



# State of New Jersey

GOVERNOR'S COUNCIL ON SUBSTANCE USE DISORDER

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PHILIP D. MURPHY  
*Governor*

TAHESHA L. WAY  
*Lt. Governor*

NEIL VAN ESS  
*Acting Chairman*

CELINA LEVY  
*Executive Director*

## MINUTES

### **Governor's Council on Substance Use Disorder**

**December 9, 2025**

**Attendance:** Neil Van Ess (Chairman), Celina Levy (Executive Director), Gregg Benson (Public Member), Gisele Pemberton (Public Member), Jeff Carrick (DCF), Michelle Graham-Lyons (DCA), Herb Kaldany (DOC), Lu Pereira (DOE), Lashunda Omida (DOH), Harry Reyes (DHS), Katie Kurek (LPS), Noelle Lee-Turner (DMAVA),

### **Call to Order**

The three hundred and ninety-ninth regular meeting of the Governor's Council on Substance Use Disorder was called to order at 10:00 a.m. by Acting Chairman Neil Van Ess.

### **Open Public Meetings Act Statement**

Mr. Van Ess announced that notice of this meeting was provided in compliance with the Open Public Meetings Act (N.J.S.A. 10:4-6 – 10:4-21). In addition, Mr. Van Ess stated that public comments were to be provided electronically, through the GCSUD website contact portal between the hours of 10am and 1pm on the day of the meeting and must state "Public Comment" in the subject line.

### **Roll Call**

Katelyn Assenheimer called the roll. Members present and absent were noted for the record. Chairman Van Ess informed the Council that this meeting would be for informational purposes only due to the lack of quorum.

### **Chairman's Report**

Chairman Van Ess welcomed everyone to the meeting. He shared his admiration and gratitude for those being honored today and stated how important the Alliance volunteers are to the communities they serve.

### **Presentation: 2025 Volunteer of the Year Ceremony**

Sara Thode, Director of Prevention and Planning shared with everyone that the Alliances represent the largest network of community-based, substance-use disorder coalitions in the nation with 300 Alliances encompassing over 400 municipalities statewide. Ms. Thode stated that these volunteers have worked to

change and save lives within their communities and throughout New Jersey. The County Volunteers of the Year were introduced by Ms. Thode and State Alliance Coordinator Kim Rodriguez, and each volunteer will be mailed a framed certificate in recognition of their service.

Ms. Thode announced that Barbara Pierson was awarded as the 2025 W. Cary Edwards Statewide Volunteer of the Year. Barbara Pierson has served as the Chairperson of Washington Township Municipal Alliance for the past 8 years. She leads an intergenerational prevention program for the Alliance that unites 6<sup>th</sup> grade students with senior citizens in her Washington Township community. The students and seniors meet multiple times during the school year to work on community projects and they receive prevention education on the importance of healthy choices and safe medication disposal during their meetings. Barbara plans the program, purchases the needed supplies, and leads the sessions. Barbara also works as a paraprofessional in the Washington Township schools where she assists neurodiverse students in special education classes. She has been honored as the Support Staff Educator of the Year by the Washington Township school system. Barbara has served as a Board of Director of the Washington Township Youth Association which supports local youth sports programs. Barbara's dedication and commitment to the health and wellbeing of the Washington Township community makes her a deserving recipient of the 2025 W. Cary Edwards Statewide Volunteer of the Year Award.

After the awards presentation, Deputy Director Rebecca Alfaro introduced the First Place winner of the Partnership for a Drug Free New Jersey Shout Down Drugs Prevention Concert, Martin Rojas Ortiz to share a recording of his song, "Bruno".

### **Executive Director's Report**

Executive Director Celina Levy thanked the PDFNJ Shout Down Drugs contest winner Martin for his performance. She also shared her gratitude to Volunteer of the Year recipient Barbara Pierson, along with all of the other honorees, for their dedication to their respective communities, and thanked all those who joined the meeting today to honor VOY recipients, also offering gratitude to all Alliance participants for their ongoing dedication to their communities.

The GCSUD Master Plan has been adopted and will be posted on the website. Ms. Levy thanks the Governor's Office, Master Plan Subcommittee members, department designees and public members, County Coordinators and Municipal Alliances, GCSUD staff and Chairman Van Ess for making this effort a success.

Ms. Levy also shared that GCSUD has a dedicated funding source, The Cannabis Regulatory, Enforcement Assistance, and Marketplace Modernization Fund, provided through the Underage Deterrence and Prevention Account that flows through the Cannabis Regulatory Commission. This funding source will provide long term sustainability for the Council and it's Alliance to Prevent Substance Use Disorder.

Ms. Levy thanked the Council members for their guidance and support, County Coordinators and Alliances for their good work in light of challenges faced, GCSUD staff for their strong work ethic and to Chairman Van Ess for his leadership.

### **Adjournment**

Chairman Van Ess adjourned the meeting at 11:06.