



TOWN OF WARNER

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Select Board Meeting DRAFT Minutes

Monday, 8:30 am, September 26, 2022, Lower Meeting Room, Warner Town Hall, 5 E Main St

I. 8:30 am Open the Meeting/Roll Call

8:40 a.m. Select Person Christine Frost opened the meeting

Present: Select Person Christine Frost, Select Person Lois Shea. (Chairman Sam Bower was not in attendance.)

Also present: Welfare Director Elizabeth Labbe; Town Administrator Diane Ricciardelli

Absent: Select Board Chair Sam Bower

Recording Secretary: Ray Carbone.

II. Welfare

Select Person Frost asked Welfare Director Elizabeth Labbe to tell the Board about her duties and activities.

Labbe said at the end of every year, she submits a report to the Select Board addressing what she does and exactly how her Department's budget is spent; the latter usually involves rental assistance while the former includes engaging with other agencies to provide emergency assistance for residents. The report is included in the annual Town Report.

Labbe said the needs she addresses are typically brought to her attention either from a phone call or personal contact by someone seeking help. The Welfare Department has a 28-page application that must be completed to receive assistance, although that formality can sometimes be set aside in emergency situations, i.e., for housing or in a case of domestic violence. Then Labbe does an evaluation and issues a Notice of Decision. (She said that the NH Municipal Association provides a great program that outlines both the history of Public Welfare Assistance in the State, as well as the State Statutes that outline the municipality's requirements.)

Responsibilities involve responding to what is revealed in the application and discussions with the applicant. Part of the work involves contacting and working with other nonprofit organizations to best identify needs and then apply for the resources that can help the person/family. Assisting organizations include organizations like the NH Rental Association (NHRA); however, it is sometimes challenging to get the right person there on the phone.

Labbe said Warner Connects Food Pantry can also be helpful because it also serves as a resource center for people. The State-operated Family Resource Center can be supportive; however, there are none in the immediate area. "They are overwhelmed too," Labbe said of the State organization. She noted that the State is now operating "Community Navigator Programs" in each county where "navigators" (i.e., social workers) provide support to individuals/families.

Currently, Labbe said she is spending a good amount of time updating the Town's welfare guidelines; this involves working with the NH Local Welfare Administrators' Association (LWAA), as well as speaking with other welfare administrators around the State and studying welfare information posted on other Towns' websites. Labbe's current

guideline draft is about 48 pages long, and she asked that the Board review it when it's complete. (The Select Board is required to review these guidelines periodically.)

Labbe is also working with Town Webmaster Dan Watts to have the updated information, as well as a welfare application, posted on the Town website.

Select Person Frost thanked Labbe for the difficult job that she does, and said her work may be "underappreciated" in some instances. Frost said she believes the Welfare Director should be a salaried or hourly-wage position. (It is currently a stipend position in Warner) She asked Labbe if she could estimate her weekly hours (while recognizing that she's sometimes called into emergency situations at night and/or on weekends), as well as the skills that are needed to do the job.

Labbe said she agreed the Welfare Director position should be paid in a different way. She said she generally puts in about 16 hours per week, but that can vary greatly depending on cases or current situations, e.g., her current efforts to update the guidelines.

Labbe said she did some research and found that, in many small Towns around New Hampshire, the Welfare Department relies heavily on volunteers. She noted that, in larger communities, there are more resources, and those Departments sometimes operate more like social service agencies.

Frost asked Labbe about the demographics of the people the Town serves. "We have families, and most of the people we help with rental assistance have minor children," Labbe responded. The Kearsarge Regional School District has a good program that monitors and responds to the needs of children of middle and high school age, she added. "They have it networked out," she said. Still, some families - especially single mothers - with young children can make requests to the Town for help several times a year. (Labbe said that most people she helps only request help once.)

Frost asked about average disbursements and duration of support. Labbe said an average monthly rental in Warner can be between \$1,000 and \$1,600; electric or oil can add another \$300-\$800. She said NH Emergency Rental Assistance (ERAP) is sometimes able to help with those costs.

Housing and home heating are the two most common problems the Department addresses, Labbe told the Board. Some of those costs could be picked up by larger agencies (like NHRA) but it's not always easy to get them onboard when the problem arises. Labbe said that some "shining stars" in the community regularly help out with her clients; one in particular "goes out of his way" to help with emergency housing and that is not always easy because there is a delay between an application for help and its funding. (That "in-between" period is not reimbursed, even after an application is approved.)

Frost asked Labbe if she had a sense of how many homeless people are in Warner, and the Director said she didn't. She said there are people who may be "couch-surfing" among friends and families at any time. "I'm dealing with two (homeless) families now," Labbe explained. "And I've engaged with somebody else who was also homeless... I'm getting people who don't have any other resources. No family, nothing. Sometimes these are medically fragile people.

"I do get frustrated that we have disabled individuals that are falling through the cracks and into my hands," she added, including military veterans.

"For me, the starting place (in establishing the way the Welfare Director position is paid) would be being able to outline what you do, who you serve and the skillset that's required to do this work" Frost told Labbe, adding that some "soft skills" are difficult to define. She asked Labbe if she could begin working on a list of these things.

Ricciardelli said the Town has a job description for the Welfare Director, but the Board noted that the exact skills are not included in that at this time. Shea told Labbe if she could list the skills and issues that Frost has asked for, someone else could write up the job description. Frost suggested having a discussion of the Welfare Director position on a future Select Board Meeting agenda, maybe in 2 weeks.

Frost asked Labbe to estimate how much money her Department spent this year. Town Administrator Ricciardelli said it was already over \$23,000, and the Town originally budgeted only \$12,000.

Frost asked Labbe if she thought she'd be able to operate her Department on \$20,000 in 2023 if the Board recommended that figure. Labbe said she knows what the legal responsibilities of the Town are. Frost asked if (in the past) it was "fair to say that Warner hasn't provided the (legally required)" help in a manner that's appropriate. Labbe agreed. Labbe mentioned that there were people who felt that the Welfare Department didn't fulfill its required obligations.

Town Administrator Ricciardelli said lawsuits apparently occurred before she served in her position; at that time, the former Town Administrator also served as Welfare Director. Frost asked Ricciardelli to find out how much the Town has spent in legal fees for Welfare Department cases.

Labbe said she would send the Board the requested information – regarding skills, demographics, etc. – and to the Board's Administrative Assistant.

Labbe also told the Board that she would like to ask NH Municipal Association to offer a training program for smaller Towns like Warner that have a single and/or volunteer Overseer of Public Welfare. She said it would cost about \$500-\$600 to have the program in the Town Hall, and that other small Towns could be invited to attend. Frost thanked Labbe again for her work.

Frost asked Ricciardelli whether the Board would need to have a Warrant Article for the upcoming Annual Town Meeting if it wanted to make the Welfare Director's position one that is salaried or paid hourly. Ricciardelli said she would check into it; it might be possible to add it to the annual Operating Budget, which would be reviewed by the Budget Committee and submitted for Town Meeting.

Frost also suggested they could use some of the Town's unspent ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds to pay for the position. Labbe said that, from what she understood, that would be valid.

Town Administrator Ricciardelli said that might be the case, especially since the cost of the Welfare Department was "drastically different" than it was two years ago (i.e., before the pandemic). She added that Select Board Admin Asst Newman-Rogers would be able to provide some insights about this since, as a longtime Town employee, she is aware of both the relevant State Statutes and how Warner's process has worked in the past.

Labbe said it is an "enormous privilege" to serve the people in Warner when they are dealing with their "worst days." She can't solve every problem, she added, "but I can always treat them with dignity and compassion." Town Administrator Diane Ricciardelli said the Town is fortunate to have Labbe.

At 9:39 a.m., Ricciardelli recommended that the Board go into a Non-Public Session.

III. Non-Public Session - Under 91-A:3 II(c) - matters if discussed in public would likely affect adversely the reputation of any person; this extends to any application for assistance, tax abatement or waiver of a fee, fine, or other levy, if based on inability to pay or poverty of the applicant.

Frost made a motion to go into Non-Public Session

1. Second: Shea

2. Vote by roll call: Shea- Yes Frost- Yes
3. Motion: Passed
4. Enter Non-public session at: Time – 9:40 am

Motion to Return to Public Session by: Frost

1. Second: Shea
2. Vote by roll call: Shea - Yes Frost- Yes
3. Motion: Passed
4. Return to Public session at: Time – 10:05 am

Motion on minutes by: Frost

Seal: **Forever due to Privacy/Non-public Information**

1. Second: Shea
2. Vote on minutes by roll call: Shea - Yes Frost- Yes
3. Motion on Minutes: Passed

III. Adjourn

No public business was announced.

At that time, without objection, Vice-Chairman Frost adjourned the meeting.