

Regional Roundtable on Panhandling Summary Report

On Wednesday, July 14, 2021, the Town of West Hartford hosted a regional roundtable at the Town of West Hartford Town Hall to discuss panhandling and the complex set of various issues surrounding why individuals may choose to panhandle within the greater Hartford, CT region. The roundtable participants and presenters consisted of various individuals from police departments, community court, social services departments and non-profit service providers. The primary objective of the roundtable was to gather a variety of perspectives, in order to begin the conversation of how to address panhandling, how to address the underlying causes of why they panhandle, and how to educate residents about panhandling.

Roundtable Participants included:

Helen Rubino-Turco, Town of West Hartford	Carl Asikainen, CT Coalition to End Homelessness
Astrid Calderon, Town of West Hartford	Marcia DuFore, Amplify
Aaron Vafiades, West Hartford Police Dept.	Carl Shields, West Hartford Prevention Council
Jim Barrett, City of Hartford Police Dept.	Carol Labrecque, Town of Newington
Douglas Antuna, City of Hartford Police Dept.	Erica Texeira, Town of Wethersfield
Cynthia Lauture, Town of West Hartford	Christina Morra-Tu, Town of Wethersfield
Tom O'Brien, Hartford Community Court	Kimberly Bona, Capitol Region Council of Governments
Crystal Henry, Hartford Community Court	Keren Paquette, Town of West Hartford
Kelly Waterhouse, Town of West Hartford	Jackie Zea-Edgar, Town of West Hartford
Laurie Mucciacciaro, Town of Farmington	

The moderator was Helen Rubino-Turco, Director of Leisure Services and Social Services for the Town of West Hartford.

Presentations

A summary of the presentations highlighting the key messages from each of the panelists is given below:

Helen Rubino-Turco, Director of Social Services, Town of West Hartford

In opening the roundtable, Ms. Rubino-Turco provided an overview of the steps the Town of West Hartford has thus far taken in analyzing the issue of panhandling. The Town of West Hartford has seen an increase in panhandling throughout town. In response to concerns expressed by Town Council members, town residents, visitors and property owners, the Town established an internal working group, consisting of Police, Social Services and the Corporation Counsel's Office. This working group was charged with assessing the issue of panhandling and reviewing possible actions that the Town may consider to address the needs of individuals who panhandle.

The term panhandling has come to be a shorthand for a range of activities and behaviors, some of them negative, and associated with those individuals who find themselves on the streets and sidewalks, usually asking for money. Ms. Rubino-Turco further noted that panhandling is protected by the First Amendment, and the Town of West Hartford is focused on coming up with a course of action to cease the activity of aggressive panhandling.

The internal working group considered several actions in an effort to address panhandling including,

- Conduct outreach to individuals panhandling in town;
- Draft and implement an ordinance with concrete guidelines for enforcement;
- Develop a public education/public outreach campaign in collaboration with service providers, which may or may not include signage;
- Hiring an additional social worker to provide outreach and support;
- Establish a regional initiative with neighboring municipalities;

And in putting together this roundtable, the hope is that the participants can provide their respective thoughts on the actions that West Hartford is considering, what has and has not worked within their respective organizations to address panhandling and the underlying concerns, and thoughts on the best way to move forward as a larger community.

Ms. Rubino-Turco noted that invitees present at the roundtable include social workers from West Hartford and neighboring towns, representatives from various police departments, Community Court, corporation counsel's office, representatives from social service agencies working in the field, and a staff member from the Capitol Region Council of Governments. She further stated that this is only the first step in what she hopes will be a continuing conversation to assist those in our communities that need our help.

Ms. Rubino-Turco further noted that the Town of West Hartford Social Services and West Hartford Police Department (WHPD) sought to gather hard data by putting together a comprehensive survey interviewing those individuals who panhandle within the Town of West Hartford. Ms. Rubino-Turco subsequently introduced Astrid Calderon, to explain the findings of the survey conducted by Social Services and the Police Department.

Astrid Calderon, Social Worker Manager, Town of West Hartford

Ms. Calderon reported on steps that the Town has taken in an effort to gather information about the issue of panhandling in West Hartford. In 2019, West Hartford Police invited Ms. Calderon to attend a two-day training in Orlando, Florida called “Rethinking Homelessness¹.” Ms. Calderon implemented the tools she received from the training in Florida to, survey panhandlers in the community. Ten (10) individuals who panhandle were interviewed utilizing targeted questions focused on gathering demographic and qualitative data, and before Ms. Calderon could finalize her findings, the pandemic hit. Subsequently, residents started raising concerns about some of the things they were seeing with panhandlers in their respective areas, such as, pregnant women and young people on the street panhandling. Following lockdown, there was a slight increase in the number of panhandlers, with WHPD receiving frequent requests for wellness checks. In the spring of 2021, the WHPD interviewed 10-15 people who currently panhandle in West Hartford, similar to the survey conducted in 2019. The survey was consistent with previously found data, but also found, that there were new panhandlers in West Hartford, some individuals were disabled, and some were pressured by others to panhandle and turn the money over. Social Services is continuously working on community education about panhandling.

Lieutenant Aaron Vafiades, Community Relations, West Hartford Police Department

Lt. Vafiades reported that he was tasked with researching the types of signage available to possibly discourage motorists from giving money to panhandlers and disrupting traffic, similar to the anti-panhandling signs around Gilbert and Phoenix, Arizona. Some options he came across included signs saying “don’t donate” or signs encouraging donating to an organization instead of directly to the panhandlers who may use the money for illicit purposes. He recommends taking a less aggressive approach to signs and maybe soliciting businesses who would be willing to display flyers with QR Codes that link to educational information about panhandling for community members. There are additional concerns that need to be resolved before considering putting signs, such as, what is the alternative to giving money, how would donations be managed, and the types of educational material to be provided. Lt. Vafiades thinks that the public may not be aware of the complex issues surrounding panhandling, which is why the Police Department frequently receives calls from concerned citizens requesting

¹ Rethinking Homelessness is a national initiative that brings together elected officials, non-profit leaders, service providers, and community leaders together to discuss best practice strategies in an effort to help those impacted by homelessness and poverty.

wellness checks or making inquiry into why the Town is not doing more to help those who are on the street soliciting money.

Officer Jim Barrett, Hartford Police Department, City of Hartford

Officer Barrett explained that he has done extensive outreach to the homeless community. Based on his conversations with the homeless community and his own observations, he reports that mental health facilities and shelters are overpopulated, and it is very difficult for those in need to access them. He also talked about how little the community knows about “the working homeless” – people who are out there working full time jobs, but have no home to go to and are sleeping in cars or under bridges, and the difficulty they have in trying to access services through 2-1-1². Officer Barrett emphasized that the difficulty with 2-1-1 is, it is available to those in need from 9am-5pm, and frequently those in need are calling for services after hours, and no one is available to assist. Furthermore, there are frequently no shelter beds available. Officer Barrett noted that, “the system is broken.” He also indicated the issue with fentanyl and addiction within the panhandling population, and noted that he tries to get ahead of some of the issues by working with prisoners being released. Officer Barrett noted that he builds relationship with released prisoners in an effort to ensure that they have the support and services that they need to avoid going back down the wrong path. Furthermore, he has heard from those who panhandle, that West Hartford is a more lucrative location to panhandle.

Officer Barrett was joined by Sergeant Doug Antuna, from the Hartford Police Department’s Community Outreach Unit.

Helen Rubino-Turco, Director of Social Services, Town of West Hartford

Ms. Rubino-Turco noted that one of the tenets in putting this roundtable together is to start to discuss the larger societal context factors in order to understand how they may contribute to people choosing to engage in the practice of panhandling. Some of those societal factors include addiction, mental health issues, homelessness and poverty. And there are people who will be speaking at this roundtable who can further discuss how those societal factors may lead to someone panhandling, and the work that their respective organizations have done to help those in need.

Cynthia Lauture, Assistant Corporation Counsel, Town of West Hartford

Attorney Lauture explained that part of the avenues that the Town was considering to address the issue of panhandling was an ordinance prohibiting panhandling. The Office of Corporation Counsel reviewed the panhandling ordinances of neighboring communities in an effort to understand how said communities enforce panhandling violations while also simultaneously recognizing panhandlers’ First Amendment rights. Panhandling is a complex issue, and holding up a sign is not against the law, so it is a matter of seeing what can be done to address

² 2-1-1 is a free, confidential information and referral service that connects people to essential health and human services.

aggressive panhandling. Attorney Lauture reported that aggressive panhandling can be seen as more behavior based, it doesn't have to become physical, but can involve such activities as blocking someone's path or communicating threats in an effort to get money. She reported that throughout various municipalities within Connecticut, the ordinance language was very similar, but that there were very different enforcement levels and responses – it appears that sometimes municipalities will issue a \$99 fine for a panhandling violation and/or issue a summons to appear at Community Court. The question then becomes how does the Town of West Hartford enforce any panhandling ordinance in a meaningful way and how does that potentially trickle down to Community Court.

Thomas O'Brien, Senior Assistant State's Attorney, Hartford Community Court

Attorney O'Brien noted that panhandling is an issue in which he has done extensive research on, on both a local and international level. Attorney O'Brien explained that "panhandling is a social problem, not a criminal problem." The public perception is that a lot of panhandlers are homeless, but Mr. O'Brien has found in his discussion with some individuals who panhandle, that is not necessarily always the case. Those individuals are usually part of our community and part of their own subset community. There are many different reasons for panhandling but Attorney O'Brien found in his research that there is a large percentage of substance abuse and addiction among the community. He stressed the importance of "building community relationships" and "humanizing people" to make them feel valued. Attorney O'Brien stated that the Community Court's involvement can be helpful to building those relationships and talked about some success that observed when a group of panhandlers were brought together to discuss panhandling. An Asylum Hill Neighborhood Association decided they wanted to help panhandlers, and reached out to Attorney O'Brien for guidance. Attorney O'Brien coordinated a meeting between the association and a group of individuals that panhandled. While Attorney O'Brien was not privy to the conversation between the parties, the parties reported that it was a positive experience on both ends. He found that afterwards, arrests for panhandling decreased for several months, leading him to conclude that humanizing and treating the panhandlers with respect and making a personal connection made a difference, and could make a difference in linking individuals to services with leverage from the Court if needed.

Attorney O'Brien was joined by Crystal Henry, from Hartford Community Court.

Carl Asikainen, Project Manager Field Mobilization, CT Coalition to End Homelessness

Mr. Asikainen reported that partnerships with law enforcement is vital to outreach workers and that you need to "meet aggressive panhandling w/assertive outreach," and that there should be specialized training for outreach workers to go out there and be able to provide adequate assistance. Mr. Asikainen further explained the importance of building rapport and getting to know the panhandlers in order to build appropriate wrap around services. That is why it is

important for future discussions to include 2-1-1 and Coordinated Access Network (CAN)³, as they are the parties that can best discuss the gaps in the services that exist. Mr. Asikainen further noted that he agrees with the earlier assessment, that there is not enough room in the homeless shelters, as it is a prioritized system. He also emphasized that getting to know the panhandlers in your community can present a good opportunity to capitalize and engage them in services.

Marcia DuFore, Executive Director, Amplify

Amplify helps communities identify gaps in services and develop plans to advocate for available resources. Ms. DuFore noted that although Amplify does not engage in direct outreach, they do conduct a lot of needs assessments. She further noted that the Central Action Network (CAN) is available from 9am-5pm, which may impede the ability of someone looking for services, and that for both 2-1-1 and CAN, timing and availability of services is a big issue and barrier. The North Central Region received a significant amount of funding from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to do outreach with well trained, skilled outreach workers. Ms. DuFore further agreed that outreach workers need to be trained in Motivational Interviewing and Outreach.

Carl Shields, Chair of the Town of West Hartford Prevention Council

Mr. Shield reported that on May 13th, the West Hartford Prevention Council, with the assistance of two Masters of Public Health students from UCONN, completed a Community Wellness Assessment which used statewide data and local surveys to conduct the 1st ever wellness study in West Hartford. The West Hartford Prevention Council will use the information gathered from this study to better inform and identify prevention efforts and tasks moving forward over the next few years.

Carol Labrecque, Director of Human Services, Town of Newington

Ms. Labrecque reported that the Town of Newington has about three to six active panhandlers, and the panhandling issue has diminished over the last year. Police and Human Services in Newington have collaborated on an as needed basis. Ms. Labrecque explained her concerns regarding the CAN system and the difficulty people have finding shelter. The numbers of rehoused people are skewed by people who drop out of the system out of frustration. At one point, the Town of Newington looked at the issue of panhandling and considered an ordinance, but given the Constitutionality concerns and freedom of speech, they opted to address panhandling by utilizing laws like reckless use of a roadway, trespassing, etc.

³ Coordinated Access Network – a provider of services to people experiencing homelessness. 2-1-1 refers anyone experiencing a housing crisis to the CAN.

Erica Texeira, Assistant Director of Social Services, Town of Wethersfield

Wethersfield Social Services sees myriad levels of homelessness/panhandling. There are many transient people in motels on the Berlin Turnpike. Wethersfield Social Services have found that there are also groups of clients in subsidized housing who panhandle for extra money. Ms. Texeira reported that Wethersfield Social Services is a small department so it is difficult to do a lot of outreach. She further noted she also has had difficulty accessing the services of 2-1-1, as some of her clients are not deemed homeless, so they do not get prioritized. Ms. Texeira emphasized that there needs to be a focus on prevention and helping people before they become homeless, as there are people sleeping on couches, that may very likely be evicted and end up on the street the next day.

Ms. Texeira was joined by Christina Morra-Tu, from the Town of Wethersfield Social Services Department.

Kimberly Bona, Program Manager, Capitol Region Council of Governments (CRCOG)

Ms. Bona indicated that this is the first time that the issue of panhandling has been brought to CRCOG's attention. Since CRCOG has assisted municipalities in the past with issues such as hoarding, they may be able to help address this issue as well. Ms. Bona will speak with CRCOG's Public Safety Committee and Human Services Committee about panhandling, and about adding this as an agenda item, and perhaps members of this roundtable can come participate at one of the next meetings.

Recommendations and Action Points Arising out of the Regional Roundtable on Panhandling

- Ms. Rubino-Turco outlined that this meeting is a starting point, and just the beginning of the conversation. Moreover, while West Hartford was happy to initiate the conversation, the emphasis should be on a regional group, such as CRCOG, taking the lead in this effort to bring towns together to address the different societal issues underlying panhandling. She further stated that a number of parties who wished to attend this event, were unable to do so. This list includes, Kim Beauregard from InterCommunity Healthcare; Sara Wilson from Journey Home; Liany Elba Arroyo from Hartford Social Services and Camilla Hillian from Bloomfield Social Services, As such, she will keep them apprised them of next steps and any future events.
- Ms. Labrecque and Ms. Texeira will present the issues identified during the roundtable to the Connecticut Local Administrators of Social Services (CLASS) executive committee.
- Efforts should be made to develop a regional strategy to address panhandling, that incorporates best practices from successful work to inform the strategy.
- An emphasis should be placed on getting others to the table to discuss panhandling. A holistic perspective with a comprehensive responsibility that includes the mental health side, addiction services, and homelessness should be included.
- Recommendations were made to have the following parties including in future regional discussions regarding panhandling:
 - It was noted that people with “lived experience” should be included in further meetings.
 - Ms. DuFore added affordable supportive housing options have to be part of the conversation as well. She also noted that Chrysalis⁴ might be good to bring to the table for that conversation, as well as, The Partnership for Strong Communities, which just received a grant to address housing assistance to serve youth and young adults experiencing homelessness.
 - Mr. Shields referenced the success of the Housing First Program, and that Crane Cesario, Housing and Homeless Resource Director for Shelter Plus Care, should be involved in any future discussions. Mr. Shields also noted he would advocate that whoever the Town of West Hartford hires as a social worker to liaison with the police, be trained in “person centered training.”
 - Attorney O’Brien recommended that Community Partners in Action, an organization focused on re-entry services, also be a party to future discussions.
 - It was further noted that 2-1-1, CAN and Journey Home should be a party of any future discussions had by the group.
- Follow up meeting – scheduled for November 9, 2021 by CRCOG’s Human Services Coordinating Council.

⁴ Chrysalis Center provides supportive services to assist people in need, such as through job training, employment services, housing and other community healthcare needs.