

WEST HARTFORD SENIOR CITIZENS' ADVISORY COMMISSION

Minutes from Meeting on September 17, 2024

Members Present: Noreen Bachteler, Kevin Ryan, Mary Reilly, Eileen Rau, Kaye Straw, Beth Rocco, Mary Silverberg, Rosemary Cleary
Staff Present: Evelyn Mantilla, Keren Paquette, Monique Dixon, Rebecca Sears
Absent: Patricia Kiely, Robin Clare
Guests: Barbara Lerner, Joe Kolczynski, Barbara Nair
Councilor Debra Polun of West Hartford Town Council

The meeting was called to order at 10:05AM by Co-Chair Noreen Bachteler. The minutes from the June 18, 2024 meeting were approved as written. There were no Commission meetings in July and August.

Chairs' Report

Noreen reported that Councilor Debra Polun from the West Hartford Town Council will be joining the meeting at 11:00AM. Noreen stated that she and Co-Chair Eileen Rau had done some outreach during the summer break. They lined up the below speakers for the October and December meetings while Mary Silverberg was asked to follow-up on the suggestion for a speaker on hearing loss in seniors which will be taking place at the November meeting.

October 15, 2024 – Melissa Marquis, MS, RN, Medical Resiliency Coordinator, and Robert McCue, Deputy Emergency Management Director, for the Office of West Hartford Emergency Management

November 19, 2024 – Christine Huebner, Audiologist & Speech Pathologist on senior hearing loss and Andrea Giudice of the Hospital Bed Project (i.e. Services You May Need As You Age)

December 17, 2024 – Maureen McIntyre, CEO, of the North Central Area Agency on Aging on the 2024 legislative updates affecting seniors and 2025 proposals

Noreen stated there will be a community “Daring Dialogue” workshop being put on by the CT Age Well Collaborative on October 1 on ageism and ableism. This program is being coordinated by Adrienne Billings-Smith, West Hartford’s Equity Coordinator, and Becky Sears, WHSC Director and will be held from 10:00AM to 12:30PM at the Bishop’s Corner Senior. SCAC members are encouraged to attend.

Seniors Job Bank – No report as Robin Clare was absent.

West Hartford Social Services

Keren Paquette reported that CRT is currently taking online applications for heat only assistance with limited funds also available for furnace repairs. In-person appointments will begin 9/30 and CRT has promised a resource person at West Hartford Town Hall to help W.H. residents with this application process. Operation Fuel is a separate organization with different eligibility requirements and they started taking applications on 9/16. This program is for electric, gas or oil. Eversource also has a low income discount program and is for electric only. The Town That Cares Fund can also help with utilities but is a one-time thing to help prevent shut-offs. The Farmer’s Market federal food program will be ending on 9/30, but people can still get in for the final weeks of this assistance.

The Renter’s Rebate program application period ends on 9/30, and no extensions will be given this year. This program provides a one-time once a year payment with a maximum amount of \$700.

More of CT’s Opioid Settlement funds will be coming to West Hartford which some has been used to hire a part-time Prevention Coordinator. The Town’s Prevention Council is seeking designation as a Recovery-Friendly Community and some of the funds will be used for this process.

The statewide Veterans’ Stand Down happens this Friday, 9/20, where veterans will have access to a variety of programs and services. These events are happening at 6 regional locations and the closest to West Hartford are at the CT DVA in Rocky Hill and in Bristol.

Transportation for Seniors

Evelyn Mantilla reported she is in her 3rd month as the new ITN Central CT Director and that their top priority right now is recruiting more drivers since the demand for their services is growing. The organization's 2025 budget has been approved and fundraising is underway. They are also looking for new board members. Becky Sears asked Evelyn to prepare a new ITN ad for the WHSC Bulletin.

Senior Centers

Becky Sears reported that the "Parkie Pong" program has received a lot of recognition from across the state and it has now brought in a grant from the American Parkinson Disease Association CT to start a new boxing program. Becky's focus is for the Senior Centers to create a space that's open to people of all abilities. The new Senior Center bus has arrived and will be in use starting with the ribbon cutting on Oct 7! The bus was made possible with funding from an ARPA Grant via the CT Dept. of Aging and Disability Services. There will be 2 part-time drivers hired. The bus can carry 18 passengers including 2 wheelchair spots. Most use will be to bring people to and from the Senior Centers for meals and programs, shopping trips, and special event trips in CT. The question was asked by Beth Rocco if the town can sell advertising on the side of the bus. Becky will investigate this issue. The "Entertainment Showcase" is scheduled for October 8 at W.H. Town Hall and will include over 30 performers. Becky reported that the new free membership for W.H. residents which began on July 1 is going well with membership up 7% already and sign-ups for programs are also on the rise. Due to this increase, Becky is looking to increase staffing to help with registrations and programs.

Councilor Debra Polun from the West Hartford Town Council

Councilor Debra Polun joined the group at 11:00AM and was introduced by Co-Chair Eileen Rau. Ms. Polun has been a member of the West Hartford Town Council since November 2022 and currently chairs the Human & Community Services Committee which has cognizance of all matters related to leisure and social services, community development and federal/state block grant allocation; housing initiatives; library services; public health; and historic preservation. She also serves as the Vice Chair of the Finance & Administration Committee. She previously served on the West Hartford Board of Education. At present, she is the Chief Strategy Officer for the Community Health Centers of CT and also worked for the CT Commission on Aging for 4 years. She stated that the issues that she hears most about in town are: driving/traffic/pedestrian safety, trash removal, and housing. She reported that the first meetings have taken place with the architects for the new Elmwood Community Center and a tree survey has already been done. A guest asked if the new site would have a senior specific fitness center and she said the new design would not have one. Kevin Ryan then presented the survey results to Ms. Polun and the group on the SCAC's June 25 housing roundtable program and the housing needs of the "missing middle" seniors in West Hartford. Debra said that the Town Council is aware of this issue and wants to attract developers to create over 55 housing to town, but so far have been unsuccessful. There was also a discussion by SCAC members with Ms. Polun about the idea of having an ombudsman for seniors to serve as a one-stop advisor/advocate that seniors in town could go to for referrals for services. Per SCAC, many seniors feel overwhelmed and have difficulty in getting information about what programs are available for them. Suggestions were made by SCAC members to look to put/send information in certain town mailings. Councilor Polun gave her email to the group for future contact: debra.polun@westhartfordct.gov.

New Business/Public Comment

The next Commission meeting will be held on October 15, 2024 in the Bishop's Corner Library due to the flu clinic being held in the BCSC large room.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:05PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Ann T. Visgilio, Recording Secretary