

# New Milford Department of Social Services



## 2013 – 2014 Annual Report

Peg Molina, LCSW, Director   Monika Roberts, Secretary   Ivana Butera, MSW   Leah Pullaro, MSW  
40 Main St. New Milford, CT. 06776   (860)355-6079   socialservices@newmilford.org

Several months ago, a young mother, Samantha, returned to her home town of New Milford, escaping an abusive relationship with her two children, some clothes and \$20 to her name. A friend temporarily offered help, but the family needed to re-settle and start putting a new life together. She contacted New Milford Social Services for practical support and the Greater Danbury Women's Center for counseling. Initially, we helped with emergency food, gas for her car and help with other immediate needs. Within about six weeks, Sam had found a job and a home to rent, was utilizing SNAP and our food bank, had HUSKY insurance, affordable child care for her daughter and her son had enrolled in New Milford schools. The crisis was easing and life was taking shape again.

This is but one story out of many people in our community who approach New Milford Social Services at a time of need. Even though the presenting problem was sorted through and solved, life is hard for this family. Nearly half of Sam's take-home income goes directly to the rent. During the winter, electric heating costs rose to nearly \$400/month in the small, poorly insulated apartment. There is no budget for new clothes, extracurricular activities, holiday gifts, haircuts and occasional meals out . . . many of the things that most of us take for granted. Thankfully, in New Milford there are several ways to help struggling families keep going; doing the important work of raising their kids and feeling a sense of worth in their accomplishments. This report describes our yearly work and the collaborations that make many things possible.

**The mission of Social Services is to help residents meet basic needs of food, housing, clothing, maintenance of health and well-being, and to help provide various seasonal goods and programs for residents experiencing financial hardship.** Promotion of self-sufficiency through programs such as financial education, Family First!, and referrals to the Community Culinary School (job training and placement) is a priority of the department. Still, our staff has met with a great number of

people who never expected to walk through our doors and have met with continual roadblocks as they try to make ends meet and support themselves. Last year we provided services to approximately 850 households from diverse neighborhoods, the common denominator being residence in New Milford and financial hardship.

The work of this department is carried out by four people: a full-time Director, full-time Admin. Assistant, 32-hour Social Worker and a 21-hour Social Worker. Additionally, our office could not function to the degree it does without the contributions of many volunteers and community partners. **Our efforts are focused upon assistance to families and individuals and working toward wider system changes that can positively impact the social fabric of our community.** This report details our activities in matters of energy/utility assistance, food, housing, financial assistance, seasonal programs and coordination with other community agencies and initiatives.

**ENERGY ASSISTANCE: The average low income household in CT owes \$2363 more in energy bills than they can afford to pay.** This "energy affordability gap" is just under \$700 million in CT. The federal energy assistance program allocation for CT was \$76 million, covering less than 11% of the state's home energy affordability gap. A combination of local, state and federal dollars assist families in need but clearly a sizeable gap remains. Social Services is the access point for residents under age 60 who apply for energy assistance. Last year's long, frigid winter impacted hundreds of households in town. Stories of people using their ovens to provide heat were real and troubling. **A total of 498 New Milford households applied for federal energy assistance at our office.** The department was able to access approximately \$320,000 of federal dollars in-home heating assistance (up 6.7% from 2012/13).



**Operation Fuel**, a non-profit fuel assistance agency funded by private and corporate contributions and some state funds, also chipped in to help residents. **60 of our local families receive \$27,170 in aid** through Operation Fuel.

Our own community has increased efforts to help off-set the loss of government funds. **The “Cold Homes, Warm Hearts 5-K Walk” for the New Milford Community Fuel Bank netted about \$25,000 from sponsors, walkers and other donors.** Local generosity enabled our **Community Fuel Bank to assist 63 Social Services households with an additional \$22,500 (up 32% over last year)** in fuel assistance. The Fuel Bank also aided an equal measure of Senior households in town. **All told, Social Services helped 621 households to assistance with heating costs totaling just under \$370,000 last winter (up 7.6% from 2012/13 but down significantly from previous years).**

**FOOD: One in five of our great nation’s households struggle to put food on the table. We may think this can’t include New Milford, but it does.** 21.4% of our school children participate in the free/reduced lunch program! Hunger continues to affect young and old in our town. To address this problem on the local level our **Food Bank** provides weekly bags of non-perishable groceries, produce and other goods to qualified households. **8216 such bags were distributed last year.** Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 87 households. Households with children comprise 40% and households with seniors are 34% of our program participants (continuing the steady rise in New Milford seniors experiencing “food hardship”).



The Food Bank could not exist without the help of our generous neighbors. We team with food vendors and growers, **Big Y Foods, Stop and Shop, Northville Store, Fort Hill Farm, and Washington’s Judea Community Garden project** among others. They enable us to provide bakery products and fresh produce, conduct food drives and special events, make special contributions and are always willing helpers in our efforts. **Great appreciation also goes to the Community Culinary School, which donated 7000+ homemade meals for clients.** All together, we make a significant impact on abating hunger in this community!

Among the many donors of food and financial support, we thank: **NM Lion’s Club, The New Milford Women’s Club, Paradise Cruisers (“Thanksgiving in July” car show), the Rotary Club, AARP (New Milford and Brookfield chapters), the VFW Ladies Auxiliary, NM Postal Workers, The Odd Fellows and Palm Rebekah Lodge, Ch. 55 Order of the Eastern Star, The NM Police Dept., Northville Baptist Church, St. Paul’s Anglican Church (Brookfield), Temple Sholom, Our Lady of the Lakes RC Church, First Congregational Churches of New Milford, Bridgewater and Washington, the United Methodist Church (for its pantry “Our Daily Bread”), and Walnut Hill Community Church.** Local corporations, **Kimberly Clark, Wal-Mart and Chemical Marketing** have provided help to keep the Food Bank going. In the schools, **Northville Elementary, Sarah Noble Intermediate, Canterbury, Kent, and Marvelwood Schools** deserve an extra big bravo for their efforts. We so appreciate the helping hands of many child care centers, Girl and Boy Scout troops and other youth groups, businesses that hold events or food drives and our loyal individual donors. We appreciate and count on all of you!

**Our Food Bank is a prime example of volunteerism at its best.** Operating every Wednesday morning and all day on Thursdays, we have an energetic, faithful team of about twenty volunteers who fill orders and distribute goods to the clients. In addition, they sort goods and re-stock shelves (a never-ending job!), pick up or package fresh goods and grocery orders, lending a sympathetic ear and cheery smile all the while. We are ever so grateful to these *amazing* women and men!

**HOUSING:** Social Services handles many calls for help with problems related to housing. For many, this largest single expense presents a continual budgetary challenge. In the US, more than three quarters of low-income households who qualify for rent subsidies are left to find housing in the private market. **In NO state can a full-time minimum wage worker afford a one bedroom apartment at fair market rent!** In CT, a minimum wage earner must work 106 hours per week to afford an apartment (140 hours for the greater Danbury area). Affordable housing is clearly a national and local crisis.

This office is often a starting point as people search for housing or for ways to remain in their homes when financial hardship strikes. We spend a great deal of time working to provide residents with information, referrals, advocacy and some direct assist grants for housing needs.

The **Hope Fund** is our assistance fund to help clients with money toward security deposits or with preventive rent/mortgage assistance during extraordinary circumstances such as illness or unemployment. Last year, we were able to assist **39 residents** with \$9225 through this fund that is supported by private contributions and grants. (down 23%) **The Thrift Mart of New Milford** has been the one consistent donor to this fund in the past year. We are most grateful!

The office also assisted **64 disabled clients with applications for renter's rebates** from the State of CT (down 12%). We are relieved to report that legislation was passed to overturn the "sun-setting" of this program and expect to see our number of applicants increase next year.



**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE:** When New Milford residents experience financial hardship, Social Services is a place people can turn to. Our help includes counseling and budget guidance as well as concrete financial aid when appropriate. In addition to the forms of financial help described elsewhere, the department administers the **Good Samaritan Fund**, a charitable crisis fund used for services or items not provided by other available resources. **During the past year 179 grants totaling \$22,479 (down 14%) were distributed to households in distress.** Like the Food Bank and Hope Fund, the Good Samaritan Fund is reliant upon private gifts and grants. Assistance includes payments to utilities in order to continue service, car repairs, help with prescriptions and other medical needs, and funding for children's activities and programs. We are very grateful to **the Thrift Mart for their on-going support to this fund. The Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation and New Milford Hospital Registered Nurses** made special gifts last year. In addition, many groups and individuals donate sums large and small to help their neighbors in need.

**Financial Fitness** continues to be a priority for the department. This takes place in conjunction with our client assistance programs and through workshops offered to other organizations such as

the Community Culinary School and to the public. We use material from The Center for Financial Social Work to help residents improve their relationship with money, learn budgeting principles, recognize emotional spending patterns and set goals to gain financial security.

**FAMILY FIRST!:** Years ago, New Milford Social Services developed a program known as "Family First!" aimed at enhancing the quality of family life for lower-income residents. This is a weekend retreat experience offering workshops for parents on stress management, parenting and financial fitness, and recreational activities for both parents and children. Last fall as we reflected on ten years of this program, we invited an original participant to address the group. She talked of being shattered by her marital break-up and the impact this had upon her young son, her years of mending and strengthening, and her more recent joy in realizing a life-long dream of becoming a homeowner on her own! She thanked the community of support she had found through Family First. To improve feelings of self-worth and hope is some of the best work we can do at Social Services. **We are so grateful that MVP-SOS continues to support a portion of the children's participation. This year the Goldring Family Foundation and another loyal anonymous donor also made Family First possible. We believe in the value of Family First and thank these sponsors for their trust in our work!**

**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:** The Social Services Department could never accomplish its work without the **support and partnership of the greater New Milford community.** Our office is the referral point for many a 211-InfoLine call, yet we act as the hub of a great support wheel consisting of other agencies, service providers, civic groups, charitable organizations, youth groups, churches, town departments, businesses and individuals. We are indebted to all for their support and teamwork!

Three "special mentions" this year: (1) **The Feinstein Hunger Relief Fund:** Alan Shawn Feinstein's Challenge is a national appeal that incentivizes donations made to hunger fighting organizations during March and April. Participating in this effort netted \$5968 from our generous donors, plus 2650 food items (half from Sarah Noble School!). In response, the Feinstein Fund made a nice donation in July. Yeah team!!

(2) **The Santa Fund:** Under the leadership of Nancy Camp, a core group of elves have organized the donation of *thousands* of holiday gifts for children for about thirty years! We are all so sad that Nancy lost her battle with cancer last winter; however, her friends pay her utmost honor by continuing this crucial program for us. Thank you Carol Staib, Maryann Stewart and Nancy Nichols!

(3) **Supervisors Isabel King and Theresa Polseno, CT Dept. of Social Services:** the CT DSS has been going through a daunting “modernization” and overhaul in the way they do business. For clients and new applicants communication has been extremely difficult at times. We are *so* grateful for the on-going efforts of these women, who have gone above and beyond helping us to find or move information so that benefits are made available.

In the community, the department hosts meetings of the New Milford Social Service Providers Group, an informational exchange between area service providers. Time permitting, we participate in regional and statewide organizations that advocate or follow issues related to poverty, health care, housing, food insecurity, financial literacy, homelessness and family strengthening. Efforts are made to maintain contact with state legislators who represent New Milford, and with town boards and commissions to share information and budgetary concerns.

**Volunteerism is alive and well!:** The Social Services Department provides volunteer opportunities for students in need of community service through their school or church, social work college students, and for a full range of people whose lives are enriched by giving back to their community. **Last year, we averaged 149 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 7093 volunteer hours (up 14%), or 136 hours per week! This represents a significant gift to the community under the capable guidance of social worker Ivana Butera, who manages volunteer activities for the department.** We simply could not function at the level that we do without our dedicated volunteers!

**SEASONAL PROGRAMS:** For many lower income families and individuals, Social Service programs make the difference at key times of the year when special events or holidays occur. These “extras” are a hardship to their personal budget and our community responds with great

generosity. This department is the access point for seasonal programs, verifying residence and income eligibility, overseeing many activities and coordinating donations and distribution to participants.

The following programs represent community-wide efforts to give Social Service children and families the same advantages as their neighbors:

<u>Program</u>	<u>Participants</u>
• Bike Day	27 kids
• Camp CONNRI	7 kids
• Back to School Clothes	272 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	288 HHs
• Santa Fund Children	565 kids
• Sibling Shopping	263 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	43 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	71



**In closing,** Social Services continues to operate at a very busy pace, a reflection of larger systemic issues that keep a segment of the population in prolonged struggle. In both good and bad times, Connecticut’s working households have seen their economic opportunities diminish. Income in Connecticut does not go as far toward meeting basic needs as it does in other states. Recent data show that Connecticut had the third highest cost of living of any state in the contiguous U.S., with the highest prices in the country for groceries and the second highest for utilities. Our residents cannot help but be affected by these trends. We hear this in their stories and bear witness to the ever-present obstacles they face. We also know very well that any of us are but an accident, a serious illness or a job lay-off away from joining their ranks.

New Milford Social Services recognizes our important role of being the logical first place for distressed people in town to turn. **We are committed to providing services, advocacy and referral information with utmost compassion and professionalism.**

**On-going needs for our neighbors:**

- \*Gift cards: gas, food, local shops
- \*Teen gifts for the holidays (especially boys!)
- \*Volunteer time
- \*Program support: financial donations and/or help with our events