

WEST HARTFORD SENIOR CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMISSION

MINUTES

December 21, 2021

Members Present: Rebecca Hajosy, Noreen Bachteler, Robert Kennedy, Mary Reilly, Rosemary Cleary, Ellen Phillips (via phone)
Absent: Linda Hanson, Kevin Farmer, Sheila Diamond, Gail Crockett
Staff Present: Keren Paquette, Rebecca Sears
Guests: WHPD guests: Lieutenant Aaron Vafiades, Community Relations Officer Pete Kisela, and Police Social Worker Samantha Innis; Krystyna Zamorska (arrived late)

Co-Chairperson Noreen Bachteler called the meeting to order at 10:01AM.
November 16, 2021 meeting minutes unanimously approved.

Chairperson's Report

Noreen Bachteler reported that she and Rebecca, co-chairs, met to discuss the upcoming year and lay out potential presentations/speakers to make the meetings exciting and interesting. Those will be discussed in the New Business section. Also, as of today, this group is planning to stay with the in-person meeting format as encouraged by the Town. Noreen then welcomed and introduced the WHPD guests introducing each to the group with a short bio on each.

West Hartford Police Department Updates

Guests from the WHPD: Lieutenant Aaron Vafiades, Community Relations Officer Pete Kisela, and newly hired Police Social Worker Samantha Innis. Lt. Vafiades told the group that he is happy to be in the room to address the group's questions, but that he can also communicate with members of this group any time they have questions outside of this meeting via e-mail. Discussion hit on 3 main areas (requested by the Commission): Carjackings/Car Thefts, Panhandling, and the role of Samantha, the new Social Worker working with WHPD. Carjackings/Car Theft – a regional task force was put together 10 weeks ago and since then, they have recovered 86 stolen cars and made 30 arrests for car theft, most of which are teenagers. This has been attributed to information sharing and resource sharing across the region. The question was asked how residents, especially the elderly, can protect themselves. Lt. Vafiades responded that you should always lock your car (they try door handles and if one is locked, they just move quickly to the next car), don't leave anything valuable in your car, never confront the perps yourself, and doorbell cameras are a big deterrent. Panhandling: Lt. Vafiades talked about what a complicated issue this is. The WHPD went out and surveyed the people who panhandle in town and found many different reasons they were doing it and that the needs are varied. Some are homeless, some are not, some have addiction and mental health issues, some do not, some have needs that can be met by social services, some do not. With no one cause, there's obviously no one solution. The one thing they heard from everyone they interviewed is that they can make a lot of money in West Hartford – the local people are very generous. Police calls regarding panhandling are mostly from residents who want to help them and ask why the town isn't doing more for them. The WHPD safety recommendations are: don't give money, say no, walk away, call the police if they get aggressive so they can track the activity of certain individuals. There are laws against aggressive panhandling (following you to your car, etc) and they want to know about that. There are 3 things that the police say can help: establish ordinances, community education, and signage. WHPD has presented to the Town Council to see what the town is willing and comfortable doing. New Social Worker joining the WHPD – Samantha Innis has been hired as part of a response to the Police Accountability Bill. The position is funded by the police department but reports into Social Services. Samantha is researching best practices for this type of position from around the state and around the country. She is called in to do ride-alongs with the police when they feel her expertise would be helpful – mental health, homelessness, elderly issues – anything where social services might eventually get involved. Samantha will also work on regular social worker cases with the town's Social Services department when there's no police issues.

Transportation

Kevin Farmer absent – no report this month

Seniors Job Bank

Sheila Diamond & Gail Crockett absent – no report this month

West Hartford Social Services

Keren Paquette reported that the new West Hartford Prevention Council had their first meeting in November. Main discussions were how to use the grant money, suicide prevention (a big problem right now), and vaping – educating the community, recognizing signs, then what to do. Staffing: the Hillcrest Neighborhood Center liaison has resigned and the department is also looking for a worker resource to help town residents fill out energy assistance program forms. Other Social Services updates: the town food pantry is still working curbside, volunteer services is still lining up volunteers, the Christmas distribution program for children under 16 is wrapping up, help with Choices Medicare enrollment ended 12/7, still seeing a lot of evictions and with such a tight housing market, progress is slow. West Hartford's Town Manager Matthew Hart resigned – he's going to work for CROG – Capitol Region Organization of Governments. An interim manager has been named and the town will be doing a search. Keren also reported that the Health Department is looking into starting up vaccinations (boosters) again.

Senior Centers

Becky Sears reported that the senior centers have reinstated the mask mandate in the centers. They continue to offer in-person programs as well as remote opportunities. Becky is putting together a safety panel for seniors that will be put into a tv program that seniors can access from home. The staff is putting together a May 11 “Senior Day” which is a West Hartford Health Resource Fair. They are also now putting together their spring calendar and are setting up the annual AARP Tax Day for qualified seniors. Open positions on the staff: Program Coordinator (part time) in Bishops Corner, and two open clerk positions – one in Elmwood, one in Bishops Corner.

New Business

Noreen distributed a calendar of upcoming meetings which was adopted by vote – staying with the 3rd Tuesday of every month. The commission still has two openings – apply to Essie Labrot, Town Clerk. Short discussion on possibly getting a gift for Amy Silverman to thank her for her service – all agreed we should.

Agenda for Future Meetings

Noreen & Rebecca passed out a calendar with potential speakers/presentations for meeting in 2022. The group will start with the January meeting to review and discuss the mission of this commission. In addition to the ideas that were distributed on the calendar, others thrown out by the group were: bringing in the new Town Manager when they're hired; bringing in the new Director of Library Services; a visit by the town's state legislators before the state general session

The meeting adjourned at 11:59AM. Next meeting scheduled for Jan 18, 2022.

Respectfully submitted,

Ann T. Visgilio, Recording Secretary