**Minutes of TNP Annual Meeting**

**Held 6/5/24 at Norwalk Public Library**

**Present**:Anthony Certo (Norwalk Strong Club - youth sector); Kaitlin Comet (The Hub); Crystal Reynolds (Norwalk Strong - youth sector); Nina Ch…; Nicole Hampton (High Focus Treatment Centers - parent sector); Dave Walenczyk (Norwalk Youth Services - youth-serving sector) Katie Gallo (Daydream Communications - media sector & parent); AnaVivian Estrella (City of Norwalk - local government sector & TNP leadership team); Anamilena Mileno (Norwalk ACTS - civic sector); Diamond Sead (HSC - health sector & parent); Ayesha Santana (HSC / SBHC - health); Vivian Balazs (Norwalk Strong -youth sector); Nia Holley (Youth Business Initiative - youth-serving sector); Paul Reinhardt (NC Parent Support Group - fraternal); Jess Vivenzio (FCA - civic); Kelley Tomlinson (Norwalk Health Dpt - health & local govt); Lamond Daniels (City of Norwalk - local govt sector); Jake Tejada (Norwalk Strong- youth sector); Tory Sullivan (BMHS - school sector); Margaret Watt (Positive Directions - substance sector); Hiba Nbou (Prevention Corps - substance sector); Kadeem Roberts (state rep - govt sector)

*Special guests*: Denique Weidema-Lewis (DMHAS); Daniela Montes-Hawley (DMHAS); Vineeta Mathur (City of Stamford); Steve Kleppin (Norwalk Planning & Zoning); Lt. Tomasz Podgorski (Norwalk Police Department); Ingrid Gillespie (Liberation Programs/Stamford Prevention Coalition)

**Welcome / Networking**

The meeting opened with refreshments, resources, and time for members to sign next year’s Coalition Involvement Agreement. AnaVivian welcomed everyone & briefly explained TNP.

**Panel Discussion – Illegal Sales from Smoke Shops: What can we do?**

Margaret introduced the panel topic and panelists. In light of the new smoke shops opening up regularly throughout the city, and the many compliance issues being identified including underage nicotine and cannabis sales, we organized this panel to talk about state and local responses and our possible actions related to this problem. Margaret added that in TNP’s recent legislative update, we shared about a couple of bills that just passed at the end of this session:

* HB5150 regulating the THC beverages. These can now only be sold in 12oz cans, containing a single serving of <=3mg THC, at package stores or cannabis stores exclusively.
* a bill requiring all smoke shops to do the free online prevention education training when they receive their license; previously this was only required when they fail a compliance check.

Denique Weidema-Lewis is the Behavioral Health Program Manager responsible for cannabis in the Prevention & Health Promotion Division at DMHAS. She was asked to share about state prevention programming that is underway that will benefit our community:

* Tasked with what this work looks like statewide and how to build infrastructure. Be In The Know CT – digital launch of cycle 2 of the campaign. Focus on reaching those who use and receive information
* Able to build regional infrastructure to build cannabis prevention. The Hub is now contracted with the state to build regional work group around cannabis work (needs assessment, work plan)
* Grant opportunities - 2 mini-grants will be available per region in Fall 24 to do cannabis-specific work ($26k per year for 2 years). Region 1 has 14 towns (Greenwich through Stratford) so collaboration is encouraged.
* Data capacity - partnership with University of Waterloo to look at cannabis density and retail sales

Daniela Montes-Hawley is the Lead Special Investigator, Prevention & Health Promotion Division, DMHAS. She was asked to discuss the challenge posed by smoke shops and how the state is looking at that issue:

* Merchant education, so they know what they can and cannot sell.
* Smoke shops (gas stations, convenience stores) not knowing what they can and cannot sell; often confusion for example, if THC content is below 0.3mg but it is more complex than that.
* Partnering with local police departments to remove illegal products from shops
* DCP is not able to seize illegal products so it can be complicated
* Youth bringing cannabis products to schools etc.
* THC seltzers
* They do their own investigations, sometimes in collaboration with local law enforcement.

The Stamford guests were asked to share what they’ve done that has been helpful in addressing the proliferation of smoke shops they’ve seen in their city, similar to what’s happening in Norwalk.

Vineeta Mathur, Principal Planner, City of Stamford, commented that Stamford Zoning and Land Use have been working to address this:

* Realized regulations were not tight enough given the demand for vape/smoke shops.
* Tightened regulations: a special permit is now required (much more complex process), which has helped reduce the number of shops in the area.
* Also have proposed reducing the amount of tobacco product that qualifies a store as a smoke shop. Previously smoke shops would have to have 50% of their products related to tobacco; now 10% is the threshold.
* Also proposed restricted the licenses to only commercial districts, not allowed in neighborhood districts

Ingrid Gillespie is the Prevention Director at Liberation Programs & chair of the Stamford Prevention Coalition:

* Just attended a presentation around tobacco density. In NYC and other communities there is a cap on the number of smoke shops within a district.
* Looked at compliance check data and education class data to see how that looks
* Work with Zoning to change signage at stores
* They also mapped out where the stores are and overlaid where the most at-risk youth live; highly correlated!

Lt. Tomasz Podgorski, Community Policing Division, Norwalk Police Department:

* NPD’s process: Receive a complaint, go investigate, apply for search warrant, and seize product. In the past year there have been 8 seizures. Problem: they can do seizures, but end up back there within a month.
* Clerks/staff are also given bad information from the owner and they are not sure what they can and cannot sell.
* NPD works with the state in terms of fines and other penalties

Steve Kleppin, Director, Norwalk Planning & Zoning, discussed the steps that Norwalk has taken:

* Zoning regulations were updated in early 2024.
* First step was to define vape shops. Currently in Norwalk it’s a vape shop if 20% of the retail is vape-related products.
* Distance separation: Cannot have a vape shop within a mile of another vape shop; able to shut them down if they are not in compliance with new regulations
* Regulated signage
* Hearing citation: $150 per day fine (max per state statute) for a business that did not get permits for zoning.
* P&Z’s data indicates there are currently about 25 vape shops in commercial zoning. This is already more than would be allowed under the new zoning restriction of 1 per mile.

**Questions:**

* How often is someone visiting the smoke shops?
  + NPD: When someone reports a complaint; case specific, not regular visits.
  + P&Z: Just started regulating this a couple of months ago so need to set a baseline. Looks like it will be perpetual.
  + Daniela: On a state level, the FDA and State make at least 2 visits per year. Compliance checks are done whether they have a police relationship or not, but will also work in line with police or other organizations.
* Why can’t repeat offenders be shut down?
  + Department of Revenue Services holds the license for tobacco sales.
  + It takes a while to shut down – starts with warning, then infractions, etc. but often they change ownership (brother, etc.) and the process starts all over.
  + Margaret commented that in Trumbull the health department has its own licensing process that allows them to visit, monitor and fine smoke shops. The fines pay the costs of the program.
* Can retailers be educated as part of the licensing or application process, to learn what they can and cannot sell?
  + Ingrid: There is a free online educational program for retailers who are out of compliance, covering issues like how to spot fake licenses; we’re advocating to increase the amount of education on addiction and the teen brain.
  + Margaret: The proactive education for retailers just passed this session.
  + Vineeta: Stamford does not have a training requirement as part of their retailer application process. Retailers reach out to zoning officers to find out what they need to do to apply.
* Why are retailers not being told there are enough smoke shops in Norwalk already?
  + If the retailer applies to Zoning, they are told that. However, they don’t all apply.
* Is there any talk about having a ‘substance’ commission, similar to the Liquor Commission?
  + State Rep Kadeem said nothing that he is aware of.

**Issues identified during the panel & TNP discussion:**

* Many shops are illegal and not registered with the state, so they don’t show up on lists of places to visit for compliance checks or even to send information about registering with the state and with local zoning. There are 2 registration sites at the state level, and most of these places aren’t listed.
* Many of Norwalk’s current locations do not comply with Norwalk zoning (new laws). P&Z sent people out to canvas the streets and look for the unlicensed locations. P&Z does not have manpower to visit all the stores and make sure they are registered, compliant, etc. Rely on community to submit queries/tips. (See how below.)
* Following compliance checks, stores often go right back to selling the same products.
* As opposed to getting shut down after multiple violations, stores may re-register under a different name, often by listing a family member as owner. This re-sets their record.
* If a store was given a permit by P&Z to open and later began selling a new product line (e.g., a convenience store began selling vapes), there isn’t really a means of finding out. Once they have the permit, there’s no monitoring of what product lines they’re carrying. Similarly, stores change their displays and products regularly, so at one visit they may appear to be selling more vape products and at another visit they may be selling fewer.
* TNP members feel there are many more vape shops than those identified by P&Z. (This may have to do with the definition of vape shop.)

**Actions for TNP - (please join Marijuana/Vaping Committee to be involved!):**

* Help with updating the list of smoke shops and monitoring products that are for sale. (Environmental scan will be conducted this summer.)
* Raise public awareness about what’s legal
* Reach out to smaller business owners who might not be aware of zoning regulations
* Raise public awareness about how to report complaints or possible illegal shops:
  + Anonymous tips can be reported to NPD online, by phone or through an app. Learn more at <https://www.norwalkct.gov/2236/Anonymous-Tip>
  + For Zoning concerns, submit a service request on the City of Norwalk website to report a shop that may need follow up. Learn more at <https://norwalkct.gov/1526/Click-Request>
* Rep. Kadeem Roberts indicated interest in working on these issues at the legislative level - We will follow up.

**Annual TNP recognition ceremony**

Members of the TNP leadership team (Diamond, AnaVivian and Margaret) read out the citations and presented certificates and gifts to this year’s awardees:

* Advocacy Award – Lamond Daniels
* Sector of the Year – Norwalk Police Department
* Community Partner of the Year – Family & Children’s Agency
* Youth Leader Award: Dyan Sommerville
* Youth Leader Award: Jake Tejada
* Youth Leader Award: Anthony Certo

Photos & the citations were posted on TNP social media following the meeting. TNP members also joined in singing happy birthday to Anthony, TNP’s summer intern and an active member of the Norwalk Strong club (TNP’s youth coalition) at BMHS/CGS.