

Social Services Working Group

[This post is co-authored with my colleague, [Margaret Henderson](#)]. It was originally posted on the Coates' Canons: NC Local Government Law blog on March 29, 2018 but is relevant to readers of On the Civil Side as well.

In 2017, the North Carolina General Assembly established the Social Services Regional Supervision and Collaboration Working Group (SSWG) and directed it to develop recommendations related to the social services system (see legislative summary [here](#)). The legislation directed the UNC School of Government to convene the group, facilitate the meetings, and provide staff support to the project.

The SSWG's work is divided into two stages. The group just released the [final report](#) for Stage One and is scheduled to present its recommendations to the legislature on April 10, 2018. Stage Two will get underway in May. All of the meeting materials, minutes, and recordings are available [online](#).

There have been quite a few different conversations about social services system reform over the last year or so. As a result, there has been some confusion about the role of the SSWG. This blog post is intended to shed some light on the group's charge and connect some dots between the work of the SSWG and other elements of system reform that are underway.

What is the SSWG?

It is a working group that includes 18 [members](#) appointed by different individuals and organizations. The group includes legislators, state agency representatives, county commissioners, social services directors, a judge, and a social services attorney. Similar to a study commission, the SSWG is charged with making recommendations and does not have the authority to take action.

What is the SSWG required to study?

The SSWG is focused primarily on making improvements to the state's current state-supervised, county-administered social services system, with the support to do so coming from the state government, the county governments, and across county borders. In a nutshell, the SSWG is trying to answer three fundamental questions about potential changes needed to strengthen the system:

- How can the NC Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) better support county administration of social services through the use of regional offices?
- How can counties improve local oversight of social services administration?
- How can counties work together to administer social services programs?

Is the SSWG recommending regional departments of social services?

No. At one point, the legislature was considering a bill that would have abolished the current county-administered system and established a new system of regional departments of social services. That version of the bill did not pass. Instead, the legislature chose to:

- Keep the current county-administered system intact;
- Allow (but not require) counties to create regional (multi-county) departments of social services; and
- Require the state to establish regional offices to support local administration.

The legislature also directed the SSWG to spend some time discussing the concept of regional departments of social services and craft a vision for what a regionally-administered system might look like. This conversation will take place in Stage Two of SSWG's work which begins in May.

Is the SSWG focused only on child welfare?

No. The SSWG's recommendations relate to the full range of social services programs—including child welfare, adult services, economic services, and child support enforcement. These are all multi-faceted programs that offer many services to millions of people across the state.

How does the SSWG's work relate to the other components of social services system reform?

The 2017 legislation includes additional components that are separate but nonetheless related to the work of SSWG:

- **System reform plan:** The legislation directs the state to contract with an [outside organization](#) to undertake a comprehensive review of the state agencies responsible for supervising social services programs. The contractor is also required to develop a “dashboard” that will allow both the state and the general public to monitor programs and services county by county to ensure “maximum accountability and transparency and the effective and efficient use of social services and funds.”
- **Written agreements:** The legislation requires the state to enter into written agreements each fiscal year with the local agencies responsible for administering social services programs. These written agreements apply to all social services programs other than Medicaid and N.C. Health Choice (a state health insurance program covering low-income children). The written agreements, which will begin in fiscal year 2018–19, will focus on “mandated performance requirements and administrative responsibilities.”
- **Corrective action:** Beginning in March 2020, the legislation provides that the state and a local agency will be required to develop a joint corrective action plan if (1) the local agency is out of compliance with the written agreement or applicable law for a specified period of time or (2) DHHS determines that an urgent circumstance requires immediate attention. If DHHS determines that the local agency has not been successful in implementing the

corrective action plan, the legislation directs the state to temporarily assume local administration of the social services program that is involved.

- **Regional departments:** As mentioned above, counties will have new authority beginning in March 2019 to voluntarily join together to create regional, rather than single-county, departments. Counties will be able to establish a regional department to provide some or all of their social services programs.
- **Child Well-Being Transformation Council:** This is a new committee that was created to provide a forum for high-level oversight of all public services for children, with the primary goal of improving coordination, collaboration, and communication among agencies and organizations involved. The initial members are expected to be appointed by July 1, 2018.

These components are interconnected efforts that, when implemented, will result in changes at the state level as well as in the relationship between the state and the counties. The SSWG is not involved in any of the other components but will stay informed of their progress.

What will SSWG study in Stage Two?

The SSWG has two topics on the agenda for Stage Two. First, the group is required to make recommendations regarding legislative and regulatory changes necessary to improve collaboration between counties. At a minimum, the group must address information-sharing, conflicts of interest, and intercounty movement of clients.

The second topic on the agenda is regionalization of social services administration, as mentioned above. The SSWG is required to develop a vision for transitioning the state from a county-administered system to a regionally-administered system. The group expects to have a high-level discussion of this idea in order to identify the benefits and challenges associated with making such a transition. It does not expect to recommend legislation to implement such a transition.

If you are now intrigued by this work that is underway and would like to receive notices of upcoming SSWG meetings, please send an email to Pratibha Sirdeshmukh at sirdeshmukh@sog.unc.edu. To download the SSWG's final report for Stage 1, click [here](#). Feel free to contact me if you have any questions about the work of the SSWG.