

9.1A Action applied to 7.7 Action: Apply the Completed Sustainable CT Equity Toolkit to 7.7 Recycle Additional Materials and Compost Organics

Background Information:

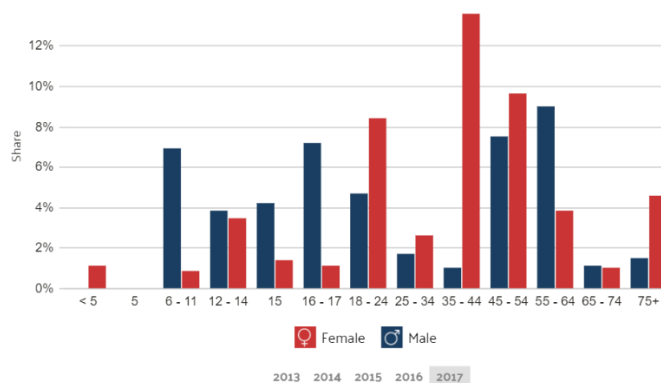
The Advisory Committee on Sustainability sought to apply the Equity Tool Kit to “7.7 Recycle Additional Materials and Compost Organics”. The Town of Darien has implemented a strong recycling program that enables residents with Recycling and Refuse Center permits to dispose of their own garbage and single stream recycling waste, and more importantly to be able to drop off additional materials for safe recycling: electronics, textiles, paints, mattresses, smoke detectors, lawn and garden debris and batteries. As of fall 2018, the town began to implement a food waste program at the R&RC. (See 7.8 Develop a Food Waste Prevention and Food Scraps Recovery Program for details of new education and composting program.) In addition to recycling, the Town has developed a “Pre-cycling” program (in the form of a Swap Shop on the R&RC premises) that allows residents with R&RC permits to bring gently used household items, furniture, and equipment to an enclosed facility or to visit the facility and take away usable items at no cost. While the Swap Shop and the Recycling and Refuse Center are heavily used, they require a permit and an annual fee. The town does not provide garbage or recycling collection services. For residents with private garbage collection services the fee is \$40. For those without private garbage collection the fee is \$120. Seniors age 65 and over receive 1 permit for free. As the Advisory Committee on Sustainability continues to look for ways to improve services at the R&RC, we applied the equity toolkit to the current and expanding (food waste) services and identified an opportunity for greater equity.

• WHO LIVES AND WORKS IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

In 2017, Darien had a population of 21.7k people with a median age of 39.4 and a median household income of \$208,848. Of the 6,700 households, 62% have children under the age of 18. The population is 88.3% White Alone, 6.19% Asian Alone, and 3.13% Hispanic or Latino and 95.7% are U.S. citizens. The median property value in Darien is \$1.4M, and the homeownership rate is 85.3%. Most people commute by Drove Alone. The average car ownership is 2 cars per household.

Given the abundance of wealth among most families, with a median income more than 3 times the national average, it is important to identify those in Darien who do not have the same means, family support, or access to transportation to all that Darien has to offer. For example, about 300 households with children under 18 are headed by a female only and about 5,700 members of the community (14.5%) are 62 years or older, some on fixed incomes.

3.73% of the population (811 out of 21.7k people) live below the poverty line, a number that is lower than the national average of 13.4%. The largest demographic living in poverty are Females 35 - 44, followed by Females 45 - 54 and then Males 55 - 64.



This data may not capture other members of the community who suffer sudden hardships from health/disability issues, addiction, divorce, loss of employment or the ability to drive, or mortgage foreclosure. The Darien Human Services Department provides the link between these individuals and assistance they may need.

● HOW DID YOU CONNECT WITH EACH OTHER?

In the spring of 2019, the Sustainability Team, along with Darien's First Selectwoman presented an overview of Sustainable CT to heads of key town departments such as Parks and Recreation, Planning and Zoning and Human Services. Our approach was to introduce these directors to the program and types of activities that defined a sustainable community. We discussed the certification process and the over-riding goal of examining programs and services through the lens of equity and access to all members of the community. Follow up meetings between the Sustainability Team, the Director of Human Resources and her staff and Sustainable CT Equity Coach Christina Smith, led to the identification of an opportunity to improve access to a key town resource: the Darien Recycling and Refuse Center.

● WHAT EMERGED FROM YOUR DIALOGUE?

Darien is generally a well-off community. While 75% of households earn \$100K or more, 14% of households have earnings below \$50K. Many members of the community need assistance (financial or otherwise) on either a temporary or longer-term basis and may face barriers to services available to most residents, especially those services that require a fee.

The Human Services department works with these residents, to promote physical, emotional and economic wellbeing. The Department offers counseling, assessment, and case management, providing information and referrals. It works with clients to determine eligibility for state or federal programs and offers emergency financial assistance. The staff provides crisis intervention, assistance with mental health, substance abuse and domestic violence issues, all confidentially.

In collaboration with outside partners like the Salvation Army, Person-to-Person and individual donors the Human Services Department runs the Back-to-School Program; providing eligible children with a new backpack, school supplies and gift cards for shoes or apparel. Hundreds of meals are provided to Darien families, individuals, and seniors for Thanksgiving, and holiday gifts are distributed to needy children and seniors. Darien Human Services provides utility and fuel assistance to clients and operates The Home Goods Closet ; offering no-cost cleaning supplies, paper goods and personal hygiene items to eligible families. And in addition, the Department maintains an Emergency Call List of seniors and disabled residents who would like to receive a telephone call prior to a storm or town-wide emergency.

While Darien provides extensive services to families in need, access to the Darien Recycling and Refuse Center was not available to certain residents with financial hardship. As the services offered at the Recycling center have grown (Actions 7.7 and 7.8), so did the need by those without the financial resources to purchase a permit. The team identified a subset of Human Services clients who could not take advantage of recycling or pre-cycling as the cost of a permit was a financial barrier. As a result, they could not recycle large items at no cost (like mattresses or electronics) or take free mulch as residents with permits can. Nor could they participate in our new Food Waste Composting Program. Most importantly they could not access the Swap Shop, a place with no-cost gently used household items that they might really need (furniture, children's toys, kitchen items etc.). While the town does provide Senior citizens with one permit free of charge, others with financial need who are not seniors were not able to participate without a permit.

• WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF YOUR COLLABORATION?

The Human Services Director worked with the Public Works Department to develop a plan for no cost dump permits for eligible Human Services clients. As of August 5th, Human Services distributed 4 permits which has enabled these families to access the Darien Recycling and Refuse Center. Human Services will now be able to routinely offer this resource to eligible families.

- How might you include or expand services to additional community members in the future?
 - This process opened the discussion of reviewing other fee-based town services that may be unavailable to certain members of the community. Special waivers exist for some programs and the Human Services Department will continue to assess the needs of their clients, communicate what's available and make recommendations if a need is identified. For example, the Department was recently approved by the state to provide coupons to Seniors that can be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at the local Farmer's Market (Action 7.1) and transportation services are being offered to Seniors as well. (Action 9.1B).

• HOW WILL YOU REFINE, REVISIT, AND IMPROVE?

Although Human Services has established a procedure to identify eligible clients and collaborate with Public Works, the Department hopes to streamline the process with feedback from existing clients. Communicating the results/benefits to Public Works and Town officials will be required.

- Evaluate the Equity Toolkit application process. What did your Sustainability Team learn?
 - Even though one team member attended an Equity Workshop we were unsure how to begin until we met with an Equity Coach. She provided perspective and helped identify possible actions. The concept, while valuable, was difficult to explain to stakeholders and will require time to be adopted into planning going forward.
 - Equity was a difficult term to apply with our small homogeneous community; the use of the word "inclusion" was helpful as it provided a framework to think of ways to include residents in town activities, policies, planning and programs.
 - Applying the toolkit required patience but yielded two actions where we were able to identify folks not being included in actions we were submitting and make changes to programs to benefit those individuals.
- What challenges did your Sustainability Team encounter, and how might you make improvements for future applications of the Toolkit?
 - The greatest challenge was understanding what Sustainable CT was looking for and how to apply the Toolkit within our community; a homogenous population, small government, and large philanthropic presence. We did identify two groups, important segments of our population, that could be better included.
 - Having only 8 months from registration to application, our initial strategy was to identify actions that were in process and would qualify for points. We found we are taking steps, to varying degrees, in all categories and spent considerable time understanding those actions and how they might (or might not) fit the certification requirements.
 - The process of educating our team, Town Officials and partners didn't allow time to proactively start new initiatives that might take a year or more to implement given budgets and approvals. For example, The Food Waste Program (Action 7.8) took over a year to implement (research to implementation) and longer on the town's solar installations. We barely begin to engage our public schools, Darien's largest investment. And there was a learning curve coordinating with outside groups.

- How might you engage and include more community members?
 - Once the Sustainable CT application is complete, we hope to provide a summary of our actions to date, actions for future consideration and the concept of the Equity Toolkit in planning. We envision sharing this information with the Board of Selectmen, and key departments within Town Hall.
 - There is an opportunity to engage the Board of Education (Superintendent and School Board).
 - We barely scratched the surface introducing Sustainable CT to Town Departments, our Representative Town Meeting, the Senior Center, Darien Arts Center, Library, dozens of Town Commissions and Advisory Boards as well as non-profits that are actively engaged in our community of 21,000 residents. In the future, Darien's 9.1 process should be done with additional community input; in order to apply it proactively and maximize community involvement.