



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

FILED

Nov 20, 2023, 8:46 am

OFFICE OF FAIR HEARINGS

[REDACTED]

PETITIONER,

AHCA Case No.: 23-FH2082

vs.

AGENCY FOR HEALTH CARE
ADMINISTRATION,

RESPONDENT.

_____ /

FINAL ORDER

Pursuant to notice, the undersigned convened a telephonic Fair Hearing on the instant case on October 18, 2023, at 9:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time (“EST”).

APPEARANCES

For the Petitioner:

[REDACTED]

Petitioner’s Authorized Representative

For the Respondent:

Diana Hearod
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. The following attended as witnesses for Petitioner: [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].

Diana Hearod ("Ms. Hearod"), Medical/Health Care Program Analyst for the Agency for Health Care Administration ("Agency" or "AHCA"), appeared on behalf of Respondent. Dr. David Bicard ("Dr. Bicard"), Board Certified Behavior Analyst and Director of Clinical Operations for eQHealth Solutions Inc. ("eQHealth"), appeared as a witness for Respondent.

Ethan, interpreter number 383812, appeared to offer translation services for the Petitioner.

Petitioner did not introduce any exhibits at the hearing. Prior to the hearing, Respondent sent to the Office of Fair Hearings and Petitioner a two-hundred and eighty-seven (287)-page evidence packet and a forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet. The two-hundred and eighty-seven (287)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings' document management system as the file titles "[REDACTED] FH 10.18.2023 1-171.pdf" and "[REDACTED] FH 10.18.2023 172-287.pdf". The forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings' document management system as the file title "23-FH2082_B A_AHCA Evidence_49 pgs_[PETITIONER].pdf". Absent an objection from the Petitioner, the undersigned admitted the two-hundred and eighty-seven (287)-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]. See page 21 of RCE 1. Petitioner is diagnosed with [REDACTED]. *Id.*

3. Petitioner requested continuation of BA services; specifically, 3,120 units of code 97153; 208 units of code 97155; and 208 units of code 97156. In a Notice of Outcome (“NOO”), dated July 27, 2023, Respondent approved 2,496 units of code 97153; 208 units of code 97155; and 156 units of 97156, but denied the remaining units. *Id.* at 28. 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 28 – 29 of RCE 1.

4. Petitioner requested reconsideration of the Respondent’s decision. In a Notice of Reconsideration Determination (“NRD”), dated August 25, 2023, Respondent upheld its decision.

Id. at 40 – 41. The NRD explained the basis for the decision as follows:

PR Recon Determination: At reconsideration all documents were carefully reviewed. The provider did not submit any new documentation that supports the medical necessity of this request. According to The Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy, (page 6, 9.0 c-d) the recipient of ABA therapy services must engage in maladaptive behavior that interferes with the recipient's daily functioning. Although the recipient is engaging in topographies of maladaptive behaviors, the frequency and intensity of the maladaptive do not support the request for services. This reconsideration request has been reviewed, reconsidered and the partial denial is upheld.

...

Pages 40 – 41 of RCE 1.

5. On August 22, 2023, Petitioner requested a Fair Hearing to challenge the reduction of ABA services. *Id.* at 8. On September 13, 2023, the undersigned issued an Order Scheduling Fair Hearing by Telephone and Prehearing Instructions, setting the hearing for October 18, 2023, at 9:00 a.m. EST. *Id.*

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

- a. Petitioner has participated in BA services with the current provider since [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at an extremely high intensity. The requested units were in excess of medical necessity based on the medical necessity criteria and Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy.
- b. The first level reviewer of the treatment plan noted that the maladaptive behavior definitions warrant further investigation, and the maladaptive behaviors and data do not warrant the number of hours requested. *See* page 23 of RCE 1. The request was referred to second level review. The second level reviewer is a Board Certified Behavior Analyst with a doctorate degree and experience in the field. The second level reviewer independently reviewed the treatment plan and applied medical

necessity criteria and specifications in the Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy. The reviewer determined that the request was in excess of medical necessity. The provider requested reconsideration, and the request was reviewed by a different Board Certified Behavior Analyst. The provider did not submit any new documentation in support of the request, but rather submitted a few paragraphs explaining the need for services. The reduction was upheld.

- c. The provider noted in the treatment plan that, during Petitioner's time in ABA therapy, significant progress has been observed. *Id.* at 195. Other information in the treatment plan indicates that Petitioner is [REDACTED]. The provider noted that some maladaptive behaviors were mastered this semester, as well as some replacement behaviors. *Id.* at 201.
- d. Many maladaptive behaviors have been identified in the treatment plan, some of which are overlapping. *Id.* at 206-208. This means that behaviors may occur once, but are counted twice. For example, [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] are behaviors that overlap. *Id.* at 207-208. [REDACTED], [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] are also overlapping behaviors. *Id.* at 206-208. [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] also overlap. *Id.* at 206-207. These are the same behaviors, but the provider has identified more labels to make it appear that Petitioner is engaging in more behaviors than [REDACTED] is. The provider has also taken the common behavior of [REDACTED] and turned it into a pathology, referring to it as [REDACTED]. *Id.* at 208. The data for all maladaptive behaviors in the treatment plan do not show

progress. *Id.* at 221-225. Most maladaptive behaviors occur at the same level as in the previous authorization period. *Id.*

e. The replacement behavior of [REDACTED] [REDACTED] is occurring at a low level and slowly increasing. *Id.* at 267. Dr. Bicard stated this skill is easy to teach and the provider should have implemented an intervention long ago. Dr. Bicard also stated it is not clear why Petitioner cannot [REDACTED] at a higher level, as other information in the behavior plan indicates [REDACTED] can do this. *Id.* at 268. Most other replacement behaviors occur at age-typical levels. *Id.* at 267-273. Petitioner has met age-appropriate goals for the majority of behaviors [REDACTED] is working on.

f. There was a reduction of parent training units, and Dr. Bicard stated it is unclear how the parent training goals are being implemented. Dr. Bicard described the goals as vague, unmeasurable, and noncompliant with minimum quality standards within the field of behavior analysis. Dr. Bicard stated the goals for data collection can be taught extremely quickly. *Id.* at 231-232. The goals of following recommended interventions, providing reinforcement in accordance with the treatment plan, and appropriate implementation of programs are the same goal. *Id.* at 232-233. The goal of describing an incident in which a replacement behavior occurred does not meet medical necessity criteria. *Id.* at 233.

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

- a. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner’s neurologist suggested that Petitioner participate in ABA therapy. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner needs the services to function. [REDACTED] stated that, after therapy, some improvements have occurred.
- b. Petitioner has [REDACTED] at school. [REDACTED] stated that issues occur apart from what is recorded in the assessment.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

8. 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).

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

10. 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.)

11. 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.

12. 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

13. 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.

14. Petitioner is under age 21, and therefore EPSDT applies to [REDACTED] 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.

15. 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.

16. 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.

17. In the instant case, Respondent reduced Petitioner's ABA services. See ¶ 3. In the NOO dated July 27, 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 intensity of Petitioner's maladaptive behaviors "does not justify the requested units of services." *Id.*

18. 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.” As shown by the record, the Board Certified Behavior Analyst who first reviewed the treatment plan determined that the maladaptive behavior definitions in the treatment plan warranted further investigation, as well as that the maladaptive behaviors and data did not warrant the number of hours requested. See ¶ 6. In support of this assertion, Dr. Bicard explained that not only are Petitioner’s maladaptive behaviors not improving, with frequencies being similar to those of the previous authorization period, but there are significantly fewer maladaptive behaviors in the behavior plan than there appear to be due to overlapping behavioral definitions. *Id.* Dr. Bicard also explained that other behaviors in the plan are typically occurring behaviors which the provider has described as pathologies, such as [REDACTED]. *Id.* As there are fewer maladaptive behaviors under treatment than there appear to be, fewer hours are warranted. Dr. Bicard also identified significant overlap among the parent training goals in the treatment plan, indicating that fewer hours are warranted for these services as well. *Id.* Dr. Bicard also testified that Petitioner has met age-appropriate goals for most of [REDACTED] replacement behaviors. *Id.* In all, Dr. Bicard provided credible testimony that continuing services at the prior level was “in excess of the patient’s needs”.

19. As QIO for the Agency, eQHealth is authorized to reduce services when “the reviewing physician determines the recipient will not gain any additional benefit by continuing services at the current level.” See ¶ 16. As discussed, *supra* ¶ 18, Petitioner has not made progress in


reducing ■■■■maladaptive behaviors, nor does the treatment plan accurately represent the number of behaviors being treated. Here, Petitioner's lack of improvement and the insufficiencies of the treatment plan are well documented.

20. 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 20th day of November, 2023, in Tallahassee, Leon County, Florida.

 Joseph Mabry
23-FH2082
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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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