

Wellesley Housing Authority Executive Director Interviews – 2.23.19

Meeting Open Time: 9:00am

Commissioners:

Maura Renzella – Chairperson

Don Kelley – Vice Chair

Tanya Morel – Vice Chair

Staff Member:

Bernie Kirstein

Jackie Sullivan

Residents:

Anne Theriault

Brad Greenfield

Kelli Carter

Candidate #1: Aaron. Start: 9:15am

Why do you feel your background and experience allows you to become the Executive Director?

Professional background of seven years at DHCD, split between construction manager and housing management specialist. Has worked with various housing authorities all over the state. As a housing management specialist, has provided a lot of training for Executive Directors and has assisted as an Interim Director in situations. He is familiar with the audit issues going on, as he used to do audits for DHCD. Was a Director of Residential Services in non-profits. He has been out of the residential housing field for a few years with his own business but would like to get back into it.

If you were cleaning up for other housing authorities to prepare for a new executive director, why weren't you considered for the permanent executive director?

He was entrenched in his work at DHCD and so he wasn't applying for those positions. He was the stabilizing factor.

Can you give some examples of what you did to help clean up other housing authorities?

Maintenance department and procurement knowledge. One housing authority had a backlog of maintenance work orders and did not have a working work order system; found these issues while going through the properties. He had to get those issues fixed immediately and worked with the existing maintenance staff to organize. He was able to get fix everything before the permanent director came in. The existing staff remained there. It wasn't his responsibility as interim to replace them.

Is that in reference to the carbon monoxide detector program?

In 2006 a law passed that all units must have a carbon monoxide detector. As a construction project manager, he was given the project and had a strict deadline. He did some research, put together a team of technical people, ran a bid within Commbuys, found a contractor, and completed the project. He left the state and returned years later as a project management specialist and had to replace all the carbon monoxide detectors.

What is your experience with recertifications/redetermining rent?

When someone was new, he would train them on the basics of that. A lot of housing authorities use rental programs that handle all of those (vendor software). Familiar with state programs.

If there was an area/subject that has to be addressed from the outside, how many bids do you usually get before you decide what person gets the job?

Depending on the amount of what has to be done. You at least have to get three quotes. Higher amounts, you run into 149 or 30/39M and there are more formal bidding procedures. It should be the lowest responsible bidder.

What is your payment schedule?

It's usually worked out in the contract. You want to pay them within a timely manner.

Working with staff and residents that have been used to “the screw ups have become the normal”; there's a huge institutional culture that has been created that needs to be shifted, how do you shift that?

Have clear expectations on what needs to be done and what the time frame is. For example, unit turnover is 21 days and you have to get it done. There has to be accountability, through formalized supervision. Supervisory check ins with goals. Also, improving on professional development.

At the end of the day, the staff has to get stuff done. What do you mean by that?

Example of turnover in 21 days. If the maintenance staff isn't succeeding in that deadline, he will talk to them about why it's not getting done and what they can change to meet that deadline. You want people to succeed you also have to find the right person to get the job done.

What motivates people?

Helping good people do good things. That's what motivates him. In this field, you want to help vulnerable people live in housing. Wants to surround himself with similar people.

How does your business tie in with this?

Not at all. He is a USA weightlifting coach and he has a gym. It's only for professional athletes. He has athletes come in 2-3 days a week to train. It's an evening thing. The other job is a security contractor that provides security to nightclubs. It's a weekend/evening thing. He is not generally on shift, just generally around. He is a crisis prevention instructor, including de-escalation. The goal is to keep people safe and protect assets.

To what extent do you want to be involved with the professional athlete and security function if you were selected to be Executive Director?

He would be involved, but would be able to respond to the housing authority whenever necessary. He is local. He works 7 days a week, every day of the year. His focus is working.

Let's say you're in the middle of a busy time at the housing authority. You get word that a resident commits suicide. You continue with your busy work for the rest of the month. Later, you get word of another suicide in the same development. Do you do anything differently?

Yes. Maybe we need to be checking in more. Generally people want their privacy, but you do need some connection to people. Day to day observation of staff. Obviously, when someone asks for help we will give it to them. If there is a concern, we can do a wellness check.

Have you ever reached out to residents in your past position?

Yes, that was a frequent thing as a housing specialist. Would receive calls from tenants and would reach out to executive director for a solution.

To what degree do you feel that as a director of housing, in addition to putting a roof over their head, do we owe them a helping hand for upward mobility?

It is more than just being a landlord. Services are important. Coordination of community services is great. You want to make a difference in people's lives. If people want to be left alone though, they have the right to be left alone. Will do the best to help people who want resources.

What is your feeling about people smoking on the property? How many chances before they get evicted?

You have to go through private conference procedure written out in regulations. It is really tough to enforce rules of what people are doing in their private business. If people have been smoking in their houses for 30 years, he recommends not having a smoking policy so that you can deal with it individually.

If you don't have a smoking policy, where is the authority given to Executive Director to stop smoking?

They are damaging their unit and they are not supposed to cause damage to their unit. He would rather work something out so that they could live their life and not affect others. Prefer case by case basis. If the board wants a smoking policy, he would do a smoking policy. He would recommend not having a policy to the board, but would respect the board's wishes.

What do you see as the most important role(s) of the executive director?

Working with the staff to make sure they are doing their jobs and are happy with their jobs – human resources aspect. Those jobs make up the most of what the housing authority does.

How do you hold a staff member accountable if they keep saying "I tried but I didn't get anywhere"?

Weekly supervision to figure out what is going on and reverse engineer what they are doing and how they are doing it. Ultimately, someone else will have to do the job if they can't get it done, but give them the opportunity to.

How do you envision dealing with this: You are supervising someone in the housing authority who also applied for the job but didn't get it?

Have an open conversation up front about it. When working with Key Program, he believes that happened. He had a conversation and it worked out.

To what degree do you have an obligation to have a staff member succeed if they applied for the job and didn't get it? If they are obstinate, when do you let them go?

He would support them as much as possible and try to increase professional development. If they just want to go, then they have to go. He can work with them to build skills to be an executive director elsewhere; he considers that a success.

How important is it for you to have a person on staff that helps the disabled?

Super important. It's not just be a landlord. He has experience in that field. He worked for a company that provided resources for those with development disabilities and traumatic brain injuries. Vulnerable populations need to be protected and it's your duty to help them out. If there is someone not doing their job with regards to that, he has no problem getting rid of them. He wants staff who follow the mission.

What was the illegal use of the Wellesley RDF that you were working on?

At Suffolk University, he was doing an internship with the Senior Management Analyst in Wellesley. At the time, Needham has done a pay-per-throw in their dump, so people were sneaking in and dumping their trash. They thought contractors were doing it. Part of the project was figuring out how much of was being illegally dumped, what the dollar amount was, and what a solution was.

What is your experience with formula funding; managing formula funded projects?

Some exposure to it in the housing management position. It was his main focus as a capital projects manager, but design focused. Familiar with making a capital plan, where the funding will come from.

WHA is a deficit run housing authority with significant modernization needs. How do you modernize with no money? Is there money to get?

Looked around at what needs work. With state experience, it has to be an emergency. Look to CPA's and grant funding. There are other places to look that take a little more work. Was able to get a private grant and get something built in Mashapee.

After you got out of college and went to play football in Europe, you went to work in the Key Program in Lawrence. Why did you leave Key Program? Why did you leave DHCD after 3 years to go to Lawrence to teach? If you got the Executive Director position, how long would you stay here? Why did you leave teaching in Lawrence? Why did you leave the Keane job and go to DHCD? Why did you leave DHCD the second time?

He went to work for the state and he wasn't getting paid enough. Reached a ceiling at DHCD of where he could go. He could do a lot more and didn't want to stay in the same position forever with no advancement. With something that needs some help, he is committed to that rebuild process. He wants to build from there and that takes time. This is a contracted position for a specific number of years. That's a good process. They cut the physical education department. He wasn't making enough money. NH underfunded services. He wasn't comfortable with it. Reached the ceiling.

Difference between being a property manager and an executive director – there is a difference between leadership and management. What importance do you give to planning as an executive director?

Planning is everything. You have to set the tone of what is going to be done and plan the details. You can do both management and leadership. You have to do both.

Which would you say comes first with regards to staff and tenants, mercy or justice?

It depends largely on the situation. If somebody is doing something with good intentions, it's mercy. If it's bad intentions, it has to be justice. But there has to be a process to determine that.

Always make sure this person is safe first.

What is your role in relation to the board?

Executive director is responsible for executing the policies of the board.

Our staff has an extremely good relationship with the chair of the board and is transparent with regards to policies and procedures. Is that something you will be okay with? Do you feel the communication from staff to board must go through you?

Yes. Has an open door policy. The board is a public board and anyone can go to the meeting.

End: 10:23am

Candidate #2: Gary. Start: 10:36am

Why do you qualify for this position?

Varied social services background. Started as a law enforcement specialist in the air force. Worked for the Wellesley School Department and Needham Community Council. Worked as a marriage and family therapy consultant. Then worked as an Elder Services worker. Came to WHA. All that background is what this job is about. He has helped negotiate tenant disputes, set up resident services, and went out and started meeting people. He doesn't have a lot of experience with management of housing authorities but he knows people and grew up in veterans' housing. Also lived in Needham Housing Authority. Understands living in low income housing.

How did you know Peg?

Originally applied for the resident coordinator position in Needham and didn't get it. Peg called him to apply for Wellesley position.

There is an institutional culture that has been created, "the screw ups have become the norm". How do you envision changing and shifting that institutional culture to move in a direction where we have policies that are in place and being utilized? How do you shift that culture with residents and staff?

Starting by taking all the rules and regulations, reading them so you know them, and working by the book. If there is no book, you create one. You sit down with staff and board to create rules and policies that work. You bring in tenants for their input. Everyone works from the same book. Doesn't want to leave things up to personal interpretation. It's important that a housing authority functions where everyone is doing the same thing the same way. This way the tenants know what is expected and the same answers will come from the every staff member.

What do you do if staff and residents are resistant to change? How do you shift organizational culture if people aren't willing to follow them because they haven't had to for years?

Change is a difficult thing. Take tenant input and try to incorporate them as much as you can. The director and the staff have to work by a set of rules and policies that comply with DHCD. A tenant had a question about yearly inspections and he sat with them to explain why.

Which would come first, the organization or the people (staff and residents)? Would you make decisions good for the housing authority but tough on staff or tenants?

The organization has to be first. Have to follow the guidelines set forth by DHCD. You have a responsibility to your employer. But you have to respect staff and tenants and their needs. Explaining the reasons to things. Yes I would make decisions good for the housing authority. There are rules for a reason.

Can you explain connections you've made and what they do? Is part of your regular duty to explain these to residents or do they have to come to you?

Wellesley Family Aid provides financial assistance. Council on Aging provides assistance to seniors. He makes the connections between new residents to these organizations. There is a senior issues meeting every other month where multiple organizations meet to discuss issues in housing and town wide. It goes both ways. It's about being willing to invest yourself in their lives.

In 11.5 years, you've gone through a number of executive directors. How much has the job changed and what will you do differently?

It's changed back and forth. Each director has their own focus and expectations. When he started, nothing had been done with resident services for three years. He talked to the residents to help determine their needs and help develop the position. The use of the building he is housed in is changing. As a director, he would like to see resident services back in the community building. It is better for the residents. As director, he would do more team building. Talk with the staff to find out what would help them do their job better. Just listen to people.

Have you ever applied for this position before? Why now?

No, this is the first time. WHA is separate from Needham now. He'd like to be part of the new direction WHA is going in now. He knows the tenants and the staff very well. He'd like to see the staff shape the housing authority's future and would like to see the tenants provide input.

If you were to not get the position, would that be a challenge?

It's no different than when any other director has come in. You do your job, even if you don't always agree with your boss. You respect your boss.

What is the most important role as an executive director in a housing authority?

Fairness. Communication. Openness. Willing to hear people and really listen to what they're saying. Be as fair and honest as you can. Building a team. You don't stand at the top and look down at people, take everyone's opinions into account, but ultimately the responsibility falls on the director.

How can we see a shift/new energy from the current position to the role of executive director? (i.e. with challenging relationships, difficult staff, etc).

Right now, there is a lot of one to one face time with tenants. Relationship with staff is relaxed. That will change, especially with tenants. There won't be time to be out there one to one with tenants and the daily contact. They will look at him differently. He will miss that because he enjoys working with the tenants. There will probably be some change in how staff looks at him; hopefully it will remain the same friendly, working relationship that exists now. Just respect

people for who they are. Trust the staff to do their job. Rely on the staff that has the experience and expertise in each area and learn from them.

How would you handle the situation where one of your employees is yelling at a resident over the phone in a disrespectful manner?

If he was there when it was happening, he would ask the staff to put them on hold and come talk to him. Maybe they're having a bad day or a conflict with the person. He would want to find out what is going on but remind them that they have to be respectful. Would try to get the employee to see what they are doing isn't right, tell them to collect themselves and get back on the phone. You keep an eye on them to see if it happens again.

Do you sense that the staff would view you as the new executive director?

Yes. You don't get into this line of work because you're trying to get rich, you do it because you believe in the people. He likes the staff and trusts them. Day one he would walk in and tell them he trusts them to do their job and hopefully they also have trust in him.

What is your experience with the recertification process?

Assisted a lot of seniors with the recertification process over the years as well as his own.

Describe context of meetings with other organizations with regards to seniors throughout Town?

Anyone at the meeting can bring up specific situations, making sure everyone is aware and accountable. Will talk through any issues that come up.

How does a tenant know to contact you?

Currently reinterviewing tenants.

Let's say you're in the middle of a busy time at the housing authority. You get word that a resident commits suicide. You continue with your busy work for the rest of the month. Later, you get word of another suicide in the same development. Do you do anything differently?

Start by going through legal process, then make contact with the family. Talk to neighbors and see how they are coping. Ask if anyone had any concerns prior. Remind people who they can talk to. Every month does a rotating meeting onsite and makes himself available. Will call up residents just to check in if he hears anything.

We're a deficit run housing authority with clear need for modernization. As an executive director, how do you see making modernization happen with little or no money?

Prioritize first what needs to be done. Contact the state and ask them for money, submit a funding request, get and review bids. If they say no, you do what you have to do. You get maintenance staff input and make sure the place is functioning. Make sure you're doing daily maintenance.

As an executive director, how do you see your role in relation to the board?

Felt he has always gotten along with the board. They have more experience than he does. Would love to learn from the board.

How do you anticipate helping tenants who do not speak English?

Previously, he looked for language classes. Looked for funding for language classes in Wellesley and was able to start language classes in Wellesley. There are translator services but is looking into handheld translators.

End: 11:34am

Candidate #3: No Show

Candidate #4: Sean Start: 1:14pm

What skills and experience do you have that qualify you for this position?

Has done a little bit of everything. Started in maintenance, cutting lawns and cleaning apartments, then worked his way up to administrative roles. Director of Public Housing in Methuen. Does file retention and file auditing currently. The perspective of each staff member is important. What do we need to do to accomplish deadlines? Looking at utilizing skills effectively. Works with staff on a day to day basis, giving them respect they need results in them working harder. He's not here to do business first only. You work with employees and bosses. You become respectful and accountable to everyone and yourself.

There is an institutional culture that has been created, "the screw ups have become the norm". How do you envision changing and shifting that institutional culture to move in a direction where there is an understanding and expectation that all staff and residents know what to expect?

Transparency. People assume that because screw ups involve covers ups. Transparency allows mistakes to happen and people to move past. No one is perfect. Moving past the screw up is important and being accountable for a mistake. "I made a mistake, what do I do?"

This housing authority has been run by the Needham Housing Authority for the past 15 years. The new executive director will have the ability to create a tone unique to Wellesley. To what degree can you set high standards for this housing authority?

Wants to create something together with the board, residents, and staff. Creating something new isn't one person's perspective. It will be a brainstorm between all. You need to be able to ask questions and listen. Just because something can't happen right now doesn't mean it's a no. He would love to take Wellesley to be a model agency. How are you getting better every day as a housing authority? Look at what can be done more efficiently, especially with technology.

In Norwood you were the occupancy specialist and in Methuen you are the Director of Public Housing. Is that a step up?

Yes. As occupancy specialist he was learning about each tenant and how to calculate finances for rent. Now he oversees staff who are doing occupancy. As a director, the expectation is not to sit at his desk every day. He is out building relationships. The difference between the director and executive director is that he has the final say. Currently, having a director over him, he can still be ambitious and want to do a lot for the agency. The executive director is the go to with the board. His focus is with the tenants.

What is the most important role an executive director has in a housing authority?

Accountability to housing itself, the regulations, and make sure you're doing the right way. Following the rules is not always the easy way. Everyone needs help. The director is prioritizing and trying to help each person and staff member do everything according to the rules. You need to be able to know why each decision was made and stand by it. Planning is also important.

Do you work within the Town? Do you know the assessor?

No. He is mostly tied to the agency, not to the town.

Have you done anything to address keeping opiates out of the housing authority?

He doesn't believe you can ever keep it out entirely of the agency. You can just do your best and make connections with local agencies, including the police. Has partnered with the police and HUD to work to keep drugs and prostitution out. Currently, there is a service coordinator that works with people. Building relationships with other agencies to help when a situation arises.

Do you have a need for translators? Could you publish rules and regulations in a different language?

A lot of the staff are bilingual. He understands more than he speaks but isn't fully bilingual. You can mostly communicate with Google translate and technology. Publishing rules and regulations in a different language can absolutely be done. Can contract out to agencies. Currently put at the bottom of the document in multiple languages that this is an important document and they should have it translated.

What is your experience with recertifications?

Have done recertifications more in the past, but has done some recently. It falls back to planning and making sure you send out notices 90 days in advance. Make sure to follow the Wellesley policy.

Can you show staff how to do things they are having issues with doing?

Yes can teach most of the things that need to be done. There are also trainings. Recently had staff go to recertification training and found it very useful. If it's something he couldn't do, he knows who to call to find out.

What is your familiarity with the waitlist and the new program Champ, especially looking at an application and see what they qualify for?

Currently does all of the Champ applications. He is very familiar with it. Hopefully in March, there will be more capabilities with Champ.

Let's say you're in the middle of a busy time at the housing authority. You get word that a resident commits suicide. You continue with your busy work for the rest of the month.

Later, you get word of another suicide in the same development. Do you do anything differently?

If someone commits suicide, the director should be at the facility that day, not continuing work. You do more than just contact the family. You should make grievance counselors available for residents and staff. You find out what's going on in the community to see if there was something driving it. You need to be willing to do extra and make yourself available. Currently, he has quarterly meetings with his staff and they sit down with each community. It started rough but

now they have built a relationship. Being accountable and available is important. He would also talk to the board about if there are any issues in the community.

How do you feel about doing job duties outside of the director position?

Each staff member should be willing to do more. Everyone should find time to make time to help. He would definitely be willing to help. Finding ways to have others in the agency help. Each director should be willing and capable to help with any position.

How do you handle a situation where you get a job that an existing staff member applied for and did not get? (They now report to you)

He would sit down with the person and have a discussion. He does not think it is a reflection on that employee. They can still be good at what they're currently doing. Could you create opportunities for more responsibilities for that employee?

There seems to be a parking problem – who can park where. Outside vendors park in the fire lane. How would you address this issue?

Parking is never an easy solution. Towing can be an option but it shouldn't be the first option. There should be progressive discipline. Talk to the person and explain everything. Start with a verbal warning and then go to a written warning. Whatever you do with one person you have to do with everyone. Review the policies regarding parking and the town by-laws. You can also bring them to court.

What was the hardest thing to learn in your past job and how did you learn it?

The most difficult thing to learn was asking someone to resign. This person took a blank money order and cashed it. They tried to reimburse the person afterwards. He had to tell the person it was in their best interest to resign. Typically, personnel issues are the most difficult to learn because each situation and person is different. With respect to hands on housing field work, it was the waiting list, and continues now to Champ. Making sure you're organized and current.

How would you deal with an employee who always has an answer for something but never gets anything done?

Creating accountability for that. Checking records and asking for proof. Do a lot of work through emails so that there is a record. Following up with accountabilities to check on their work. With regards to productivity, you have to sit down with the employee and tell them that their work has to be done within a timely manner. Continue to sit down with them to check in. If it's still not working, move onto progressive discipline. It's difficult but important.

What is your experience with formula funding and formula funding projects, with regards to project management?

No direct experience by himself. Goes to meetings with his director and provides his input. Working with expertise of staff that is currently doing it. Has been learning a lot from his current boss, who is responsible for formula funding projects.

How do you see your relationship/role with the board?

The board is the boss of the director. They decide how they want the agency to move forward. They create policies with the best interest of the agency and the director takes those policies and puts them in place.

The board doesn't have the experience the executive director has. The executive director should expect the board to bring problems and solutions. The board and the executive director should work hand in hand.

How much of a notice would you feel is fair to give Methuen?

3-4 weeks. Currently hiring more staff to take over some of the administrative duties. He would want to see that through. He would also want to make sure they have enough tenants ready for apartments. Believes the possible Wellesley salary is fair based on calculations. Would not need to relocate.

Where do you see DHCD's role in Wellesley Housing?

Giving subsidy if necessary or leaving them alone if they are revenue. He thinks DHCD can be a partner. He currently calls them for advice sometimes. Has been able to find extra money through different grants. When you're transparent and doing your best, DHCD shouldn't be someone that you fight with. You can disagree with them, but have the conversation.

Would you be willing to accept a one year contract initially?

Yes. That is based on the guidelines. It is in an agency's best interest not to sign a long term contract at first. After that one year, the new director can negotiate a new contract. He is willing to take that risk.

Do you have any other offers? Is Wellesley the most attractive?

He has an interview on Tuesday with Milford. He has applied to Needham and Somerville. Yes, Wellesley is the most attractive. Wellesley is close to home. He is committed to housing, loves what he does, and wants to make a difference. There is a significant pay difference between Wellesley and Milford, but money isn't everything.

Candidate Questions:

What do you plan to do now that you're separated from Needham? What are your expectations of the new executive director?

Maura: We are opening the doors of Wellesley for the first time. There has been significant neglect. This is an opportunity to become a model organization. There are priorities – fill vacancies, pull people off the wait list, complete recertifications, collect all the rent that is due, update policies and procedures. It is an opportunity to create and build something from the ground up as a team. Not expecting to executive director to reinvent the wheel. Reach out to others. Communicate with the residents, who have a lot of good insight.

Can utilize agencies who have excellent policies. With cross training, you can utilize staff's personal strengths.

End: 2:30pm

Vote Breakdown:

Commissioners: Sean 3

Residents: Sean 3

RESOLUTION #2019-10:

Upon a motion made by Commissioner Renzella and seconded by Commissioner Kelley to make an offer of employment opportunity to Sean Barnacle as the next executive director, subject to a contact made to his current employer and an approval on DHCD, was approved by a vote of: 3-0.

Felt that Sean was the strongest candidate. He has the most experience and knowledge, but if he did not know something, he knows where to go to get it. His response regarding DHCD as a partner is important. His recommendations were the most recent and from his current employer. His writing examples were of letters one actually uses in housing.

The next steps in the process: consultant will contact Sean tonight about the board vote and ask if he is open to having a phone conversation with the other two board members if they so desire. In the meantime, Commissioner Renzella will have conversations with the other two board members. Consultant will call his boss as well. Then he will put together the packets that the board needs to send to DHCD including salary and contract length.

Upon a motion made by Commissioner Renzella and seconded by Commissioner Kelley the motion to adjourn was approved by: 3-0.

Meeting Adjourn Time: 3:01pm