

Williamstown CARES Statement for Select Board Meeting--6/14/21

The Town's Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment is now underway. This project is directed by Jennifer James, who was hired in February as the Town's Research Director for Community Assessment and Engagement. She conducted an initial information gathering phase and has established a communications and research infrastructure while developing the methodology for the project with support and oversight from an advisory board of professional social workers. The team also includes Christina Daignault, a social worker who is on contract with the Town to assist with outreach. Dr. Kerri Leyda Nicoll, Associate Professor of Social Work at MCLA, is serving as co-principal investigator of the study and as a member of the advisory board. The research has been vetted and approved by MCLA's institutional review board (IRB), which means that a research ethics committee has ensured that it meets all relevant standards.

About two weeks ago, a mailing describing the community assessment was sent to every residence and business in Williamstown. Anyone who has not seen the mailing or would like more information is encouraged to visit www.williamstownma.gov/community-research. The assessment is also linked under Current Projects on the williamstownma.gov homepage.

The Community Safety and Wellbeing Assessment is a community-based participatory research project that includes three major components:

1. In-depth interviews with community members regarding their experiences and perceptions of safety and wellbeing in Williamstown;
2. In-depth interviews with members of the Williamstown Police Department regarding their experiences and perceptions of safety and wellbeing in Williamstown;
3. And a review of current WPD policies and practices to assess their alignment with community and employee needs.

The research team is currently focusing on the community interviews, and well over 100 residents have already registered to be interviewed.

A few people have asked why the researchers have chosen to conduct in-depth interviews rather than an anonymous online survey, which might be less time-consuming and labor-intensive. The primary reason for this choice is that safety and wellbeing are complex and multifaceted concepts that are not easily measured by survey questions. Interviews encourage individuals to share their thoughts and experiences in their own words, allowing for much deeper exploration of these concepts. The information gathered through interviews will enable the researchers to develop policy and program recommendations that are rooted in the particular needs of Williamstown's residents. This is a ground-up approach that will take more time but will produce more focused and actionable data.

The interviews are being conducted by Jennifer, Christina, and the members of the advisory board, all of whom are professionally educated social workers who have been trained specifically for this project. Interviews are being recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions are

saved under identification numbers, and no identifying information about interview participants will be shared.

Community members who have experienced or perceived a lack of safety or belonging in Williamstown are particularly encouraged to register for interviews. Those who do feel safe and welcome are also encouraged to participate, as this will enable the research team to assess what is working well and what may need to change to create a safer and more welcoming environment for all.