

**REGULAR MEETING OF
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION
MINUTES**

**TUESDAY, APRIL 14, 2020
9 AM**

Virtual Meeting - REVISED

Members Present: Bob Galan, Chair; Beth Bass, Claudia Coplen, Pete Powell, Ken Bernhard, Lee Bollert, and Yvonne Senturia

Staff: Elaine Daignault, Susan Stefenson, Kristen Witt, and Sue Pfister

Guests: Jim Marpe, First Selectman, Melissa Kane, Second Selectwoman

Elaine updated commission members and guests:

Town Hall/Senior Center are closed to the public. DHS is working in shifts, two staff members are in Room 200 and two to three are working at the Center. All work phones are forwarded to the responsible staff member. Elaine hosts frequent Zoom meetings with staff.

Sue Pfister gave update about the Senior Center. It is in fast gear with virtual learning within 24 hours of closing. She applauded staff, instructors, and the seniors (not all are tech savvy; Volunteers from Staples High School help to get them on board.) There were more than 500 clicks on the Center's UTube channel for classes.

The Food Fund Drive with the help of Dan Levinson, Dan Woog, and Miggs Burroughs was a tremendous success as it touched on food and security. Home delivered meals for vulnerable seniors at risk are being delivered Mon. Wed., and Fri. Staggered shifts are answering calls and making wellness calls. Sue P. also mentioned how SWCAA has arranged for Center to receive 50 frozen meals for the curbside pickup for her congregate meal participants. No charge!

Elaine thanked her staff for their hard work and support with the Food Fund and managing the transition during these uncertain times.

Kristen Witt gave an update on Room 200/Social Services efforts. Seniors and families are feeling the insecurity, job loss, health issues, need counseling for anxiety and fear. She commented seniors have shown resilience and are managing the current conditions while younger families continue to struggle with working, childcare and distance learning. With the help from the Westport Woman's Club food pantry and grocery gift cards, residents are able to stock up on perishables. Continued efforts in providing resources for all to access necessities. DHS has established an online resource guide for residents including procurement of medications, unemployment and other basic needs. Westport has shown great resiliency and DHS is pleased to have received so much community support in helping those in need.

Susan Stefenson gave an overview of the VITA Virtual Platform for Free Tax Filing which continues to operate thanks to the many VITA volunteers led by Mark Spivack to implement the VITA Online Tax Filing program. Residents can file their taxes electronically. They are put in touch with a counselor with a follow up phone call, then passed to a quality reviewer. The program is going over very well. For the residents unable to take advantage of this program online; they are working on providing other options once things quiet down.

Current conditions have impacted many families with job loss; **seniors not as affected, on the whole they have consistent income.** Majority of inquiries are about unemployment, stimulus checks, and food. Staff provides validation and help to direct them through the resources.

Jim Marpe thanked DHS staff, Commission, and volunteers. He commented how emergencies in the past were weather-related and only last a couple of days. This current condition is a big one for DHS. There is a different mindset and behavior now and in the future. DHS has many connections with the community. Seniors have lived through challenging events before.

DHS Other Programs and Community Collaborations:

Elaine thanked residents Dan Levinson, Mark Spivack, Miggs Boroughs, & Dan Woog for their support with programs that evolved as a result of isolation.

DHS is working with the schools to offer fresh meals to the Free and Reduced School Lunch participants at SHS using Rotarian volunteers. The Home Delivered Meal volunteers are back.

Susan S. - DHS applied for the Fairfield Community Foundation for addl. energy/rent assistance funding. The forgiveness period ends May 1. Just postponing the inevitable. It is a reality, and a giant step backward for many.

Elaine - Salvation Army is delivering 30 food boxes to go along with the free and reduced meals at SHS. Local caterers will add hot meals to this as well. Commented that 4.2% of residents meet income poverty limit. These numbers will now change during this pandemic. Every \$ counts! Will close down the Food Fund fundraiser on the Town's website but still accepting donations as families will need it.

Elaine mentioned Home's with Hope shifted all their residents to isolate in local hotels. Food service is still being provided – lunch and dinner curbside. The WWC food pantry has been given permission to drop off groceries at resident's driveways. DHS is mailing out gift cards.

The public school's nurses have offered to make calls to vulnerable clients. They are trained and can understand medication inquiries.

What can the Human Services Commission do?

The Call Reassurance Program will soon become a volunteer based program where commissioners can help. Westporters can help in various ways with making of masks, food on the frontline, and ways to connect with isolated seniors. Selectwoman Melissa Kane spoke of community member Navida Griefenberger, a Westporter worked with DHS to establish a program called "Hello Neighbor" to offering a neighborhood call program to build community connections and reduce isolation. Together with Navida, DHS is working with the police department to safely vet community members before matching them and will offer virtual trainings to volunteers while

we accept those who would like to receive a phone call. Many commissioners expressed interest in volunteering for the program.

Questions: What is the best way to vet? Train, use online webinar orientation. Create a PR campaign, flyers, post cards, ways to reach out to people. There is a great potential to build a community connection beyond the pandemic. Find residents who are under the radar. Elaine mentioned instilling a caller "code" to allow the receiver to know it is not a scam. Bob Galan will spread the word to the Rotary organizations. Pete Powell will get it out to the clergy. Claudia Coplen to inform the Library and League of Women Voter volunteers. Ken Bernhard commented program needs parameters for volunteers. What you need and for how long?

Yvonne Senturia questioned vetting process. Suggested a telephone conversation with volunteer. Find out if they are patient. Get the criteria for training; make up a phone module. Worries about the violation and privacy. Focus on vetting and training.

Elaine mentioned there is a vetting process already in place with the Mentor program. Possible police or DCF check to ensure safety and confidentiality. Focus on strengthening the already established program.

Elaine – There is a lot of trust building, work on structure and boundaries, and then she will share with HSC

Elaine – Board of Finance votes on DHS budget tomorrow night and then it is on its way to the RTM. It is the hope to get funding on improving the Client Track database request, the approval of the "My Senior Center" program, and the DHS request for a part-time social worker who will deal with the overflow. The Town administration has been supportive of the DHS requests and hopes for a favorable ruling.

DHS continues to work on online programs for youth and families.

Bob Galan thanks DHS. He offered the HSC services if they can help. Also thanked Jim Marpe for his timely and efficient communication through this pandemic.

Ken Bernhard commented how proud he was of Elaine and Jim and of the community.

Lee Bollert – just came back from the West Coast; Westport communication is so much better and clearer.

Bob Galan adjourned the meeting at 10:07AM.