

Additional Budget Questions-Ross Tartell

I think I understand why the town should not provide counseling services. In that regard, I am unsure if an intake interview to understand the presenting issue well enough to make a referral, falls into the category of "counseling services." That said, I think that whatever we need to do to make an appropriate referral is likely very safe territory. I don't think we need Town Counsel to answer that question.

Referral services and short-term counseling are acceptable per Town Counsel and don't come with the same risks to the town.

In this context, our use of the term counseling refers to long-term counseling, serving as the resident's therapist. Our use of the term short-term counseling refers to in the moment counseling to help the resident in the moment and properly refer to an appropriate counselor.

Town Counsel Ira Bloom has advised town employees should not be performing long-term counseling. He advised doing so created financial risk to the town and potential significant liability. Former BOE chair Debbie Low and Dr. Smith shared they received the same advice from the BOE's counsel.

In the past, Youth Services had provided long-term counseling. Sarah Heath has ensured counseling is limited to short-term and the department is referring out for counseling services.

There are a small number of residents who appear to be urging the town and/or the schools to provide long-term counseling services. As such it is important for board members to understand the financial risks and potential liabilities. With that understood, we can vote to remove Tuesday's agenda item D. 1.

My real question is in regard to understanding the depth of current and emerging social service related issues in the town and deciding if Social Services should proactively expand its scope to address those issues. *For the benefit of Bas and Kim, who were not on the board at the time, Ross raised a similar question about increasing the scope of the department in 2020. At the BOS's September 22, 2020 meeting, Sarah Heath and I provided a presentation which explained 1-social services within Wilton is network of Wilton and Fairfield County and State of CT nonprofits and government resources and 2-the services provided by the Social Services department.*

The presentation is available here:

https://www.wiltonct.org/sites/g/files/vyhli4046/f/uploads/social_services_overview-9-22-2020-website.pdf. The video of the discussion, which begins at 6 minutes, is available here:

https://us02web.zoom.us/rec/play/AKBsXlyji1qWHEPRsjAaTVM_1-FAYv7lz4KP2POC6dfPtV_vXtmbdOnzx3HoFUe8ZUjh7sz32Y1_KPI1.5IJuWt9Aed4Fz kfZ?continueM ode=true

Social services within Wilton's town government includes the Social Services Department, but goes well beyond that one department to the Parks and Recreation Department, Environmental

Affairs, the Conservation Commission, the Health Department, the Assessor's Department, the Elderly and Individuals with Disabilities Tax Credit and Tax Deferral ordinance and program, grants to Wilton nonprofits and services provided by both the Police and Fire Departments.

That is why I suggested the diagnostic needs analysis to help identify the issues and begin to explore if those issues can be addressed by the department.

As documented at the September 22, 2020 meeting, any proposed needs analysis would have to be a comprehensive town wide analysis.

I think potential strategic/service areas to explore might include:

- Should we enrich our support for seniors?
- Do we need to formalize our relationships with other service providers that help address mental health issues (i.e., Riverbrook Y, Wilton Library, Parks and Recreation, etc.) That was something that you and Sarah outlined the last time the two of you presented the department strategic plan. *I interpret "formalize our relationships" to mean we would have a memo of understanding or a similar document memorializing the relationship. That is not necessary/appropriate with the outside groups and certainly not with other town departments.*
- There are certain groups who voice pressing needs - in reality how strong/dire are those needs (i.e., LBGTQ+, suicide prevention, drug addition/overdose, integration of new demographic groups into the town, etc.)
- Food insecurity
- Stress due to housing shortage
- Mental health resources (i.e, ease of referral, quality and affordability of placement)

I think the department is doing a really good job of carrying out its responsibilities and making good use of its resources. *It is good to hear you acknowledge the work of the department and state your confidence in the department, as your questions and past comments have led many to conclude otherwise.*

Social Services probably has more requests for services and a wider range of services than any other town department. *That statement is not correct. The Wilton Police Department has the most requests for services and provides the widest range of services.*

As we heard last week from Chief Conlan, the Police Department had over 12,000 incidents in 2022. Those incidents included domestic violence, sexual assaults, drug overdoses and crisis events related to mental health. The department also provides educational programming for seniors, students, the schools, public and private, and new parents. And of course, there are two officers in the schools every day as school resource officers.

At our November 21, 2022 meeting, Captain Cipolla spoke to the department's crisis intervention calls, the department's Crisis Intervention Team, the statutory authority of the department to address and the agencies to whom they refer or coordinate.

*As discussed at the September 22, 2020 meeting, the Social Services Department has a **narrow** scope. Unlike the Wilton Police Department, which is responsible for the public safety of the entire community, the Social Services Department is not responsible for the social and psychological needs of all Wilton residents. The department's purpose is to help residents meet their needs through information, referrals, financial assistance, short-term counseling, as defined above, and programming. **The focus is on residents who need help meeting their needs.***

Just under 400 residents qualify for financial assistance. The situations that have led a resident to need financial assistance are broad and as Sarah Heath shared at the September 22, 2020 meeting, one requested form of assistance often leads to further assistance, financial or otherwise. Those client relationships are ongoing. As stated in response to your 2/15/23 questions, most residents who require mental health services don't seek the department's help to find those services.

This same narrow scope is true of our neighboring communities and most municipal social services departments. Below are links to social service department webpages of similar communities in CT.

*It is critical that it be clear on what it can do if it is to avoid being overwhelmed and losing its effectiveness. **It is the responsibility of the first selectwoman, the town administrator and the department heads to properly manage so that employees aren't overwhelmed and all departments are effective. It isn't the role of the Board of Selectmen to manage the departments.***

Our discussions at the February 15th meeting provided a good example of how the first selectwoman, the town administrator and a department head recognized and handled what could, without intervention, have become an overwhelming situation within DPW.

If a member of the Board of Selectmen hears or sees an issue, that issue should be emailed to the first selectwoman to investigate and address.

Collectively town employees receive hundreds of emails or calls on any given day. Sometimes the individual contacting a town employee has the right facts or presents the information in an accurate manner. Sometimes they don't. Employees know how to verify the information before drawing any conclusions.

A discussion of the department's scope and responsibilities might be useful. For that discussion, I think Town Counsel would have very valuable input.

From my perspective, those discussions have been held.

Informational Links:

<https://www.westonct.gov/government/municipal-departments/social-services>

<https://www.ridgefieldct.org/social-services>

<https://www.westportct.gov/government/departments-a-z/human-services/social-services>

https://www.newcanaan.info/departments/human_services/index.php

<http://www.darienct.gov/humanservices>

<https://www.avonct.gov/social-services>

<https://www.simsbury-ct.gov/social-services>

CT Department of Social Services:

<https://portal.ct.gov/dss>

Federal Department of Health and Human Services-Social Services

<https://www.hhs.gov/programs/social-services/index.html>