

Critical Program Standard Violation Inquiry

Sponsoring Agency: Aspire Youth and Family, Inc.

Program: Catawba! Kids at Work! Program

Allegations: October 18, 2024

Robin Frasier with Aspire Youth and Family, contacted Megan Webster, Area Consultant at 10:46am. Robin reported the following situation:

A juvenile in the Kids at Work program in Catawba County went to school yesterday (Thursday October 17, 2024) with a knife in her backpack. The youth upon questioning explained that she attended the Kids at Work program the night prior (Wednesday) and the Chef gave her the knife. She had just forgotten to take the knife out of her backpack.

Robin stated that the program did give the youth a Chef's Kit approximately 2 months ago. This Chef's Kit consists of 2 pots, 2 pans, spatula, knife, and an apron. The kit was to help the youth prepare meals for her elderly grandmother. Robin stated that Chef Tammy is preparing a written report on the matter and will have that report to me by the end of the day today (10/18/2024).

On 10/18/2024 the Area Consultant called LaChauncey Coulter, Catawba County Juvenile Court Counselor Supervisor, to follow up on the matter. Fridays are court days in Catawba County therefore a message was left followed up with an email. An update will be provided as more information is received.

UPDATE 10/21/2024:

LaChauncey Coulter, Juvenile Court Counselor Supervisor reached out to Area Consultant, Megan Webster on October 21, 2024, at 9:58am in regard to the juvenile in question. The juvenile is 12 years old and lives with her 80-year-old grandmother. Juvenile is on EM (electronic monitoring) and became assaultive to her grandmother last Thursday (October 17, 2024). She was in court on Friday for probation violation due to unplugging her EM unit. Grandmother stated to the Court Counselor (Addison) that the juvenile had a knife in her backpack, but the juvenile did not take it to school. She found it after her Kids at Work class on Wednesday night. According to the Court Counselors the juvenile likes the cooking part of the class and enjoys eating the food. She does not like the staff and does not get along with them. Juvenile was sent to the Bridges Assessment Center over the weekend, and they are currently looking for out of home placement for her due to the grandmother not being physically able to supervise. Chauncey will follow up with Area Consultant if the knife was in fact taken to school.

At this time, October 21, 2024 (10:24am) no report has been received from the Aspire agency.

UPDATE 10/24/2024:

Area Consultant, Megan Webster, reached out to Robin Frasier via text message requesting a copy of Aspire's Incident report as it had not been received. Robin sent the incident report via email on Thursday, October 24, 2024, at 10:00am. A response email from Area Consultant was sent to the Aspire program via Robin Frasier and Kim Castano. The response requested the program to **IMMEDIATELY** suspend giving out knives and/or any other item that can be perceived as a weapon.

Critical Program Standard Violation Inquiry

UPDATE 10/28/2024:

Western Region Area Manager, Regina Arrowood, called Sarah Wilfong, the grandmother of the youth involved in the incident report on 10/28/2024 at approximately 12:30pm. The conversation was approximately 15 minutes in length. Ms. Arrowood explained to Ms. Wilfong who she was and why she was calling. They spoke about the youth's involvement in the program. Ms. Wilfong spoke positive things about the program and stated that it was good for the youth. She was not aware that the program gave her granddaughter a knife. She did state that the program gave her granddaughter a chef's kit. Ms. Arrowood asked Ms. Wilfong if the program staff gave her or notified her about a chef kit and Ms. Wilfong stated that she was not handed any chef kit, she said that the youth brought it home with her. She stated that the chef kit was given to her granddaughter, and she did not know it had a knife. She stated that she always looks in her granddaughter's bookbag every day and noticed the knife on Thursday.

UPDATE 11/1/2024:

Western Region Area Manager, Regina Arrowood and Area Consultant, Megan Webster, had a conference call with Kim Castano, Executive Director of Aspire on 11/1/2024 beginning at 10:01am. The phone conversation lasted 39 minutes. During the telephone call a series of questions were asked to help gather information pertaining to the incident and policies and procedures around critical standard reporting, staff supervision, and handing out of knives by program staff.

Ms. Castano reported that Robin Frasier did reach out to her to inform her about the situation. She stated that Chef Kits began as a way to allow youth to still participate in the cooking part of the program during COVID stay at home. It was disclosed at this time that the chef kits had items other than food in them such as pots, pans, cooking utensils including knives and that it wasn't a problem then so why now? Ms. Webster stated that while attending all of her JCPC meetings virtually during COVID times, the boxes discussed only included items such as food. This was the first time of hearing about other items being included. She also stated that the issue isn't with the pots and pans etc because the chef kits are a good idea, but the knives are very problematic due to supervision issues and can potentially cause a liability issue. She reminded Ms. Castano about the risk and needs data showing a low rate of supervision for this population of youth. Ms. Castano did go on to state that the boxes during COVID were discussed with the parents about what was in the box, and that they signed an agreement with the program stating that they would supervise the youth while doing the cooking program virtually. The youth could only participate if the parents were supervising and the agreement, they signed stated this. Ms. Arrowood asked for Ms. Castano to send a copy of the agreement to both her and Ms. Webster. Ms. Castano stated that she would.

Ms. Webster asked Ms. Castano if this particular youth's grandmother signed an agreement for this chef kit. Ms. Castano stated that the chef kit's were phased out after COVID so no she did not sign an agreement. Ms. Webster asked about the procedures for deciding how youth get a chef kit since they were phased out. How does the program decide if a youth should get one? Ms. Castano stated that Chef Kimberly did the intake and noticed that the grandmother was struggling with the youth. She talked to the youth about needing to help the grandmother out by learning how to cook and helping her cook meals at night. Chef Kimberly stated that the family had limited kitchen materials.

Critical Program Standard Violation Inquiry

Ms. Castano stated that chef kits were now given out on a case-by-case basis and should be documented in general notes. The contents of the chef kits come from donations from businesses like Pampered Chef, local people, thrift stores, etc. They are not purchased with JCPC funds. The chef kit for this particular youth was given to the grandmother by Chef Kimberly or Tammy. Ms. Castano was not sure as she had not reviewed the case notes of this youth. She did state that Chef Kimberly or Tammy went over the contents of what was in the chef kit with the grandmother. There is no documentation that this was done. Ms. Castano was very adamant that the grandmother was handed the chef kit and that her staff went over the contents.

When asked, Ms. Castano stated that she has not followed up with anyone pertaining this situation. She has not reached out to the court counselor or the guardian. Ms. Castano did ask Ms. Arrowood and Ms. Webster what their perspective on this situation was. Ms. Arrowood replied with asking if Ms. Castano reviewed the email sent on 10/24/2024 at 10:22am by Ms. Webster stating that the program immediately stop giving out knives. Ms. Castano had not read that email until right at that moment. Ms. Webster stated that handing out knives in the chef kits should immediately stop as they are dangerous and proper supervision is not available. She explained how this could be a liability for the agency and that the population of youth being served need supervision at all times with a knife and they cannot provide that if they are sending them home with the youth.

Critical Standard: The DPS Community Programs Critical Standard found in JCPC Policy Section 5, Operations: Program Accountability – Critical Standards, 5.3,D Safety Concerns, outlines critical standards for programs and states that *“Programs shall ensure that safety measures, which include appropriate supervision standards, trained staff and the provision of safety equipment, are in place for all program-sponsored functions.”* Based on the preliminary report, DPS Community Programs determined that further inquiry was warranted for the incident.

Actions taken by North Carolina Department of Public Safety Community Programs to verify the accuracy of the allegations:

- Upon receiving telephone call from Aspire Program Representative, Robin Frasier, Area Consultant, Megan Webster, reached out to Court Counselor Supervisor, LaChauncey Coulter to obtain further information.
 - Conversation with Court Counselor Supervisor did find that a knife was found in the juvenile’s backpack by the juvenile’s 80-year-old grandmother. It is still in question as to whether the youth took the knife to school.
- Review of the Incident Report provided by the program on 10/24/2024, outlining details of the alleged events.
- Area Consultant requested the following from the Associate Executive Director, Robin Frasier and Executive Director, Kim Castano on 10/24/2024:
 - IMMEDIATELY suspend giving out knives and/or other items that can be considered weapons in Chef Kits.
 - Review Aspire policies and procedures on age and safety limitations for youth using kitchen equipment.

Critical Program Standard Violation Inquiry

- Western Region Area Manager called Sarah Wilfong, grandmother of youth on 10/28/2024 to ask some pertinent questions.
- Regional Area Manager and Area Consultant had a conference call with Aspire Executive Director to ask follow up questions on 11/1/2024.

Findings: The inquiry concluded that the agency does have a critical standard violation by providing a youth with a possible weapon and not proper staff supervision. The agency did follow NC DPS/JCPC minimum standards by reporting the incident immediately upon notification of the incident to the local Area Consultant, however they did not report the incident to the Chief Court Counselor. Policy does state that the agency should notify the Chief Court Counselor.

Recommendations: Per JCPC Policy Section 5, Operations: Program Accountability – Critical Standards, 5.3, D. Safety Concerns, 1:

Programs shall ensure that safety measures, which include appropriate supervision standards, trained staff and the provision of safety equipment, are in place for all program-sponsored functions.

It is recommended that the Aspire Agency IMMEDIATELY suspend the giving of knives and/or any object that can be considered a weapon to any program participant. Chef Kits minus knives may be given as an incentive to youth in the program as long as the incentive is written into the program agreement and signed parental consent is given.

Individual Service Plans (ISP) should document for any and all youth that receive any incentive items such as Chef Kits (minus knives) for an example. This is a way to document behaviors and rewards as well as provide documentation for audit purposes.

The Aspire agency shall also review their policy and procedures on the use of kitchen equipment for youth participating in the culinary program. Items to take into consideration are: age of youth, mental capacity of youth, behavioral issues of youth, etc.. The North Carolina Department of Labor will be a great resource to ensure that you have the proper policies in place for youth's safety pertaining to kitchen equipment.

Report submitted by Area Consultant, Megan L. Webster.
11/1/2024