

**PUBLIC SAFETY STANDING COMMITTEE VIRTUAL MEETING
WEDNESDAY, MAY 5, 2021, 6:30 P.M.
MINUTES**

1. Call to Order

A. Meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chairwoman Carol Anderson Blanks.

B. Attendees – Mayor Shari Cantor, Deputy Mayor Leon Davidoff, Councilor Mary Faye, Councilor Lee Gold, Councilor Beth Kerrigan, Councilor Ben Wenograd, Councilor Chris Williams, Town Manager Matt Hart, Town Planner Todd Dumais, Police Chief Vernon Riddick, Assistant Chief Lawrence Terra, Lt. Aaron Vafiades, Fire Chief Greg Priest, Assistant Chief Michael Sinsigalli, Ms. Helen Rubino-Turco and Ms. Astrid Calderon from Leisure Services, Mr. Duane Martin from Community Planning and Economic Development, Ms. Kristen Gorski from Economic Development, and Pat Gallagher.

2. Business Items

A. Meeting Minutes March 3, 2021 – The minutes were accepted without objection.

B. Panhandling Initiative – Mr. Hart reported there was a good interdisciplinary team working on this initiative; social services combined with the police department. A couple of suggestions from committee members and other council members have been reviewed. Mr. Hart stated there was a draft report, but it needed a few revisions before being sent to the committee; however, members from Social Services and Police Department touched on it briefly.

Ms. Rubino-Turco reported they were asked to look into the issue of panhandling. The working group consists of Social Services, the Police Department and Corporation Counsel. Ms. Rubino-Turco defined the differences in panhandling, aggressive and passive. The working group first looked at the volume of calls into the police department from members of the public and initiated a study to interview 10-15 panhandlers in town, as well as spoke to those people who work with them on a regular basis. Whatever actions will be taken in the future, what neighboring cities and towns are doing needs to be taken into account as well. It is felt this is something that requires a regional approach. Some possible actions explored included looking into a previously drafted ordinance, looking at regional ordinances, and looking at the ordinance repercussions, as well as looking at a public education campaign, which would be two or three-fold; signage on the street, a webpage dedicated to information about panhandling and other methods. Whatever action is taken should be done in consideration of what is going on in neighboring communities.

Regarding the data collection, there were complaint calls and a survey. The consensus was almost none of them are West Hartford residents and almost all have a complicated social issue contributing to their panhandling. The majority of the panhandlers are passive, i.e. holding up signs. The aggressive panhandlers have received consequences, i.e. incarceration

due to criminal activity unrelated to panhandling, mental health issues. Panhandling is also an opportunity to make a lot of money. There are different ways to go about those two kinds, aggressive and passive, panhandling.

Corporation Counsel found in 1995 the City of Hartford did enact an ordinance and a couple of years ago they started to enforce it where panhandlers had to clear out and they started to move to West Hartford. Other municipalities have enacted very similar language to Hartford's ordinance; Waterbury, New Britain, Enfield, Rocky Hill and Middletown. The only difference is the enforcement provision. Most municipalities issue a small fine. If an ordinance is to be made, the decision needs to be made on what kind of penalty is included. The goal of any consequence would be to connect people with programs, services, and resources they need.

The Hartford Community Court, which is a State court, targets quality of life misdemeanors and infractions like panhandling and is a great place to connect people with resources. Community Court is very interested in knowing what the plans are, having some input and giving some advice; some of them have been studying panhandling for years and are experts in it. Many of the people and/or non-profits that work with the homeless or panhandlers should be part of the conversation before launching into action. They see the repercussions and may have good advice we may want to hear.

Action outside of an ordinance is a public education campaign. Signage was looked into as it has been used throughout the country including Arizona, New Mexico, North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas and Wisconsin. The signs could have a variety of messages. If signage is a desirable action, there are opinions regarding messaging and styling. One partner organization recommended against negative "don't give". There has been a lot of discussion about the pushback that can come from undertaking an action, i.e. putting up signs, that runs the gamut of payment for signs to, "Do not tell me what I should and should not do. I am going to do what I want to do." The goal would be signs that are accompanied by news articles and a website with a dedicated page with the idea of educating the community about this complex social issue. There could be a QR code people scan for more information about where to give instead of giving to a person. Benchmarking regarding the success of the program was also discussed, i.e. the number of QR scans, clicks on the website, how many click through to donate.

A recommendation was made for setting up a Regional Round Table that represents the diverse perspectives and positions, including representatives from non-profits working in the field, government entities including the Hartford Community Court, regional police departments and regional social services to analyze the issue around panhandling with possible regional recommendations the Town Council could consider about how to address the societal issues are affecting panhandling and meet the needs of the community. There may be some recommended actions.

Ms. Calderon reported the data obtained is from the time period of 2019 to 2021 and included surveys, excluding the time of the pandemic, and complaint calls. The field workers were able to determine who was really homeless, those with substance abuse issues and who

was panhandling for many years or a combination of characteristics. Some have been connected with Journey Home and Community Court and some had been lost in the process. There are no dedicated social workers for this type of fieldwork. They have been doing these types of intervention outside.

Mr. Hart stated they will convening the Regional Round Table with both the public sector and non-profit partners and they are working on a draft ordinance related to aggressive panhandling, the public education campaign including signage and other things, and looking at resource allocation in terms of dedicating more social worker time, in particular, to this problem. They will regularly report to the Committee on their progress. Once they have a draft ordinance they will submit it to the Committee for review, determination of possible revisions and/or moving it on to the full Council.

C. Training Outline for Civilian Police Review Board – Mr. Hart went over the recommended outline for the training recommended for the new Civilian Police Review Board and mentioned the appointments for the Review Board will occur on May 11. Police Chief Riddick, Assistant Chief Terra and Mr. Hart worked with Corporation Counsel to put it together.

Chief Riddick provided a brief overview of the outline, which was broken out into eight categories; Orientation, Municipal Oversight Board with various subcategories, Legal Considerations to understand the implications and the laws involved, West Hartford Police Department/Citizen's Police Academy with some best practices and rules of conduct and other things going through in the citizen's academy and abridged-version training is provided for the members, Board Procedures including intake and review procedures, Ride-along in which a participant/Board member would ride with a patrol officer, Use of Force Simulator that is based on actual situations/scenarios and they go through them, as well as training simulations/scenarios to help officers and the public, and Simunitions Experience with paintballs going through various situations with the use of force or no use of force. These things are done with officers to assist with decision-making, verbal judo, and de-escalation techniques.

D. Fire Dept. Efficiency and Effectiveness Study – Mr. Hart reminded the Committee of the Efficiency and Effectiveness Study that Fitch Associates conducted a couple of years ago, pre-pandemic, and due to current events the discussion had to be suspended. At Mr. Hart's request, Chief Priest put together the key topics to be reviewed with the Committee over the next several months.

Chief Priest briefly discussed Fitch Associates being considered a subject-matter expert and they made some recommendations regarding efficiency and effectiveness. Chief Priest went over some of the topics and the proposed review schedule. Many of Fitch's outstanding recommendations had previously come before the Council including EMS deployment, personnel housing facilities, as well as issues in the Fire Marshal's office with inspections.

Deputy Mayor Davidoff requested the documentation be received before the Public Safety Meetings instead of the day of, so members could review the documents before the meeting

and come up with some talking points to be effective and be able to implement any required action steps at that time. If the documentation was received the night of the meeting, it would not be very helpful. Also, if anything is ripe for action, they can be moved forward to the Council table or if it does not need to be a policy decision, then the Fire Command could implement the things to be recognized and achieve the efficiencies and effectiveness necessary for the Department since on a day-to-day basis they know best how it can make things better.

Mr. Hart stated the documents would be provided to the members before the meetings to allow time for review.

3. Communications

Mr. Hart reported there were no communications.

4. Staff Reports

A. Fire Department – Chief Priest highlighted a written report, located in BoardDocs. The Department’s focus has been on the vaccinations, whether supporting the clinics, supporting the Health District, or providing medical stand-bys. Regarding the Department itself, the workforce is very stable. No one is out due to COVID. There is an open hiring process for EMTs and paramedics until June and there are hopes it will result in a larger, more diverse candidate pool. It is the first time in a long time that there is no firefighter certification requirement for EMTs. The Department has moved forward with some of the longer-term strategies to remove barriers for the candidate pool and the school district has been engaged in some of the discussions regarding how to do that very early on with the youth and encouraging them to come into this career field. Operationally, there has been a downward trend in the call volume, which is being monitored but there is no assigned reason for that. There have been several extractions lately, including one on the highway where the jaws-of-life were used. The firefighters have been doing significantly more training hours than previously. Also, the CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) is reforming. There are close to 70 people interested in CERT.

There has been a lot of lifesaving going on inside the department with the paramedics. There have been cardiac arrests where people have walked out of the hospital. Along the lines of safety, the Fire Marshal’s office has improved the number of inspections and is engaging the company office inspection program. One of the Fire Marshal staff recently completed her training and is now contributing to that workforce.

B. Police Department – Chief Riddick briefly went over the Action Plan relating to those with special needs or a person with autism who runs away. Often they seek water, lights and sirens have an impact on the individuals. There is a CARE component in the [cab 1:28:01] system where people can register and provide that information and the information will be available in advance of responses to residents’ homes for calls for service. Assistant Chief Terra has been assigned to the Use of Force Taskforce subcommittee. Part of the subcommittee’s task is to develop a curriculum and action plan going forward to implement

consistency statewide for all police departments. The training component is to be completed by January 2022. It is getting compressed. Currently it is seven or eight months. The goal is to have it rolled out by July 2021. Policies are still being put online. As policies continue to be updated they will be placed online with the caveat of anything dealing with details or security will not be placed online. Regarding the body cams, we just started with Panasonic. Two other vendors were Luxguard (previously Motorola) and Axion. Everything is planned to be completed for T&E by July 2021 with selection and purchase sometime around the end of July/early August.

Regarding the availability of funds, there is a state grant and inquiries have been made regarding funding. Because of West Hartford's status, we are probably eligible for 30% reimbursement and, unless there is a revision, 0% reimbursement for in-car cams because they were purchased after 2010, per the grant. Regarding the 1033 Program, the military surplus program, contact has been made and approval received and 19 rifles will be sent to Michigan in the next 3 weeks. Regarding the efforts to increase minority hiring, conversations have been had with St. Joe's Director of Inclusion and Diversity, to get some partnerships and have people apply once they graduate and the same thing at the University of New Haven. Contact was made with Dr. Boyd, who is the Chair of the Diversity and Equity Inclusion, to get them to think about West Hartford.

Chief Riddick briefly went over the Use of Statistics for 2020. In 2020, there were 164 cases where force was utilized and of those 164 cases, they generated 441 Use of Force reports. If there was a situation where force was used and there was more than one police officer, each officer submitted a Use of Force document. Use of Force is documented for anything more than mere touching. The attempt to handcuff is not a use of force. If a person pulls away or runs or there is any type of resistance, a Use of Force report is required. The number of suspects where force was used totaled 196, understanding there were multiple suspects at the same incident and there were 136 occasions where an arrest was made. Some may question why all 196 were not arrested, some of those situations included those with mental illness and were out of control, running away, and many times there was minimal force used, just holding people down until medical could arrive. Chief Riddick went over the types of force used including hand/fist/foot, displaying Taser, use of Taser with and without probe deployment, displaying handgun/rifle/shotgun and other means (K9). The total number of suspects injured was 32 and the total number of officers injured was 20. In 2020, out of 45,000 calls for service, 0.36% involved the use of force.

Something that was planned for last year was a defensive tactics course for women to defend themselves against assaults and rapes. It was shelved due to the pandemic; however, it is being revisited for this year. In addition, the College Academy is being restarted in June.

C. Town Manager – Mr. Hart recommended resuming meetings on a monthly schedule to stay on top of the work and to get through it in a timely way. Meetings were being held every couple of months but now that meetings can be held in person and a hybrid offering, Mr. Hart recommended resuming a monthly schedule. Mr. Hart also highlighted the interdisciplinary approach to solve complex problems. This consists of a several departments working together to arrive at better solutions than departments working alone or in silos

using the issue regarding panhandling as an example of the interdisciplinary approach being used.

5. Future Agenda Items

There were no future agenda items identified.

6. Adjournment

A. Meeting adjourned at 8:46 p.m.

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