

History of the Project

- The Williamstown CARES project began organically, in July 2020, when a group of local social workers met with then Town Manager Jason Hoch to discuss potential solutions to challenges in policing and to explore the possibility of a social work program to serve unmet community needs.
- Former Town Manager Hoch asked this group to serve as an ongoing social work advisory committee. These social workers have volunteered countless hours of their time and expertise over the past year, based on their commitment to creating proactive, sustainable, and inclusive change in our community.
- The social work advisory committee spent four months (July-October 2020) learning about local and national models for community safety and wellbeing. Members of the committee visited nearby localities to learn about wellbeing programs, visited with the Williamstown Police Department to learn about the calls they receive and respond to on a regular basis, and read numerous articles and studies about community safety and wellbeing.
- Based on this work, the advisory committee recommended that the Town conduct a thorough needs assessment of the community in order to determine what needs exist in Williamstown - a critical first step toward designing and implementing programs to meet those needs.
- In November 2020, the Town posted an RFQ (request for qualifications) with the goal of hiring a social worker to lead a community needs assessment.
- After interviewing candidates in December 2020, the advisory committee recommended that the Town hire Jennifer James to lead the project and Christina Daignault to support outreach to marginalized communities.
- In February 2021, Jennifer James officially started her full-time position as Research Director for Assessment and Engagement. Since February, Jennifer has been working in close collaboration with the advisory committee. She also worked in close collaboration with former Town Manager Hoch until his departure in May 2021.
- In March 2021, Christina Daignault officially started her part-time position as an outreach specialist.

Project Development

- Thorough needs assessments - like other in-depth research projects - take time to develop.
 - First steps involved initial community outreach to allow residents to voice their concerns alongside hearing from town officials. This enabled the social work team to accurately define the scope of the project.
 - At the same time, Jennifer James was conducting an initial literature review to help ground the research design within the extant body of relevant research and to review a range of research frameworks and methods to determine an effective design for Williamstown specifically.
 - Dr. Kerri Leyda Nicoll - a member of the social work advisory committee and tenured faculty member at MCLA - worked with Jennifer James to develop a research design appropriate for assessing the multiple components of safety and wellbeing in

Williamstown. These components include community perceptions/experiences, Williamstown Police Department (WPD) employee perceptions/experiences, and current WPD policies and practices. The research design also includes examination of literature and research on existing community safety and wellbeing models.

- Once the scope of the project and the specific research design were established, Dr. Nicoll applied for approval from MCLA's Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure that the project abides by ethical research standards for working with human research participants. This is critical in a study that covers sensitive topics such as personal safety and wellbeing. The project received IRB approval in early June 2021.
- During this same time period (February-May 2021), Jennifer James and Christina Daignault built the infrastructure needed to support the needs assessment. This work was necessary before any outreach or interviewing could begin. This involved:
 - Working with the Town's contracted web company to develop publicity materials as well as online registration and informed consent documents that would protect confidentiality and security of data.
 - Investigating and procuring the technology required to conduct and record community interviews in-person, by phone, and by Zoom - a necessary expenditure for conducting interviews during a pandemic.
 - Reviewing qualitative analysis softwares that can support the transcription, coding, and analysis of hundreds of hours of interviews.
 - Developing a communication infrastructure for scheduling interviews, responding to community questions, and sharing information with the public. This infrastructure is particularly important for a study that is grounded in concepts of equity, inclusion, and transparency.
 - Establishing relationships with members of the Williamstown Police Department in order to ensure their participation in the project. (Assessing WPD employees' safety and wellbeing concerns, as well as their training and support needs, is a key component of the needs assessment.)

Project Launch and Public Response

- The social work advisory committee launched the Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment with a mailing sent to every mailbox in Williamstown and outreach at the June 9, 2021 Town Meeting.
- Immediately following this initial publicity, nearly 100 community residents registered to be interviewed. Since then, approximately 50 more community residents have registered, bringing the total number of registrants to 147. Plans for additional publicity, in order to ensure that all interested voices are heard, are underway, and it is estimated that the project will involve interviews with several hundred community members.

Funding Needs

- This community needs assessment is being funded by the Town of Williamstown. Former Town Manager Jason Hoch worked in collaboration with the social work advisory committee to

determine initial costs for the project, including the full-time salary for the Research Director, part-time payment for the outreach specialist, and the purchase of research materials and technology. The former Town Manager also made a verbal commitment to the advisory committee that additional funding would be made available as the scale of the project came into perspective. Former Town Manager Hoch resigned prior to the development of the full project budget.

- Now that the full scope, scale, and design of the research project have been determined, the social work advisory committee and the Research Director have drafted a working budget, which includes potential contingencies. They are currently in discussion with the Interim Town Manager and the Select Board to determine appropriate funding sources to meet the budget's needs.
- It is important to remember that when this project was envisioned and the Research Director hired, there was a plan to conduct research, but no infrastructure or research vehicle existed. As Research Director Jennifer James explains, "There was an idea of where we were and an idea of where we wanted to go. Since then, we have made a plan, built a road, created signage and navigation for traveling that road, and created a custom vehicle designed to efficiently reach our destination. Now that vehicle needs fuel to facilitate the rest of the journey."

Benefits for the Town of Williamstown

- This is a win-win project for town government and community members, at a time when such a mutually beneficial and inclusive project is sorely needed. As a community based participatory research project, Williamstown CARES is providing all community members with an opportunity to constructively use their voices to build an evidence base for community change and improvement.
- The policy and program recommendations offered by Williamstown CARES will be grounded in community-generated data along with conceptual, quantitative, and qualitative data drawn from the extant research literature. The evidentiary framework will be presented in a thorough report that will speak to all community members' concerns, regardless of where those community members fall on the political spectrum or what opinions they hold regarding the challenges of the past year.
- Taking the time to design a thorough research study and obtain IRB approval means that the Town will be able to use the results to apply for future funding for the implementation of new and innovative programs in our community. Any published research or models for improving community safety will also raise the town's profile and provide a replicable model for change processes in other communities.
- Williamstown values integrity and standards in research. After all, it is home to one of the nation's most rigorous liberal arts institutions, and the college's faculty and staff compose a large number of town residents.
- The current budget - while still in draft form - is remarkably low for a social science research study. The new budget is not an overreach--it is simply time to put the gas in the vehicle so that it can proceed to its destination.