

12-14-18 A Reminder: Why We Do This

As of late, I find myself looking back over the years and contemplating my journey as a health agent. And it has been a journey! It was due to be a very short one, early on, as I was not only overwhelmed but also felt completely inadequate to deal with the job. The overwhelming part was the easy part, as it turned out. I called up the former agent, then in Marshfield, and asked her how long it took for her to feel at all comfortable with this job, for she had been new to it also when she started in Halifax. “Oh, gosh, at least two years!” she exclaimed.

There. I was normal. These feelings were normal and to be expected when faced with new challenges. I could do this. I was accustomed to learning and I could continue to learn about the myriad of topics. And I did.

As for the dealing with difficult people, well, that was more challenging for me than learning about a new topic. I thought about quitting this path where some people were mean and hostile to me while doing my job. I finally decided that my difficulty with difficult people reflected my need to improve in that area. So, I took it on as a personal challenge. I would stay until I felt I could handle it better and then give myself permission to leave if I wanted to.

As you can see, I stayed.

Why should I let a few complaining people succeed in intimidating me? They were a distraction from why I was attracted to this job. I wanted it because I would have the opportunity to help people. Nurses, social workers, fire fighters, EMT’s, police officers and so many more begin their profession looking forward to the goal of helping people. All of us can be discouraged at times, for it is difficult work. Then we are reminded of our intentions whenever we have that opportunity to help. And we smile and think, “This is worth it. This is why I am here.”

Those reminders occur frequently with numerous expressions of gratitude in the office. Peggy (the Board of Health Administrative Assistant) and I agree in considering ourselves civil servants. We are there to serve. Almost everything in that office is a public record and we enjoy copying them and explaining them.

The big reminders arrive, however, when we least expect it and when there are far more serious consequences at hand than getting a copy of a septic plan. Should a house be declared uninhabitable? If it is, can the situation be remediated? Will the owner cooperate? Am I making things worse for the owner, who most likely has numerous other issues besides clutter, blocked egresses and very necessary home repairs? That question does not always have an easy answer. I can be clear-minded (along with other town officials such as Fire Chief and Building Inspector) about the life-saving changes and repairs that are, indeed, necessary.

However, the sticky points are waiting to be discovered. Where will the person go? Do they have the personal assets to pay for repairs? What if they don’t? Will their quality of life be

diminished while I try to improve the physical quality? All remains to be seen until I meet the person and begin the process.

I recently spoke with a hospital social worker over the phone about a ninety-one-year-old who was then in the hospital for smoke inhalation and it was now my job to speak to him about a lot clutter and unsafe conditions such as a furnace needing replacement. The social worker knew that I had declared his home as uninhabitable yet told me that he would probably be glad to meet me. I disagreed. I told her, “No, I think he is going to be very angry with me!” She quickly saw my point and agreed. I did not relish this meeting, but it had to be done.

He is deaf, completely deaf. (Note to self: Is he eligible for a hearing aid?)

We communicated by writing everything in large print with a marker; not a pen. There was some sign language of sorts.

He quickly proved his innate intelligence and current intact mental capacity with his rich vocabulary, his memory of events and his organization of his life and his accurate understanding of his current circumstances. He had a place to go while work was done in Halifax. (Whew!) He would cooperate. (Whew!)

A pressing point was that he needed to leave that hospital so that he could get the sticker for his truck renewed. (Yup, he still drives.) The taxi dropped him off from the hospital and I followed him to the garage. Then he told me that he was very hungry. The hospital had discharged him without any breakfast! We went to a nearby restaurant where I had the pleasure of hearing about this man’s life. His service in the military, his many sports, his teaching mentally and physically challenged youth. Everyone in the restaurant heard it also, for the voice of a deaf person can be very loud. They did not mind though. Occasionally, I looked around to check on that. I saw smiles and heads nodding.

He handed me his wallet to pay for his breakfast but when I met the waitress at the register, she said, “You’re all set.” Somebody had paid for this man’s breakfast, everyone had heard about a fascinating life of service and I was reminded of why I love this job.

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