



STATE OF FLORIDA
AGENCY FOR HEALTH CARE ADMINISTRATION
OFFICE OF FAIR HEARINGS

FILED

Sep 18, 2023, 9:39 am
OFFICE OF FAIR HEARINGS

[REDACTED],

PETITIONER,

AHCA Case No.: 23-FH1461

vs.

AGENCY FOR HEALTH CARE
ADMINISTRATION,

RESPONDENT.

_____ /

FINAL ORDER

Pursuant to notice, the undersigned convened a telephonic Fair Hearing on the instant case on August 3, 2023, at 12:56 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (“EST”).

APPEARANCES

For the Petitioner:

[REDACTED]

Petitioner’s Authorized Representative

For the Respondent:

Lee Ann Williams
Medical/Health Care Program Analyst
Agency for Health Care Administration

STATEMENT OF ISSUE

The issue is whether Respondent proved by a preponderance of the evidence that Respondent’s decision to reduce Petitioner’s Behavior Analysis (“BA” or “ABA”) services was correct.

PRELIMINARY STATEMENT

All parties and witnesses appeared telephonically. Petitioner’s Authorized Representative and [REDACTED], [REDACTED] (“[REDACTED]”), appeared on behalf

of Petitioner. [REDACTED] (“[REDACTED]”), [REDACTED] of Petitioner, attended as a witness for Petitioner.

Lee Ann Williams (“Ms. Williams”), Medical/Health Care Program Analyst and Fair Hearing Liaison for the Agency for Health Care Administration (“Agency” or “AHCA”), appeared on behalf of Respondent. Dr. Joseph Darling (“Dr. Darling”), Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral level and Second Level Reviewer for eQHealth Solutions Inc. (“eQHealth”), appeared as a witness for Respondent.

Petitioner did not introduce any exhibits at the hearing. Prior to the hearing, Respondent sent to the Office of Fair Hearings and Petitioner a one-hundred and forty-four (144)-page evidence packet and a forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet. The one-hundred and forty-four (144)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings’ document management system as the file title “[REDACTED] FH 08.03.2023.pdf”. The forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings’ document management system as the file title “23-FH1461 AHCA Evidence packet 49 pages.pdf”. Absent an objection from the Petitioner, the undersigned admitted the one-hundred and forty-four (144)-page evidence packet into evidence as Respondent’s Composite Exhibit 1 (“RCE 1”) and the forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet into evidence as Respondent’s Composite Exhibit 2 (“RCE 2”).

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. Petitioner receives Medicaid services on a fee-for-service basis from the Agency. eQHealth is a Quality Improvement Organization contracted by the Agency to review prior authorization requests for services. See page 2 of RCE 2.

2. Petitioner is [REDACTED] ([REDACTED] - [REDACTED]) old. See page 16 of RCE 1. Petitioner is diagnosed with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. *Id.*

3. Petitioner requested continuation of BA services; specifically, 2,600 units of code 97153; 208 units of code 97155; and 52 units of code 97156. *Id.* at 23. In a Notice of Outcome (“NOO”), dated April 12, 2023, Respondent approved 1,872 units of code 97153; 208 units of code 97155; and 52 units of 97156, but denied the remaining units. *Id.* The NOO explained the basis for the reduction as follows:

[T]he requested services are not medically necessary under the following standard(s):

Individualized, specific, and consistent with symptoms or confirmed diagnosis of the illness under treatment, and not in excess of the patient’s needs.

The NOO further provided:

PR Clinical Rationale – Denial: According to Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy requests for services must be based on the medical necessity of the recipient’s maladaptive behaviors and skill deficits. The recipient is engaging in problem behaviors that threaten access to typical environments and negatively affects activities of daily living. However, the frequency, intensity, or severity of the recipient’s maladaptive behaviors does not justify the requested units of services. The requested units of BA services are in excess of medical necessity.

...

Pages 23 – 24 of RCE 1.

4. Petitioner requested reconsideration of the Respondent’s decision. In a Notice of Reconsideration Determination (“NRD”), dated April 26, 2023, Respondent modified its decision.

Id. at 34 – 35. The NRD explained the basis for the decision as follows:

PR Recon Determination: At reconsideration all documents were carefully reviewed. Based on the information submitted for review at reconsideration, additional units of services are approved. However, the current requested is in excess of medically necessary for BA services. Although the recipient is engaging

in topographies of maladaptive behaviors, the frequency and intensity of the maladaptive do not support the request for services.

...

Pages 34 – 35 of RCE 1.

5. On June 5, 2023, Petitioner requested a Fair Hearing to challenge the reduction of ABA services. *Id.* at 8. On July 12, 2023, the undersigned issued an Order Scheduling Fair Hearing by Telephone and Prehearing Instructions, setting the hearing for August 3, 2023, at 1:00 p.m. EST. *Id.*

6. Dr. Darling is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral level. Dr. Darling testified to the following at the Fair Hearing:

- a. The treatment plan was in excess of the patient’s needs and was not consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards, as determined by the Medicaid program.
- b. The first reviewer of the treatment plan determined that the treatment plan exhibited minimal progress. The second reviewer, a Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral level, determined that the treatment plan could be administered with fewer hours than were requested. The third reviewer, also a Board Certified Behavior Analyst at the doctoral level, determined that the treatment plan supported twenty (20)-hours of direct therapy services.
- c. The Behavior Analysis Certification Board’s practice guidelines manual determines an effective treatment plan, as well as how much time is allocated for each component of the treatment plan. The reviewers of the treatment plan used this manual to determine the allocation of necessary hours to effectively administer

the treatment plan. The reviewers determined that the treatment plan could be effectively administered with twenty (20)-hours of direct therapy per week, two (2)-hours of lead analyst oversight per week, and thirty (30)-minutes of parent training per week.

- d. The practice guidelines call for a minimum of a 1:10 ratio of lead analyst services to direct therapy – what’s recommended is 2:10. What was requested is less than 10% (208 units of code 97155 to 2,600 units of code 97153).
- e. Petitioner’s maladaptive behavior of [REDACTED] demonstrates an increase in behavior. This indicates ineffective treatment. Petitioner’s maladaptive behavior of [REDACTED] has remained steady, although ideally it would be decreasing. This behavior has reduced from baseline. Overall, Petitioner’s maladaptive behaviors are not worsening. The replacement behaviors do not demonstrate an increase in skills, but rather a maintenance of behavior. The plan does not address replacement behaviors to replace specific maladaptive behaviors, such as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]
- f. There is not enough therapy outlined in the treatment plan to continue services at the current rate. The plan is a maintenance plan, outlining slow progress. Petitioner will not gain any additional benefit from twenty-five (25)-hours per week of therapy.

7. [REDACTED] is the provider for Petitioner. [REDACTED] testified to the following at the Fair Hearing:

- a. The provider initially requested twenty-five (25)-hours. Hours were reduced to eighteen (18)-hours, and then increased at reconsideration to twenty (20)-hours. Twenty-five (25)-hours are needed due to the severity of Petitioner's behaviors.
- b. Petitioner [REDACTED], and the maladaptive [REDACTED] behavior can be a [REDACTED] [REDACTED] without constant supervision. [REDACTED] believes that twenty (20)-hours will not be enough time to implement proper supervision.
- c. Petitioner recently had surgery, which will increase problem behaviors for the next authorization. Environmental changes result in the variable data. Petitioner's [REDACTED] have increased. Petitioner's [REDACTED] has caused barriers to [REDACTED] [REDACTED]. The skill acquisition goals in the treatment plan are kept simple in order to prevent spikes in maladaptive behaviors, such as [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. Several skill acquisition goals have been mastered.
- d. Petitioner [REDACTED] than some students.

8. [REDACTED] is the [REDACTED] of Petitioner. [REDACTED] testified to the following at the Fair Hearing:

- a. Petitioner [REDACTED] due to [REDACTED] Petitioner [REDACTED].
- b. Petitioner becomes [REDACTED] when told not to do something. Petitioner has many [REDACTED] per week. Petitioner has [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], as well as [REDACTED].

- c. Petitioner’s skills do not last long-term, and Petitioner learns [REDACTED]. Reducing [REDACTED] hours will not result in improvement, and Petitioner’s [REDACTED] have worsened since the reduction of hours.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

9. The Agency’s Office of Fair Hearings has jurisdiction over the subject matter of this proceeding and the parties pursuant to section 409.285(2), Florida Statutes (2019). This order is the final administrative decision of AHCA under section 409.285(2)(a).

10. This hearing was held as a *de novo* proceeding pursuant to Fla. Admin. Code R. 59G-1.100(17)(b).

11. Because Respondent reduced a previously approved service, Fla. Admin. Code R. 59G-1.100(17)(g) assigns the burden of proof to the Respondent. The standard of proof in an administrative hearing is a preponderance of the evidence. The preponderance of the evidence standard requires proof by “the greater weight of the evidence” (Black’s Law Dictionary at 1201, 7th Ed.)

12. The Florida Medicaid Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy (October 2017) (“BA Policy”), incorporated by reference in Fla. Admin. Code. R. 59G-4.125, governs BA services available under Florida Medicaid. The BA Policy provides as follows:

1.0 Introduction

Behavior analysis (BA) services are highly structured interventions, strategies, and approaches provided to decrease maladaptive behaviors and increase or reinforce appropriate behaviors.

...

1.4.5 Medically Necessary/Medical Necessity

As defined in Rule 59G-1.010, F.A.C.

...

4.0 Coverage Information

4.1 General Criteria

Florida Medicaid covers services that meet all of the following:

- Are determined medically necessary
- Do no duplicate another service
- Meet the criteria as specified in this policy

4.2 Specific Criteria

Florida Medicaid covers the following BA services in accordance with the applicable Florida Medicaid fee schedule(s), or as specified in this policy:

4.2.1 Behavior Assessment

One per fiscal year, per recipient, when completed within 30 days of the start of the assessment.

4.2.2 Behavior Analysis

Up to 40 hours per week, per recipient, consisting of services identified on the recipient's behavior plan in order to reduce maladaptive behaviors and to restore the recipient to his or her best functional level. Services include:

- Implementing behavior analysis interventions, and monitoring and assessing the recipient's progress towards goals in the behavior plan
- Behavior analysis interventions, for example, discrete trial teaching, task analysis training, differential reinforcement, non-contingent reinforcement, conducting task analyses of complex responses, and teaching using chaining, prompting, fading, shaping, response cost, and extinction
- Training the recipient's family, caregiver(s), and other involved persons on the implementation of the behavior plan and intervention strategies (the recipient must be present when clinically appropriate)

...

4.3 Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnosis, and Treatment

As required by federal law, Florida Medicaid provides services to eligible recipients under the age of 21 years, if such services are medically necessary to correct or ameliorate a defect, a condition, or a physical or mental illness. Included are diagnostic services, treatment, equipment, supplies, and other measures described in sectioned 1905(a) of the Social Security Act, codified in Title 42 of the United States Code 1396d(a). As such, services for recipients under the age of 21 years exceeding the coverage described within this policy or the associated fee schedule may be approved, if medically necessary. For more information, please refer to Florida Medicaid's General Policies on authorization requirements.

13. Appendix 9.0 of the BA Policy provides Review Criteria for Behavior Analysis Services.

These Review Criteria state as follows:

Review Criteria for Behavior Analysis Services

Behavior analysis (BA) services are considered as either the treatment of choice or as an adjunct treatment modality for a variety of conditions and disorders where maladaptive behaviors are part of the recipient's clinical presentation,

including behavioral manifestations of diagnoses such as Autism Spectrum Disorder and other behavioral health conditions.

Critical Elements Necessary for ANY Type of Behavior Analysis Service:

The following critical elements **MUST** be satisfied to qualify for BA services:

- a. Eligibility – The recipient must meet all criteria for BA services as outlined in the Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy, Rule 59G-4.125, F.A.C.
- b. Medical necessity – The recipient must meet medical necessity criteria as outlined in Rule 59G-1.010, F.A.C.
- c. The recipient currently engages in maladaptive behaviors
- d. These maladaptive behaviors interfere with the recipient’s daily functioning

1. Criteria for Initial Behavior Analysis Assessment - BOTH of the following MUST be satisfied:

- a. **ALL** critical elements are met
- b. Provide submits a valid written physician’s order as stipulated in the Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy, Rule 59G-4.125, F.A.C.

2. Criteria for Behavior Analysis Services and Reassessments – ALL of the following MUST be satisfied:

- a. **ALL** critical elements are met
- b. An assessment or, if applicable, a reassessment, authored by a lead analyst, is provided. An assessment of the maladaptive behavior(s) is a necessary element of the process of identifying the frequency and magnitude of the behaviors as well as the variables associated with the occurrence of the maladaptive behavior(s). This helps in defining what are the functional consequences of the problem behavior(s) so that an adequate behavior plan can be implemented. This (re)assessment **MUST** include, at a minimum, **ALL** of the following:
 - i. A clear operational description of the maladaptive behavior(s)
 - ...
- c. A behavior plan authored or updated by a lead analyst. The behavior plan is the cornerstone of the delivery of behavior analysis services and it is based on the information obtained in the assessment. It proposes specific interventions to reduce or eliminate the maladaptive behavior. These interventions take into consideration the variables, both present before the behavior, as well as after the behavior, that influence the occurrence of the maladaptive behavior(s). This plan also includes replacement appropriate behaviors for the recipient to engage in instead of the maladaptive behaviors in order to obtain the same function. The plan must be detailed enough to warrant the requested

services and include mechanisms to monitor its effectiveness. This **MUST** include, at a minimum, **ALL** of the following:

- i. Observable and measurable descriptions of the maladaptive behavior(s)
- ii. Identified function of the maladaptive behavior(s) behavior as a result of the assessment or reassessment conducted
- iii. Goals and strategies for changing the maladaptive behavior(s)
- iv. Written detailed description of when, where, and how often these goals will be addressed and proposed strategies will be implemented
- v. System for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of the plan
- vi. Safety and crisis plan, if applicable
- vii. Summary and recommendations
- viii. Discharge criteria
- ix. Transition plan (if applicable)

NOTE: Although the assessment and behavior plan were addressed separately in section 2, both of them can be submitted as a single document.

3. Criteria for Continuation of Treatment at the Present Level and/or Using Current Methods: Providers must ensure that ALL of the following criteria are met to request continuation of treatments at the present level or using the current methods. If criteria for 3a is met, but criteria for 3b and/or 3c are not met, then a reduction of the treatment level and/or change of treatment methods may be warranted.

- a. ALL criteria listed in 2a, 2b, and 2c regarding critical elements, assessment or reassessment, and behavior plan, are met.
- b. The data provided must show evidence that the frequency of the maladaptive behavior(s) has decreased since the last review and, if not, that there is a modification of the behavior plan.
- c. The level of functional impairment justifies continuation of BA services. The reviewer utilizes the information provided below as a guide as it relates to the level of functional impairment as expressed through the following behaviors:
 - i. Safety – aggression, self-injury, property destruction, elopement
 - ii. Communication – problems with expressive/receptive language, poor understanding or use of non-verbal communications, stereotyped, repetitive language
 - iii. Self-stimulating, abnormal, inflexible, or intense preoccupations
 - iv. Self-care – difficulty recognizing risks or danger, grooming, eating, or toileting
 - v. Other – behaviors not identified above

14. States must provide Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment (“EPSDT”) services to Medicaid-eligible children under age 21 when requested under the Medicaid state plan. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 1396a(a)(43); 42 U.S.C. § 1396d(a)(4). According to 42 U.S.C. § 1396d(r)(5), EPSDT services mean, in relevant part, the following items and services:

Such other necessary health care, diagnostic services, treatment, and other measures described in subsection (a) of this section to correct or ameliorate defects and physical and mental illness and conditions discovered by the screen services, whether or not such services are covered under the state plan.

15. Petitioner is under age 21, and therefore EPSDT applies to ■■■ request for services. However, a state may place medical necessity limitations on EPSDT services. *See* 42 C.F.R. §§ 440.230(a), (b), (d). Fla. Stat. § 409.905(2) limits EPSDT services with a medical necessity standard:

The [Agency] shall pay for early and periodic screening and diagnosis of a recipient under age 21 to ascertain physical and mental problems and conditions and all services determined by the agency to be medically necessary for the treatment, correction, or amelioration of these problems and conditions, including personal care, private duty nursing, durable medical equipment, physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy, respiratory therapy, and immunizations.

16. The Definitions Policy, incorporated by reference in Fla. Admin. Code R. 59G-1.010, defines “Medically Necessary” or “Medical Necessity” as follows:

The medical or allied care, goods, or services furnished or ordered must meet the following conditions:

- Be necessary to protect life, to prevent significant illness or significant disability, or to alleviate pain
- Be individualized, specific, and consistent with symptoms or confirmed diagnosis of the illness or injury under treatment, and not in excess of the patient’s needs
- Be consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational

- Be reflective of the level of service that can be safely furnished, and for which no equally effective and more conservative or less costly treatment is available statewide
- Be furnished in a manner not primarily intended for the convenience of the recipient, the recipient’s caretaker, or the provider

The fact that a provider has prescribed, recommended, or approved medical or allied care, goods, or services does not, in itself, make such care, goods or services medically necessary or a medical necessity or a covered service.

17. The Florida Medicaid Authorization Requirements Policy (“Authorization Policy”), incorporated by reference in Fla. Admin. Code R. 59G-1.053, provides as follows:

3.2.1 Continued Authorization Requests

The QIO shall not deny or reduce the amount, frequency, or duration of a service that is already being provided, unless:

- The reduction is to correct for factual error or omissions in prior certifications.
- There is a documented improvement in the recipient’s medical condition.
- There is a documented change in the recipient’s circumstances.
- The reviewing physician determines the recipient will not gain any additional benefit by continuing services at the current level.

18. In the instant case, Respondent reduced Petitioner’s ABA services. See ¶ 3. In the NOO dated April 12, 2023, Respondent explained that continuing services at the prior level was not medically necessary, specifically, that it did not meet the requirement that services must be “individualized, specific, and consistent with symptoms or confirmed diagnosis of the illness under treatment, and not in excess of the patient’s needs.” *Id.* Respondent further explained that “the frequency, intensity, or severity of the recipient’s maladaptive behaviors does not justify the requested units of services. The requested units of BA services are in excess of medical necessity.” *Id.*

19. As provided by the EPSDT requirements, the recipient must meet the medical necessity criteria as outlined in Fla. Admin. Code R. 59G-1.010. As provided in section 2.83 of the Definitions Policy, a component of medical necessity is that services must be “individualized, specific, and consistent with symptoms or confirmed diagnosis of the illness under treatment, and not in excess of the patient’s needs.” Dr. Darling testified that two (2) Board Certified Behavior Analysts at the doctoral level determined that the treatment plan can be effectively implemented with twenty (20)-hours of services. *See* ¶ 6. Dr. Darling also described the treatment plan as a maintenance plan that has outlined slow progress for Petitioner, as well as increasing maladaptive behavior. *Id.* Moreover, Dr. Darling explained that the requested units of services is not within the practice guidelines for ABA treatment, as lead analyst services are not administered at a 1:10 ratio with therapy services. *Id.* As experts within the field of behavior analysis have determined that the amount of therapy outlined in the treatment plan does not warrant the requested hours, the record shows that Petitioner will not gain any additional benefit by continuing services at the current level.

20. As QIO for the Agency, eQHealth is authorized to terminate services when “reviewing physician determines the recipient will not gain any additional benefit by continuing services at the current level.” *See* ¶ 17. As discussed, *supra* ¶ 19, the treatment plan can be properly administered with twenty (20)-hours of services.


21. Upon consideration of the testimony provided, evidence submitted, and applicable polices, the undersigned concludes that Respondent proved by a preponderance of the evidence that the reduction of ABA services was necessary. Looking at all the evidence relevant to the particular needs of Petitioner, Respondent has demonstrated that the previously authorized

services, based on the treatment plan at issue in this case, are not necessary to correct or ameliorate a defect or a physical and mental illness or condition. Accordingly, Respondent proved by a preponderance of the evidence that Respondent's reduction of ABA services was correct.

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED AND ADJUDGED THAT:

Respondent's reduction of ABA services is **AFFIRMED**. Petitioner's appeal based on Respondent's reduction is **DENIED**.

DONE and ORDERED this 5th day of September, 2023, in Tallahassee, Leon County, Florida.

 Joseph Mabry
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JOSEPH MABRY, Hearing Officer
Agency for Health Care Administration
Office of Fair Hearings
2727 Mahan Drive, Mail Stop # 11
Tallahassee, FL 32308-5407

NOTICE OF A RIGHT TO JUDICIAL REVIEW

A PARTY WHO IS ADVERSELY AFFECTED BY THIS FINAL ORDER IS ENTITLED TO JUDICIAL REVIEW, WHICH SHALL BE INSTITUTED BY FILING THE ORIGINAL NOTICE OF APPEAL WITH THE AGENCY CLERK OF AHCA, AND A COPY, ALONG WITH THE FILING FEE PRESCRIBED BY LAW, WITH THE DISTRICT COURT OF APPEAL IN THE APPELLATE DISTRICT WHERE THE AGENCY MAINTAINS ITS HEADQUARTERS OR WHERE A PARTY RESIDES. REVIEW PROCEEDINGS SHALL BE CONDUCTED IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE FLORIDA APPELLATE RULES. THE NOTICE OF APPEAL MUST BE FILED WITHIN 30 DAYS OF THE RENDITION OF THE ORDER TO BE REVIEWED.

Copies Furnished To:

[REDACTED]

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