



FILED

Dec 11, 2023, 8:56 am

OFFICE OF FAIR HEARINGS

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

[REDACTED]

PETITIONER,

AHCA Case No.: 23-FH2300

vs.

**AGENCY FOR HEALTH CARE
ADMINISTRATION,**

RESPONDENT.

_____ /

FINAL ORDER

Pursuant to notice, the undersigned convened a telephonic Fair Hearing on the instant case on November 9, 2023, at 1:02 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (“EST”).

APPEARANCES

For the Petitioner:

[REDACTED]

Petitioner’s Authorized Representative

For the Respondent:

Suzanne Chillari
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. Petitioner was present for the hearing but did not participate.

Suzanne Chillari ("Ms. Chillari"), Medical/Health Care Program Analyst 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.

Tonya, interpreter number 386890, 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 one-hundred and sixty-six (166)-page evidence packet and a forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet. The one-hundred and sixty-six (166)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings' document management system as the file title "[REDACTED] FH 11.09.2023.pdf". The forty-nine (49)-page evidence packet appears in the Office of Fair Hearings' document management system as the file title "Agency Evidence Legal Authorities 23-FH2300.pdf". Absent an objection from the Petitioner, the undersigned admitted the one-hundred and sixty-six (166)-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, 2,600 units of code 97153; 208 units of code 97155; and 208 units of code 97156. *Id.* at 28. In a Notice of Outcome (“NOO”), dated August 29, 2023, Respondent terminated Petitioner’s ABA services. The NOO explained the basis for the termination as follows:

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

Consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational.
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 provider has not addressed the lack of progress during the last observation period and did not amend the treatment plan in relation to the lack of progress. The information submitted does not meet standards of care within the field of behavior analysis. This request is denied.

...

Pages 28 – 29 of RCE 1.

4. Petitioner requested reconsideration of the Respondent’s decision. In a Notice of Reconsideration Determination (“NRD”), dated September 15, 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. 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.

...

Pages 40 – 41 of RCE 1.

5. On September 11, 2023, Petitioner requested a Fair Hearing to challenge the termination of ABA services. *Id.* at 8. On October 12, 2023, the undersigned issued an Order Scheduling Fair Hearing by Telephone and Prehearing Instructions, setting the hearing for November 9, 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 instant treatment plan was not consistent with the symptoms of Petitioner’s confirmed diagnosis and was in excess of Petitioner’s needs. The treatment plan

was also not consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards, nor was it reflective of the level of service that can be safely furnished and for which no equally effective and more conservative treatment is available statewide. Services were denied because, based on the report submitted, services have been ineffective.

- b. The submitted treatment plan was reviewed by three (3) Board Certified Behavior Analysts to determine if treatment should be approved based on the progress made. The second reviewer determined that there had not been adequate progress based on the data submitted by the provider. Based on the progress in the treatment plan, the provider had not made the necessary changes to the plan to facilitate Petitioner's progression, and services were denied. The provider then made some changes to the plan and requested reconsideration. The third reviewer determined that the recommendations were insufficient to support continued care, and the denial was upheld. The treatment plan did not meet accepted professional medical standards and did not exhibit the progress necessary to continue services, which resulted in the denial.
- c. Petitioner has participated in twenty-five (25)-hours per week of intensive BA therapy for [REDACTED]. Petitioner is diagnosed with [REDACTED] and [REDACTED]. See page 21 of RCE 1. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the American Medical Association, there are several other therapies apart from ABA effective for treating Petitioner's conditions. The three (3) reviewers used this information

from relevant medical communities to determine whether the treatment plan met medical necessity and treatment standards.

- d. Visual interpretation of the graphs is the primary measure of effective ABA therapy. In the second treatment plan submitted, Petitioner's maladaptive behavior of bolting exhibits a slow decrease in frequency. *Id.* at 116. The plan does not demonstrate the aggressive treatment expected for such a dangerous behavior. The behavior of [REDACTED] also exhibits a slow decrease in frequency, but there is not a significant decrease. *Id.* The behavior of [REDACTED] demonstrates a steady, very slow decrease, and the behavior still occurs between [REDACTED] times per week. *Id.* at 117. Some of Petitioner's maladaptive behaviors, such as [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and [REDACTED], are dangerous, and most occur multiple times per day and per week. There is no indication that the provider made any changes to treatment.
- e. After [REDACTED] of treatment and twenty-five (25) hours of intensive therapy per week, most of Petitioner's replacement behaviors are not occurring at higher than fifty percent (50%). *Id.* at 122. There has been a slow increase in the frequency of these behaviors, but Dr. Darling asserted that the research in ABA for mastery of skills to increase indicates that each objective should be reached within three (3) to five (5) sessions or days. The treatment plan is designed to attain a ten percent (10%) increase per month in replacement behaviors. *Id.* at 138. Research in the field shows that the plan should be designed to meet goals in three (3) to

five (5) days. This plan aims for very slow progress, which is not beneficial to Petitioner. Based on the slow and negligible progress made after [REDACTED] of intensive treatment for twenty-five (25) hours per week, the treatment plan does not meet the standards of applied behavior analysis.

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

- a. [REDACTED] stated [REDACTED] has seen Petitioner's progress, as well as that Petitioner exhibits more progress in some areas than in others.
- b. [REDACTED] stated Petitioner does need therapy and that therapy has been helpful.

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 29, 2023, Respondent explained that continuing services at the prior level was not

medically necessary, specifically, that it did not meet the requirements that services must be “consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational”, as well as “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.*

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, two components of medical necessity are that services must be “consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards as determined by the Medicaid program, and not experimental or investigational”, as well as “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, Petitioner has participated in BA services for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] at a high intensity. See ¶ 6. Dr. Darling described Petitioner’s progress as “slow and negligible”, considering the length of time and intensity of treatment. *Id.* Dr. Darling testified that the treatment plan lacks the aggressive treatment expected to address Petitioner’s more dangerous maladaptive behaviors, as well as that there is no indication that the provider has made any changes to treatment to facilitate the reduction in frequency of the maladaptive behaviors, which still occur multiple times per day and per week. *Id.* Furthermore, most of Petitioner’s replacement behaviors are occurring below fifty percent (50%) after [REDACTED] [REDACTED] of intensive treatment. *Id.* Dr. Darling further explained that the treatment plan is designed to produce slow progress, which does not comply with standards in the field of ABA. *Id.* The

treatment plan is designed to progress by ten percent (10%) per month, which is contrary to research in ABA which shows that the plan should be designed to meet goals in three (3) to five (5) days. *Id.* As Dr. Darling explained that the slow progress outlined in the treatment plan does not meet standards within the field of ABA, the treatment plan is not “consistent with generally accepted professional medical standards.” Furthermore, as Dr. Darling testified that the slow progress was not beneficial to Petitioner’s progression, the treatment plan was also not “individualized, specific, and consistent” with Petitioner’s diagnoses and treatment needs. As such, Respondent demonstrated that it is not medically necessary to continue ABA services with this 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 made very slow progress in reducing [REDACTED] maladaptive behaviors and improving [REDACTED] replacement behaviors over the past [REDACTED] of intensive treatment, and the slow progress outlined by the treatment plan is not beneficial to Petitioner’s improvement.

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 11th 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:



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