

Needham Youth & Family Services

Notes from April 12, 2023, Board Meeting

Meeting Commenced at 5:30 pm, in person and on Zoom in the Highland Room, Needham Town Hall.

Board in Attendance: Susan Patkin, David Bookston, Julie Stevens, Will Holland, Karen Mullen, Jill Mullaney, Joseph Brienze (School Resource Officer)

Director: Ms. Sara Shine

Minutes March 8, 2023. Mr. Bookston made a motion to approve the March minutes. Ms. Patkin seconded. The March 8 minutes unanimously approved by voice vote.

Update on Community Needs and Crisis Response

Ms. Shine noted that there continues to be a wait list and mental health needs. Currently waitlist stands at forty-one. Mr. Brienze reported that there has been an uptick in what the police manages.

Ms. Shine noted that there has always been collaboration at the schools but with the pandemic and the increased mental health need, this partnership is even stronger. In addition, some open positions have created more of a need for this partnership.

More parents are calling for case management/community consultations as well as general services. There is also an increase in funding requests due to impending homelessness. Y&FS staff have been able to connect families with some much-needed support and have extended the community wide reach by helping support these community members.

In discussing the community needs and mental health availability Ms. Shine noted that counseling availability is a bit better than a year ago although waitlists still do exist. In a couple of instances, Ms. Shine explained that youth were connected with a provider in about a month. These waitlists are very dependent on insurance company coverage or ability to pay out of pocket, age of client, and ability to travel out of the area. There was a further discussion about many therapists dropping insurance due to the extensive amounts of paperwork and expectations so many are doing private pay only, which many families cannot afford.

Board members discussed the increase in stress around college admissions for seniors and end of year studying for everyone else. This stress is currently very present as there is a May 1 deadline for many college admissions decisions.

Ms. Fitzpatrick Town manager confirmed receipt of the letter from the Youth & Family Services Board highlighting the mental health crisis and the need for additional support and space. Ms. Fitzpatrick is in full support of the mental health needs of the community and is understanding of the increased needs. The Board discussed inviting Ms. Fitzpatrick to a

meeting and Ms. Stevens, Chair, will invite her to a future meeting to discuss the issues and ways the community can be best supported.

Ms. Shine noted that during the Finance Committee Meeting, members raised the issue again of billing insurance which as Ms. Shine noted is an access barrier as well a resource commitment to bill insurance and track reimbursements. Members discussed the pros and cons of billing for services, and all were in support of keeping Y&FS free for clinical work. Ms. Shine will, again, put together a document explaining the implications of this for future needs. Ms. Shine is also preparing a synopsis for the ARPA position showing all the work that the position accomplishes in the interest of keeping it Town funded.

Ms. Shine talked about other towns that are being creative in how they are supporting the increased mental health needs. One model involved housing insurance-based clinicians in schools so that they can see students for therapy through the school day and bill insurance. Other districts are increasing guidance staffing while others are focusing on trainings and awareness campaigns. Ms. Shine will continue to explore other options to find ways to best meet the increased needs.

Update on Programs, Services and Awards

- Winter Groups – planning for ongoing groups is underway.
 - Ellen and Christine are running a Candid Conversations group for 4th and 5th graders. This 6 week group has 10 participants and focuses on social skills, problem solving and coping skills.
 - Ellen and Hannah are consistently working with a group with ELL students to support them with social emotional learning. Many of the students arrived from war-torn countries and/or escaping gang violence. Their levels of comfortability with English vary but they are becoming more open with staff about their families and losses.
 - Kelsey and Grace have wrapped up **lunch groups** at Eliot for 2nd, 3rd, and 4th graders. These groups were very well attended and staff will continue to run them in the fall.
 - Ellen and Grace are running **lunch groups** at Sunita Williams for 2nd, 3rd and 4th graders. Similar to the groups at Eliot, students eat their lunch and engage in therapeutic games and activities.
 - **Coffee Talk** - Coffee Talk meets at Needham High School every Thursday morning during the x block. It is open to all high schoolers. The program is designed for students to drop in for a donut and a cup of coffee and discuss anything on their minds. So far, the topics have included: active shooter drills, homework stress, NHS cellphone policies, and end-of-the-semester exams. We plan on continuing to offer Coffee Talk indefinitely. It is fairly well attended weekly.
 - Ellen and Hannah are working on a group for 8th graders that will take place at Pollard starting April 24th. This group will focus on coping and social skills in addition to anxiety and depression support.
 - Pollard Middle School has requested a group for students who have had losses in their families as there are a number of students who have experienced this. Hannah is taking the lead on this group and working with the school to process how this group will run. The plan is to run a couple of workshops this year with a more formal group over the summer.

Ms. Shine noted that with two interns next year and shared office space on the first floor for some afternoon meetings she hopes to be able to reduce the wait list. Ms. Shine noted one intern is coming from Smith College and the other from Boston College. She noted the interns next year will be able to run more lunch groups. Currently Y&FS has 67 active clients and 41 youth on the waitlist.

Alyssa in the main office is reaching out to local providers and maintaining sophisticated lists. She has developed a rapport with many families and many local providers to connect people with needed resources.

Youth & Family Services worked with the Needham Exchange Club on hosting **Ryan's Story** for the second year. Ryan's Story is a community presentation that is focused on bullying, social media use and suicide prevention. This event took place on March 29th and had about 45 attendees. SRO, Joseph Brienze brought Office Rocket, the Police Service Dog, which was a huge support to students and families who were hearing difficult information. Both Ryan's Story and Family Fun night (50 attended) went well in March. Y&FS hosted another Family Night on March 30th at the Center at the Heights which was a huge success. The purpose of this event was to help families connect to each other and to Y&FS through dinner, games, arts and crafts and cookie decorating. The event was sold out and had about 50 participants.

Y&FS is working with Dr. Mitch Ablett, a Wellesley-based psychologist, who is presenting a workshop on Tuesday, May 9th at the CATH titled "**The Mindful Path to Unwinding Anxiety for Kids and Teens**". Dr. Ablett will address the epidemic of anxiety impact youth and will guide the group through specific hands-on, mindfulness-based tools for breaking the brain-based habits of anxiety that limit peer and family relationships, academic outcomes and overall well-being. Mr. Brienze brought Rocket to Ryan's Story and will try to get Ghost the new dog in training for this session.

Ms. Shine is investigating the rules for volunteer babysitting events (a group of teens have volunteered) which would allow parents to participate. Certainly, parents would welcome it and it would increase attendance so she is meeting with town counsel to discuss liability concerns. This would be a great model for next year as some of the earlier timed programs could include dinner and increase overall family attendance.

Y&FS is working with a local expressive art therapist, Tova Speter, on providing workshops for the community. **Tova Speter, LMHC** consultant with a Master's degree in Mental Health Counseling and Art Therapy, she has over 20 years of experience working at the intersection of arts and healing, and offers art therapy and mental health counseling services through her private practice. Staff are planning a **Rain Art Workshop** for Teens which is a 2-part series. The first part will gather a group of teens to help brainstorm and create designs for the sidewalk art in Needham that will magically appear when it rains. Artwork will be inspired by themes of how we refresh and renew ourselves and find joy. Every participant will also be able to create their own magical art to take home. The second part will be a scavenger hunt for families once the art is live on the sidewalks. Y&FS is excited to host this event with Tova.

Needham Unplugged: The 2023 edition is completed, and Y&FS had so much engagement this year. After 21 years in operation, the community still values the mission of Needham Unplugged. The goal of Unplugged is to encourage families to unplug from technology and engage with one another without these distractions.

Peer Tutor - Peer Tutor is a program that offers tutoring to 4th through 8th graders in Needham at no cost! The tutees are matched with a tutor (Needham high schooler) based on academic needs. The tutor and the tutee meet weekly at the library. Tutors receive community service hours for participating in the program. This year we have 28 matches! We are looking at the possibility of changing the program a bit next year to have multiple sessions and set tutor days/times. Staff are currently collecting feedback and gathering information from students.

VIP (peer mentoring program) had its last session last week. Staff are meeting with mentors next week to process the year. This year was a huge success with 25 pairs meeting regularly. The pairs did an amazing job working on social skills and building that mentoring relationship. We are already talking about the next school year and how the program will be run.

Volunteers Around Needham will continue this year. This program is an opportunity for middle and high school students to give back to the community while also getting their needed community service hours. We are planning 2 days for April Vacation – one at the Charles River Center where the volunteers assist program staff during the vacation program for kids with special needs and one at the Fire Station where students will engage in a workshop and help to organize the fire station. It was noted that the volunteer hours for the middle school requirement ended April 8 (before April Vacation) which may impact numbers of participants. Ms. Shine is going to reach out to Pollard to see if this can be changed in future years.

Ms. Shine also noted all the committees are doing well. Staff are participating in the Substance Prevention Alliance of Needham, Chapter 84, a Homelessness Committee, the Domestic Violence Action Team, The Community Crisis Intervention Team, the Youth Resource Network, a Youth Services Meeting and a Community Health Resource group.

Public Health is sponsoring an April 13 Alcohol Health Safety Prevention workshop and on May 2 an event on the social host laws which includes a session on what parents should look for re: vaping and other drug paraphernalia.

Old Business

Ms. Stevens noted she will send the invitation to Ms. Fitzpatrick for the June meeting.

The May meeting is the potluck and Ms. Shine will coordinate the sign ups and invitations to current and past members of the Youth & Family Services Board.

Mr. Bookston made a motion to adjourn. Ms. Patkin seconded the motion. Unanimous vote to adjourn by voice vote. Meeting adjourned at 6:15 pm

Notes by: Faith Crisley, Recording Secretary
Edited By: Sara Shine, Director