challenge*** – This ongoing challenge of not having a State Medicaid representative has been brought to the attention of the Part A Recipient and Part A Project Officer in hope that assistance can be provided from an HRSA level.

The staff of the Planning Council has been directed by both the Membership Committee and the Planning Council as a whole to seek additional ways to reach younger individuals for membership on the council.

- ***Progress in implementing the plan to overcome the challenge*** – Added measures have been taken to contact organizations that work directly with the younger demographic as well as posting membership ads in areas that historically cater to a younger demographic.

An additional consideration is being taken to assess the feasibility of establishing a Planning Council Youth Caucus.