

SOUTHEASTERN CONNECTICUT COUNCIL OF GOVERNMENTS

5 Connecticut Avenue, Norwich, Connecticut 06360

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Southeastern Connecticut

Regional Human Services Coordinating Council

A steering committee of the Southeastern Connecticut Council of Governments

Draft Minutes

Friday, July 21, 2023, 8:30 AM

Conducted via Zoom

Attendees: Deb Monahan (TVCCA), Kathleen Stauffer (The Arc of Eastern CT), Cathy Zall (New London Homeless Hospitality Center), Dina Sears-Graves (United Way of SECT), Amanda Kennedy (SCCOG), Jeanne Milstein (New London Human Services), Jennifer Granger (UCFS), Alison Dvorak (Senior Resources), Selectman Kevin Lyden (Town of Salem), Leanne Theodore (Stonington Human Services), Patrick McCormack (Uncas Health District), Mayor Ron McDaniel (Town of Montville), Lisa Otto (Child & Family Agency), Jen Muggeo (LLHD), Kate Milde (Norwich Human Services), Krista Veneziano (CT DPH), Stephanie Guess (CT DMHAS), Chlo-Anne Bobrowski (CSDE), Kyle Casiglio (SCCOG), Erin McBride (Office of Sen. Murphy)

1. Call to Order

Ms. Monahan called the meeting to order at 8:33 AM.

2. Welcome and Introductions

The RHSCC welcomed first-time attendee Lisa Otto, who recently took over as CEO of [Child and Family Agency](#)

The minutes of the April meeting were approved by unanimous vote. Ms. Milstein motioned, Ms. Bobrowski seconded.

3. Stonington Human Services Community Outreach Specialist Presentation

Leanne Theodore, Director of Stonington Human Services, shared a presentation on the success the town has had from the creation of a new

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position within the department; the Community Outreach Specialist. This position was created after her department was approached by the police who had been faced with an increasing number of calls that they were either ill-equipped to handle on their own or were not explicitly public safety related, such as calls regarding mental health, addiction, or evictions.

The role of this position is to bridge the gap between departments and foster trust and communication within the community. Ms. Theodore emphasized that the position is best suited to someone who already knows and has a rapport with the community, with strong de-escalation skills. The most common referrals out of the 403 received to date are for Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Domestic Abuse, and Basic Needs. Elder Abuse, Homelessness, and Disabilities Issues were also common causes for referral.

4. Group Discussion

Ms. Zall highlighted the role that faith communities have played in supporting the community outreach and in reaching vulnerable populations.

Mr. McCormack shared Uncas Health Dept's experience with being brought in on some of these calls and emphasized the criticalness of municipal support through a position such as this as the Health Department does not have a social work component to its office. He further highlighted the value in flexible funding such as Stonington's funds for home repairs as that is addressing the root cause of an issue rather than treating the symptom by condemning the home and potentially putting someone on the street. Ms. Monahan noted that TVCCA has a new Water Assistance Program that might be able to assist with similar issues.

Ms. Kennedy inquired as to whether there were other towns with similar positions that Stonington modeled their position after. Ms. Theodore explained that there was not a model to cut and paste, but that they did draw influence from national programs such as 211.

Selectman Lyden reminded the group that ARPA money is still out there, and while the goal is to spend it by December 2024, it does not have to be spent until December 2026. He shared Salem's success establishing a Benevolent Fund which acts as a flexible source of funds for charitable use, such as when the town was able to pay to fumigate the home of a child that was bringing bed bugs into school. Selectman Lyden emphasized the importance of making sure these funds aren't put in a place where they are restricted by

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the fiscal year. Ms. Monahan pointed out how valuable these types of funds are because most organizations are limited by restrictions on the usage of particular grant funds for particular purposes.

Ms. Stauffer asked who the key players in town are that need to be on board with the program to make it successful. Ms. Theodore reported that the CEO needs to be on board in order to make a successful pitch to the Board of Finance. The leaders of the first responders are also critical. Other key stakeholders will vary depending on the context of the town, but it is important to make sure these people are identified and brought on board.

Ms. Monahan asked about the level of flexibility of ARPA funds, how strictly do they need to be tied to COVID related incidents? Ms. Milstein reported that it is a very flexible definition, and that the breadth of COVID's impact makes any human service function easy to justify for ARPA. Ms. Kennedy reminded that the restrictions are even less for small towns, who can spend ARPA money on almost anything. Ms. Muggeo highlighted that language in the ARPA guidelines says that funds can be used to address "long standing inequities" that do not have to be tied to COVID. She also highlighted that communication and coordination between regional organizations is important to making the most of these dollars. Scarce flex funds are particularly valuable, so if there is an intervention that one organization has dedicated funding for, that should be tapped first.

Ms. Zall reported that her organization spends about \$250k annually in flexible funds such as those being discussed. She reminded the group that it is important to be cognizant of the scope of the need in our communities and that a small fund will not be able to solve significant problems. People are poor and struggling in serious ways that require significant, serious investment to address.

Ms. Monahan and Mr. McCormack emphasized the importance of "pre-treating" – that many people who seem to be doing ok can be one disaster from slipping into catastrophe. It is often cheaper to prevent someone from falling into poverty than it is to help them out of it. Mr. McCormack further noted the importance of treating the root cause of an issue, otherwise organizations may be tapped several times to treat the manifestations in ways that don't actually solve the problem. Ms. Monahan noted that the asset limit for energy assistance has been waived, which removes a barrier to helping what are often very needy people.

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5. Member Updates

Ms. Sears-Graves alerted the council to the upcoming publication of the United Way's ALICE report. The Report documents how many households struggle to pay for life's basic necessities, including households living below the Federal Poverty Level and households with income above the poverty level but below the state's basic cost-of-living threshold defined in the ALICE Report.

Ms. Otto shared that Child and Family Agency is opening a Youth Urgent Crisis Center at 255 Hempstead Street in New London in the next month. The center will provide mental health and substance abuse crisis-based assessment, intervention, and service linkages to youth and families in New London, Middlesex, and Windham counties.

Ms. Dvorak reminded the council that it is Senior Farmer Market Nutrition Program time. While the change to electronic benefit cards has been challenging to some, Senior Resources is committed to making them work. They have developed many education materials and are working with towns, senior centers, senior housing facilities, etc to make sure they have access to them. Senior Resources will be doing outreach at many farmer markets as well. She shared that some farmers can do "pop up" markets at Senior Centers or other locations if that will increase senior use of their benefits. Last year only 52% of benefits were used so Senior Resources is actively trying to improve this as it is a great benefit to both seniors and farmers.

Ms. Monahan announced her coming retirement from the TVCCA. The RHSCC membership was unanimous in its appreciation for her leadership in service to the Southeastern Connecticut region over the decades and wished her joy in her retirement. Her scheduled last of work will be October 13th.

6. Adjournment & Next Gathering

Ms. Stauffer noted the issue many organizations have with public awareness and suggested that we need to be more aggressive in telling our stories to the public and to our elected officials.

Ms. Monahan suggested that as we have acquainted ourselves with one and other in a long time, that all members are asked to bring a short briefing on their organization, what they do, and active or upcoming projects to the next meeting.

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The meeting was adjourned at 9:28 AM by unanimous vote. Selectman Lyden motioned, Mr. McCormack seconded. The next convening is scheduled for Friday, October 20th at 8:30 AM.