



FILED

Dec 07, 2023, 8:42 am

OFFICE OF FAIR HEARINGS

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

[REDACTED]

PETITIONER,

AHCA Case No.: 23-FH2214

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 25, 2023, at 9:00 a.m. Eastern Standard Time ("EST").

APPEARANCES

For the Petitioner:

[REDACTED]

Petitioner's Authorized Representative

For the Respondent:

Doris Rivera

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 terminate 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.

Doris Rivera (“Ms. Rivera”), 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.

Milena, interpreter number 358934, 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 (280)-page evidence packet and a forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet. The two-hundred and eighty (280)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings’ document management system as the file titles “[REDACTED] FH 10.25.2023 1-138.pdf” and “[REDACTED] FH 10.25.2023 139-280.pdf”. The forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings’ document management system as the file title “23-FH2214 – AHCA evidence BA 49 pgs.pdf”. Absent an objection from the Petitioner, the undersigned admitted the two-hundred and eighty (280)-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 16 of RCE 1. Petitioner is diagnosed with [REDACTED]. *Id.*

3. Petitioner requested continuation of BA services; specifically, 2,600 units of code 97153; 360 units of code 97155; and 104 units of code 97156. In a Notice of Outcome (“NOO”), dated August 17, 2023, Respondent terminated Petitioner’s ABA services. *Id.* at 23. The NOO explained the basis for the termination 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 the Florida Medicaid State Plan (Appendix 9.3.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. The recommendations for procedural modifications include: additions/changes to treatment plan to impact behaviors targeted for reduction. Procedural modifications should include one or more of the following: antecedent manipulation modifications, modifications of prompting procedures used in acquisition, modifications in consequence-based strategies- - ones that either reduce maladaptive behavior or reinforce replacement behavior (e.g., manipulation of reinforcement schedules, switch to a different decelerative procedure), or if lack of progress was due to therapist error (e.g., poor data collection or poor training on intervention methods), how you will address human error. The information submitted does not meet standards of care within the field of behavior analysis. This request is denied.

...

Pages 23 – 24 of RCE 1.

4. Petitioner requested reconsideration of the Respondent’s decision. In a Notice of Reconsideration Determination (“NRD”), dated September 11, 2023, Respondent upheld its decision. *Id.* at 35. The NRD explained the basis for the decision as follows:

The reason for the denial is that the services are not medically necessary as defined in 59G-1.010, Florida Administrative Code. Specifically, the 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.
Consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational.

...

PR Recon Determination: At reconsideration all documents were carefully reviewed. The recipient has been in services since [REDACTED] and the recipient shows no progress over the past two authorizations. According to the Florida Medicaid State Plan (Appendix 9.3.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. The recommendations for procedural modifications include: additions/changes to treatment plan to impact behaviors targeted for reduction. Procedural modifications should include one or more of the following: antecedent manipulation modifications, modifications of prompting procedures used in acquisition, modifications in consequence-based strategies - ones that either reduce maladaptive behavior or reinforce replacement behavior (e.g., manipulation of reinforcement schedules, switch to a different decelerative procedure), or if lack of progress was due to therapist error (e.g., poor data collection or poor training on intervention methods), how the provider will address human error. The recommendations are insufficient to support continued care. This reconsideration request has been reviewed, reconsidered and the denial is upheld.

...

Page 36 of RCE 1.

5. On September 8, 2023, Petitioner requested a Fair Hearing to challenge the termination of ABA services. *Id.* at 8. On September 26, 2023, the undersigned issued an Order Scheduling Fair Hearing by Telephone and Prehearing Instructions, setting the hearing for October 25, 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 this provider since [REDACTED], and Petitioner is still working on the same goals as [REDACTED] was [REDACTED] years ago without progress. This does not meet standards of care within the field of ABA

according to the Behavior Analysis Services Coverage Policy. The provider did not make any changes to treatment to facilitate Petitioner's progress, and the quality of care is below standard.

- b. Given the provider's description of Petitioner's [REDACTED], it is unclear how Petitioner can engage in [REDACTED], although this is a maladaptive behavior identified by the provider. See pages 221 and 222 of RCE 1. The behaviors of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED] overlap, as do the behaviors of [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED]. *Id.* at 222-223. After [REDACTED] years of treatment with this provider, the provider has identified a new, potentially dangerous, maladaptive behavior of [REDACTED] and [REDACTED], which is indicative of ineffective treatment. *Id.* at 223. Dr. Bicard explained that if Petitioner is engaging in new and more severe maladaptive behaviors while in ABA therapy, then [REDACTED] is moving backwards in [REDACTED] treatment.
- c. Most of Petitioner's maladaptive behaviors exhibit the pattern of worsening throughout the authorization, and then returning to a level similar to that at the beginning of the authorization. *Id.* at 235. Overall, the behaviors are not improving. These behaviors have been under treatment for [REDACTED] years and should therefore be occurring at much lower levels, if at all. [REDACTED] with this provider occurs [REDACTED] of the time, indicating ineffective treatment. *Id.* at 239. Dr. Bicard stated this behavior is easy to treat and goes away after the first couple months of therapy. The provider has not intervened, as indicated by vertical lines on the graph, nor made changes to treatment.

d. Dr. Bicard asserted there is no reason that the identified replacement behaviors should not have been learned a while ago. There is no progress in response to treatment for more than one (1) authorization period. The behavior of [REDACTED] contains unclear goals. *Id.* at 248. The behavior [REDACTED] is a behavior worked on with much lower functioning recipients and should have been mastered long ago. *Id.* at 250. Overall, all replacement data are flat and around [REDACTED], indicating no improvement. *Id.* at 243-262. The provider has not identified significant changes to the plan that will improve Petitioner's behavior. Petitioner may seek effective therapy from a different provider.

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

a. [REDACTED] stated there have been familial issues which have negatively affected Petitioner. [REDACTED] stated [REDACTED] traveled out of town for work, and that Petitioner began to engage in several maladaptive behaviors that [REDACTED] had already overcome.

b. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner has improved by [REDACTED] in all short term objectives. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner's grades have improved in school, and Petitioner is able to follow [REDACTED] teacher's instructions. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner's [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED] behaviors have significantly decreased, and Petitioner can now interact with peers. Petitioner attends [REDACTED] and can [REDACTED].

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 terminated 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 not 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 his 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 terminated Petitioner’s ABA services. *See* ¶ 3. In the NOO dated August 17, 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 information submitted does not meet standards of care within the field of behavior analysis.” *Id.* Lastly, in the NRD, the Respondent further explained that the services did not meet the requirement that services be “consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational. *See* ¶ 4.

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 “consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational.” As shown by the record, the reviewers of the treatment plan indicated that “the recipient has been in services since [REDACTED] and the recipient shows no progress over the past two authorizations.” See ¶ 4. In support of this assertion, Dr. Bicard provided credible testimony that the provider has not adequately changed the treatment plan in response to Petitioner’s lack of progress. See ¶ 6. Indicating a lack of progress, Dr. Bicard explained that Petitioner is still working on the same goals as [REDACTED] was [REDACTED] years ago. *Id.* Dr. Bicard identified a pattern within the data of the behaviors worsening throughout the authorization period, and then returning to levels similar to those at the beginning of the authorization, further demonstrating a lack of improvement. *Id.* Dr. Bicard explained that this was not within the standards of care within the field of ABA. After [REDACTED] years, Dr. Bicard stated these behaviors should be occurring at much lower levels or not at all, particularly the behaviors that Dr. Bicard described as being easy for the provider to treat. *Id.* Indicating ineffective treatment, Dr. Bicard also noted that, after [REDACTED] years of treatment with this provider, the provider has identified a new, potentially dangerous, maladaptive behavior. *Id.* There is also overlap in the behavioral definitions in the plan. *Id.* The provider did not make any changes to treatment or interventions on the graphs to facilitate Petitioner’s progress. *Id.* As the provider has not implemented interventions tailored to Petitioner’s needs, the treatment plan is not “individualized, specific, and consistent” with Petitioner’s treatment needs. Furthermore, as the treatment plan lacks adequate progress and intervention, the treatment plan is not

“consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards.” As such, Respondent demonstrated that it was not medically necessary to continue services with the current provider.


19. As QIO for the Agency, eQHealth is authorized to terminate 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 significant progress in reducing [REDACTED] maladaptive behaviors, nor in improving [REDACTED] replacement behaviors after [REDACTED] years of therapy with this provider. Here, Petitioner’s lack of improvement and the provider’s lack of intervention 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 termination 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 termination of ABA services was correct.

IT IS HEREBY ORDERED AND ADJUDGED THAT:

Respondent’s termination of ABA services is **AFFIRMED**. Petitioner’s appeal based on Respondent’s termination is **DENIED**.

DONE and ORDERED this 7th day of December, 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]
[REDACTED]
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**AHCA Medicaid Hearing Unit
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