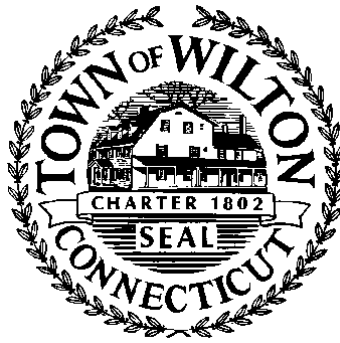


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TOWN HALL
238 Danbury Road
Wilton, CT 06897

**Wilton Social Services Commission
Special Meeting
Tuesday, July 28, 2020 at 6:00 PM
Zoom**

Present: Deborah List, Genevieve Eason, Pam Kelley, Paul Nisco, Sarah Heath
Absent: Danielle Mancuso

1. Welcome

Acting Chair Dr. Deborah List welcomed the commissioners and viewing public.

The commission would like to extend its gratitude to the former chair, Michael O'Connell, for his service to the commission and the town.

Commissioners also took this opportunity to acknowledge and thank Colleen Fawcett, LCSW, who is retiring after 26 years serving as the Coordinator of Wilton Youth Services.

2. Acceptance of the February 12, 2020 and June 11, 2020 meeting minutes

The commission's regular March meeting was cancelled due to the COVID closure of Comstock. While the commission lacked options for holding a public meeting electronically, they met informally via Zoom in meetings coordinated by Mike O'Connell and Sarah Heath to allow Sarah to give the commission department updates and for the commission to offer assistance necessary on April 9, May 1, and May 18.

The regular June public meeting was rescheduled to a conference call at noon on June 11 but did not have quorum. Commissioners met informally over Zoom again that same day.

The minutes of the February and June meetings were accepted as submitted.

3. 2020 – 2021 Election of Officers

Deborah shared that the Board of Selectmen will be discussing the charge of the commission and reducing the number of commissioners to seven. The commission may have new members soon.

Pam moved to elect the officers as follows. Genevieve seconded.

Chair – Deborah List
Vice Chair – Paul Nisco
Secretary – Genevieve Eason

The slate was approved unanimously.

4. Confirmation of meeting schedule for remainder of 2020

The commission will meet at 6 pm on Sept. 10, Oct. 8, Nov. 12, and Dec. 10, either at Comstock Community Center or using the Town's Zoom capability.

5. Review of current Department of Social Services roles and responsibilities

Deborah clarified that the intention is not to discuss human resources issues or what members have or have not been told about their jobs. The commissioners understand that there have been some changes in the department and just want to understand how needs are being met in the town.

Sarah gave a department update:

Phoebe Musico, LCSW (Adult & Family Social Worker) resigned; her last day was Friday. She worked 19 hours/week. Sarah is determining the best way to serve current clients and future clients she would have assisted. About seven residents have joined the food pantry over the past couple of months and the department has had a lot of phone calls recently from people wanting information about supports for themselves or people they know.

The department also has Lauren Hughes, LCSW (Senior Services Coordinator) for 22 hr/week and Stephanie Rowe (Social Services Activities Coordinator; Master's in Recreation Administration and Supervision; current MSW student) is full time at 35 hours/week. She was running the senior center prior to the coronavirus shut down and will be starting some virtual programs for seniors. She will now be working with some established clients who have financial needs, along with support from Sarah.

In June, Stephanie published an issue of Corridors, the senior center newsletter, with some programs that are being offered online. It is available on the Senior Center page of the town website. They are hoping to fill in gaps where they see them, make it more robust, and share programs being offered in the community, so that people who are home have resources available to them.

The department has made monthly phone calls to the 80+ highest-risk households that have asked to be on the emergency call list to make sure that they know the department is available if they need something – food, a way to stay cool, medication.

The department has also made connections with volunteers in the community, like Helping Hands run by Peg Koellmer.

Colleen is retiring after 26 years. Sarah offered her thanks to Colleen for her dedication and for everything she has accomplished in Youth Services and in the town.

Colleen's retirement creates an opportunity for Sarah to understand better what Colleen does and what the needs will be in the future. Sarah is confident that the department can meet the need for counseling, referrals, and parenting videos or ideas. They will not be filling Colleen's position at this time.

Roles in the department are changing and have changed over the last three months. Numbers have not increased dramatically right now, which is good since the department will be short staffed.

This is consistent with other catastrophic events like 9/11. We don't see the needs immediately. Sarah wants residents to know that when people do need help, the department has a great food pantry, social workers who can listen and provide short term counseling, support and resources. We do expect that numbers will go up as people go through hard times in the coming months.

Sarah has confidence in her staff and will be discussing with Lynne Vanderslice what needs to be done to ensure that services continue as they are for the residents in town. She will be looking to see what the department can do to improve.

Commissioners posed the following questions and concerns:

Pam expressed concern about losing Colleen, who she sees as the center of the wheel of all services for youth in town. She thinks there are a lot of things that Colleen is doing that we won't know we are missing until it is too late. Pam also expressed concern about the delayed effect of trauma as well as the impact of isolation on seniors. In sum, she is concerned about the decrease in staffing.

Pam asked if the budget for the department has been reduced or threatened. Sarah answered that it has not.

Sarah stated that she does not have a time frame to fill these positions. She needs to see how they manage the workload that Phoebe had been handling.

Deborah believes that the needs may come in waves. There may or may not be an additional stimulus package coming. Currently additional unemployment payments end July 31. Also know that the end to the mitigation for eviction is coming. Those may trigger points in time where we see needs rise and then on-going needs afterwards. She asked if Sarah has thought about what the department will do if the needs rise and the two LCSW positions have not been filled, resulting in fewer social work hours.

Sarah reiterated that it is a work in progress. She believes they are prepared and doesn't know what else they could do to be proactive. In Sarah's opinion, the department has adequate staffing to address the needs as they are right now and she stated that she will hire someone in the coming months if that is needed.

Genevieve asked whether we have enough hours in Youth Services, given that losing Colleen means more than a 50% decrease in the hours there. In the minutes from our February meeting, we recorded that youth services had 20 active cases, cases rose throughout last school year, and the schools are anticipating a rapid rise in mental health needs.

Sarah stated that she feels that with existing staffing the department is able to provide everything they need to provide and asserted that it is impossible to hire Colleen's replacement until she has a better understanding of the needs in Youth Services.

Genevieve shared that she received a call from Ellen Abend, the Medicare CHOICES counselor who volunteers with Lauren Hughes. Ellen called because Marie Allen, of the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging (SWCAA) got in touch with her and is very concerned because it is Marie's understanding that the department would not be offering Medicare counseling in the fall.

Sarah stated that in the past that Lauren, Ellen and CHOICES counselors have offered Medicare counseling during open enrollment in the fall. Sarah stated that she will no longer have staff provide that service. They will offer it using volunteers. Sarah will be setting up a meeting with SWCAA in the coming weeks. Any senior in town that can use a computer and get online can receive basic information about how to access Medicare. The department has spent a lot of staff time on Medicare but this season will rely on volunteers and SWCAA.

SWCAA is organizing a task force to figure out how to assist seniors this fall when they can't meet face to face.

Genevieve expressed concern that seniors feel this is one of the more important service that our town provides, and in the monthly department reports we can see that Lauren provides this service throughout the year.

Sarah responded that Lauren can assist seniors who are retiring and need some information about Medicare, but not the time-consuming assistance with Medicare Part D during open enrollment. Instead Sarah is offering resources in the community through volunteers and SWCAA. Sarah is hoping that Ellen will continue and Sarah will work with SWCAA to see how they can creatively solve this problem with other CHOICES trained volunteers.

Pam asked what how Lauren will be reassigned to fill the hours she used to spend on this type of counseling. Sarah replied that she is working on that.

Deborah asked if there are other ways we can creatively meet the needs of seniors, referencing the fact that that Warrior Helpers called 2,700 seniors in town and Helping Hands assists its members

Sarah referenced the calls that were made to households on the emergency call list. Stephanie is working on a way to reach the residents who had been coming to the senior center and assess their needs, so she can find out what is available in the community in addition to the three or four zoom classes in Wilton. The department worked with SWCAA to have bags of groceries delivered to homebound seniors for a couple of months. Residents can have food delivered to their house by volunteers, and people can access the food pantry.

Genevieve asked whether family programs such as school supplies and holiday gifts will continue, and Sarah answered that the department will collect gift cards to be distributed to clients. Families also receive gift cards once per month for grocery shopping. Sarah stated that offering gift cards is the wave of the future that was coming anyway, because we have so many generous donations. Genevieve and Sarah agreed that during normal times, donors enjoy making selections and assembling baskets, but that is not possible right now.

Paul asked what kinds of opportunities Sarah sees for innovative new ways to offer services. Sarah responded that during the weeks that the department could not stock the food pantry, people found creative ways to provide food to residents, like shopping for residents and dropping off groceries at their homes. Sarah would also like to look into having a food delivery service provide frozen meals for homebound residents, if we have issues again with providing food.

Sarah meets with local social services directors biweekly to share issues and things that are working/not working.

6. Assessing residents' needs for Social Services in COVID-19 environment

The purpose of the commission is to identify the present and future needs for Human Services in the town. In the past, the commission has fulfilled that mission through activities like advocating for a full time Senior Activities Coordinator, initiating the work that eventually led to the development of Wilton Commons, and conducting the youth mental health needs assessment in June 2016. In the last few years the department has been delivering an incredible volume of services, and the commission has not felt that a needs assessment was necessary. Now that we are in a crisis, this can be a valuable way for commissioners to support the department and represent residents.

Commissioners expressed interest in conducting needs assessment in order to anticipate needs in a proactive, not reactive, fashion. We will need to find innovative ways to collect data in town and maybe access information from other organizations. Just as the youth mental health needs assessment originated in the commission, we can make this decision as a commission, since it this falls under our charge.

7. Review of the Social Services Commission charge

The charge of the Commission on Social Services was amended by the commission itself and then ratified by the Board of Selectmen in March 2015. There are discussions going on now at the Board of Selectmen to review the charge.

Commissioners felt that charge accurately describes what we have been doing and should be doing moving forward. We look forward to working with the Board of Selectmen on how we can best support the department and the residents of the town.

8. Suicide Postvention – report on training from Genevieve Eason

Genevieve attended a free Suicide Postvention training program offered by The Hub: Behavioral Health Action Organization for Southwestern CT. Postvention is a planned response after a suicide to help with healing and reduce risk of further suicide incidents. Knowing someone who has died by suicide increases our risk for suicide, and how a suicide is handled affects the risk factors for others, especially teens.

The purpose of the postvention training was to:

- Review risk factors and warning signs for promoting postvention as prevention for individuals at risk.
- Identify protocols and best practices for communication after a suicide to insure immediate follow-up response across a community.
- Develop a Postvention Team of stakeholders to ensure policies and procedures are implemented so the community can stay safe.

We know that the risk for suicide will increase as impacts of the COVID pandemic are felt in unemployment and mental health. For each percentage point that unemployment rises, the suicide rate rises by 1%. Prior to 2020, it had been many years since Wilton experienced the death of a resident by suicide, but the state has reported one suicide death in our town this year.

Wilton was represented by Kim Zemo from the public schools, Rich Hubli of WVAC, OFC Elise Ackerman of the Wilton PD, Vanessa Elias of NAMI and Genevieve. Our neighboring towns sent staff from their human services/social services departments, but Wilton was not able to.

The town's support and leadership in forming a postvention plan will be critical to meeting this need.

9. Public Comment

Two comments were read. See attachments.

Adjourn, 7:25 pm

Next regular meeting – September 10, 2020, 6:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Genevieve Eason
Secretary

July 27, 2020

Deborah List
Social Services Commission
Town of Wilton

Dear Ms. List:

My name is Ellen Abend and I live at 105 Silver Spring Road in Wilton. Over six years ago, the Social Services Department sponsored me to participate in a course to become a certified CHOICES (Medicare) counselor with the understanding that I would assist the Social Services staff with Medicare counseling. Currently, I also serve on the Board of Directors for the Southwestern CT Agency on Aging (SWCAA).

Although Social Services staff, mainly Lauren Hughes, help seniors sign up for Medicare throughout the year, the busiest time is during Annual/Open Enrollment (October 15-December 7) when seniors are encouraged to review their prescription drug plans and possibly change to one that provides better benefits. Medicare is constantly changing and quite complex and many people find it confusing to navigate the system. So, each year with the help of myself and other CHOICES volunteers, Social Services has offered an Open Enrollment Day at which people can get assistance. I also volunteer one day a week during the whole period to help with counseling. The number of people participating has continued to grow each year I have been involved. In addition, in a collaborative effort between SWCAA, Social Services and the Wilton Library, a Medicare Boot Camp is provided for people new to Medicare. It has been very successful - filling the Brubeck Room to capacity each time.

Recently, the Director of SWCAA, Marie Allen, contacted me with the unsettling news that Social Services would no longer be offering any Medicare counseling to Wilton seniors. Although face-to-face meetings are no longer safe for seniors, I know that surrounding towns in our region will continue to offer this service. Currently, SWCAA has established a task force to develop a strategy that will allow Medicare counseling to continue in these difficult times.

I feel strongly that Wilton should continue to provide their senior residents with Medicare counseling. Social Services is the best department to be involved especially since it is located at the Senior Center and is familiar to residents. Through the years, seniors have contributed greatly to help Wilton grow and be a special place to live. It seems only right that the Town through Social Services continue to help them with negotiating the challenges of Medicare.

Thank you,
Ellen Abend

Dear Deborah List,

I'm listening to the Social Services Commission meeting and am very concerned and would like to submit the following as public comment. Apologies for any typos and incongruencies as I'm typing whilst listening too.

I am writing to express my deepest concern regarding the even temporary reduction in Wilton Youth Social Services staff with Colleen Fawcett's retirement after 26 years and not being replaced at the critical time.

As a town resident, I have had a most unique connection to knowing the value and demand for work Wilton Youth Services does. First, through my role as volunteer Wilton Youth Council president for four years starting in 2015, second in serving on the Wilton Free Play Task Force as a Committee Chair for the parent and neighborhood committee for the past three years, third in my role as a facilitator of a NAMI (national alliance on mental illness) CAN (child adolescent network) support group for parents of kids with mental health behavioral and emotional challenges for the last five years and fourth and finally as a once-desperate parent who came to Wilton Youth Services 6.5 years ago to find resources for my child and family.

I have referred countless parents to Wilton Youth Services. Quality mental health services are almost always not covered by insurance and many parents are unable to find the resources they need for their children. Because of my role over the last five years I am privy to dozens and possibly hundreds of parents who struggle to help their struggling children and families who are living in a world of hell. This was all pre-Covid. The mental health and emotional ramifications of Covid are already being seen and the worst is yet to come. Experts are warning us --and as a NAMI volunteer, I'm already seeing an uptick in calls for help from parents.

Wilton Youth Services, specifically Colleen Fawcett, shared the experience of over 20 years which provided me and my all volunteer board with the "brains" of WYC information, background, past events as she had done for each WYC board for the previous 20 years. Without her, the job would have been impossible. Thankfully we now have Genevieve Eason to pass on all that information if she were to leave Wilton Youth Council. However, Wilton Youth Council is a resource for parents, it is an independent, education nonprofit, not clinical staff or offering services -- nor being funded by the town.

For the four years that I was Wilton Youth Council president and leading the organization with Genevieve of Eason who was Vice President, we would be met time and time again with astonishment from all of our neighboring communities, who were dedicated paid town youth services staff and Genevieve and I would be the only volunteers at the table. As the demand for Wilton Youth Council's community, parent education and youth programs continued to rise and grew to a level not able to be sustained by volunteers, I knew that WYC needed a paid staff member to continue and we began to talk about the need for an executive director and we scraped up funds for a part time position. We need to keep pace with our neighboring towns.

The minutes from the last Social Services meeting show an increase in caseload -- even before COVID hit. Even if the numbers haven't risen yet, they will. Experts are speaking about the three waves of this COVID pandemic - the first health, second economic and third --and biggest-- wave will be the mental health crisis. It's looming and we need to be ready. Cutting staff and not filling the huge void that Colleen leaves behind. Parents need more than parenting videos from social services -- we need someone who pulls all resources together and as Pam says the center of the spoke of the

wheel. I recently attended a Postvention Suicide training which highlighted the increased risk for a community when they have a loss due to suicide and support is needed not just in the days and weeks following, but in months and years.

One of the special things about Colleen is that she has worked tirelessly under the radar - I fear that that humble quality will fool people into thinking we can manage without a replacement for now. Hiring someone takes time and once we figure out what we need, I worry there will be a critical gap in clinical care for our Wilton youth and their families.

The health of our community depends on it.
Thank you for your time.

Respectfully yours,
Vanessa Elias
101 Middlebrook Farm Rd
Wilton, CT 06897