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How does a town handle social service appropriations?

There are two ways for a social service appropriation article to appear on the town meeting warning: by voter-backed petition submitted in accordance with 17 V.S.A. § 2642, or by the selectboard's own motion. If the town receives a voter-backed petition asking for an article on the warning to appropriate funds to a social service agency, then the selectboard must put that exact appropriation on the ballot. Otherwise, the selectboard is free to decide how it will handle social service appropriations.

Some towns allow an agency to appear on the ballot if an appropriation to that agency was voted in the preceding year and the agency is requesting level-funding for the present year. Those same towns may require that the agency submit a voter-backed petition if there is an increase in the amount of funding requested. Other towns require a voter-backed petition every year, regardless of whether the agency has received an appropriation from the town in the past.

VLCT recommends that every town adopt a written policy about how it will handle social service agency appropriations and under what circumstances a voter-backed petition will be required. Such a policy may be changed from year to year, but should be communicated to agencies well in advance of the annual town meeting date so that they will have time to get signatures on a petition if needed. VLCT has developed a model Social Service Appropriation Policy which can be used as a template. It is available at <http://www.vlct.org/assets/Resource/Models/Model-Social-Service-Agency-Appropriation-Policy-November-2014.pdf>.

The selectboard has general authority over how articles are warned on the ballot and therefore may warn social service appropriations as individual ballot articles or may lump all appropriations into the general fund budget. (Towns should be careful not to make a double appropriation to the same agency by inadvertently including an appropriation for that agency in both the general fund budget and as a stand-alone article on the ballot.) If the town votes its budget from the floor, then any part of that budget is subject to discussion, amendment, and division of the question, such that there could be a separate vote on any individual appropriation.

Once an appropriation is approved by the voters, the selectboard has no authority to alter the amount of that appropriation. However, pursuant to 24 V.S.A. § 2692, the selectboard may contract with a social service agency concerning the provision of services in the town and may include in this contract a schedule of installment payments and other reasonable conditions as a condition of receipt of the appropriation.

Social service appropriations may only be made for the provision of services to town residents. However, there is no requirement that the social service agency have programs or facilities located within the town; an agency is eligible for town funds if it provides services to that town's residents.

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