

December 4, 2023

Commission for Senior Services

Regular Meeting Minutes, November 20, 2023

Attendance: Sarah Adair, Claudia Coplen, Diana (Wendy) Kleros, Doris Levinson, Merle Spiegel

Staff: Elaine Daignault, Wendy Petty, Kristen Witt, Holly Betts, Ryan Balis (Human Services)

Guest: Harris Falk

Absent: Teri Klein, Bob Fox

Commission Co-Chair Wendy Kleros called the meeting to order, and the minutes from the June 12th meeting were approved. Ryan Balis, a social worker for Human Services, was introduced. There were no public comments on non-agenda items. The group discussed how long it had been between Commission meetings, resulting from a summer hiatus followed by two special meetings for all Human Services Commissions. After some discussion the topic was tabled since this situation was unlikely to recur.

Staff reports:

- Elaine Daignault, Human Services Director, reported that her staff was particularly busy at this time of year, handling the Energy Assistance Program and various Thanksgiving-related activities. The Women's Club distributes gift cards to needy families at Thanksgiving and to individuals at Chanukah and Christmas. Other organizations, including Coleytown Middle School students and the Temple Israel Pre-School, distribute turkeys and pies. Human Services partners with the Westport Housing Authority and Homes with Hope in providing home-based meals. The Open Door Shelter in Norwalk is holding a Thanksgiving meal, and 100 seniors are registered for each of two sittings at the Senior Center's Thanksgiving luncheon, to be held on November 21. The large Thanksgiving meal formerly held at the Saugatuck Congregational Church has been suspended since Covid; it was labor intensive, not limited to Westport, and not specifically for need-based participants.

- Wendy Petty, Senior Center Director, reported on a \$70,000 state grant that has been granted to cover the purchase of an electric vehicle, a new logo and website for the Senior Center, and outdoor enhancements such as a pollinator garden. Thought is being given to providing passive recreation outdoors such as bocce. A separate grant is being sought to provide a charging station for the electric vehicle. Wendy shared sketches of the proposed new logo with the Commission, and the overall impression was quite positive, with the recommendation that the current white doors on each side would be eliminated.
- Holly Betts, Senior Center Assistant Director, said that a Volunteer Fair for adults and one for students were held at the Westport Library in September. She added that the Senior Center now has an adult technical assistant, complementing the students who provide technical help – meaning that hours could be extended beyond after-school programs. Holly mentioned that registration for winter classes would begin on December 4 for Westport residents and December 11 for nonresidents. Ninety classes will be offered, of which only three are now held on Zoom and five are hybrids. In addition to the Thanksgiving lunch, the Center will host a Chanukah lunch on December 8 and a Christmas lunch on December 19, each accommodating 100 participants at each of two seatings. She also said that the Center’s “Hope Garden,” filled with yellow tulips, will bloom in the spring.
- Kristen Witt, LCSW Municipal Agent for Seniors/Senior Social Worker, reported that they are receiving many calls for assistance during the holidays, adding that people are really struggling. Eversource provides a 50% discount to people who are enrolled in any assistance program, and they offer a separate low-income discount. However, people cannot be part of both programs, and there’s considerable confusion about this. About 400 households are served by Human Services, and there are already well over 200 requests for the Energy Assistance Program this year. Additional assistance is provided by Westport’s Warm-Up Fund, which has slightly higher income guidelines. Kristen added that Catholic Charities runs the Senior Center’s lunch program, and more and more people are signing up for these lunches.

Commissioner reports:

- Claudia Coplen, Housing, reported that she had attended meetings of U.S. Food Rescue, Sustainable Westport, and FarmLink. There was also a large September meeting updating participants about all the various affordable housing issues and initiatives currently under way. She added that the Youth Commission has reached out to Human Services, Senior Services, and Disability Services for help in its effort to bring miniature golf to Westport, and Claudia will follow up on this effort.
- Wendy Kleros, Transportation, reported that age alone should qualify individuals automatically for inclusion in the door-to-door transportation service. Qualification for disability would be evaluated separately. She discussed the fact that Westport needs to merge its transportation program with either Norwalk or Bridgeport, since our size is insufficient to warrant a separate program. Norwalk's program includes door-to-door transportation for all towns south to Greenwich; Bridgeport's program currently has no door-to-door service.
- Doris Levinson, Prevention Coalition and Parks & Recreation, reported that smoking and cannabis use at town beaches and parks has now been banned. The golf course and parking lots are excluded. Westport has also limited the number of smoke shops that can be opened. The Westport Prevention Coalition is an amalgam of several different organizations with health concerns about smoking, vaping, and alcohol use. A biennial survey of drug and alcohol use among young people in grades 7-12 will be conducted in the spring. Westport is expecting to see a high rate of such use.
- Sarah Adair reported that the Tree Board will plant 20 new trees on town property and will provide additional funding for irrigation. She added that the Chinkapin Oak is the "highlighted tree" for December.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:00 pm. The next meeting will be held on December 18.