

New Milford Department of Social Services



2014 – 2015 Annual Report

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

Despite an improved economic outlook in the US the going stays tough for many people. They may be left with a lot less in the aftermath of divorce or separation. Perhaps they lost their job and are having a tough time finding one that utilizes their skill set. Maybe illness or chronic health problems have created a whole new landscape to adjust to, including changes in work capacity. Or they never did well in school or lacked opportunity for higher education and struggle with low paying jobs, plentiful in our service economy. In New Milford, many such people find their way to the Social Services office. They rent or own homes all over our town, work in our schools, stores, hospital and medical offices. They drive our school buses, care for our elders and toddlers, and volunteer with Scouts and church groups. With one twist of fate, they could be you or me, my son or your cousin. They ARE our brothers and sisters, collectively.

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 Fitness, 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 Secretary, full-time Social Worker/Volunteer Coordinator 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 typical low income household in CT owes \$2560 more in energy bills than they can afford to pay. This “energy affordability gap” is 784 million in CT! The federal energy assistance program (CEAP) allocation for CT was \$79.2 million, covering roughly 10% of that gap. A combination of local, state and federal dollars assist families in need but clearly a sizeable disparity remains. Social Services is the access point for residents under age 60 who apply for any form of energy assistance. Last year’s endless winter impacted hundreds of households in town. CEAP deliveries began in mid-November and ended in mid-March, while frigid temperatures widely exceeded these dates. **A total of 529 applications for the CT Energy Assistance Program were taken at our office this winter.** (up 6.2% from last winter) 23% of applicants were new to the program and of the 1450 people assisted, 43% were children. **A total of \$310,732 in energy aid was provided.**



Operation Fuel, a non-profit energy assistance organization funded by private and corporate contributions and some state funds, also chipped in to help residents. **69 of our local families received \$29,338 in winter aid while 19 had \$6789 in help with utilities last summer through Operation Fuel.**

The greater New Milford community generously supports our 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 raised dollars from sponsors, walkers and other donors.** Local generosity enabled our **Community Fuel Bank to assist 67 Social Services households with an**

additional \$16,626 in fuel assistance. The Fuel Bank and Operation Fuel also aided a good number of Senior households in town through the work of our counterparts in the Senior Center. **All told, Social Services helped 665 households to assistance with heating costs totaling just under \$358,000 last winter.**

FOOD: One in six Americans (17.2 percent) said in 2014 that there had been times over the past 12 months that they didn't have enough money to buy the food that they needed. Tens of millions of people are still struggling, despite an improving economy. **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. Feeding America's quadrennial "Hunger in America" study indicates that families and elders no longer visit emergency food sources for temporary relief, but rely on food pantries as a supplemental food source. On the local level our **Food Bank** provides weekly bags of non-perishable groceries, plus produce and other goods to qualified households. **8519 such bags were distributed last year.** Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 89 households. **Households with children comprise 40% and households with seniors are 31% of our program participants.** Our annual program users total 1495 residents, and are predominantly female (56% to 44% male) and white (73%), with Hispanic the second largest group at 14%.



The Food Bank could not exist without the help of our generous neighbors. We team with food vendors and growers, **Stop and Shop, Big Y Foods, 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 6000+ homemade meals for clients (and 67,859 meals since its inception!).** 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, Korean War Veterans, Roger Sherman Chapter of the DAR, The NM Police Dept., Northville Baptist Church, St. Paul's Anglican Church (Brookfield), Temple Shalom, Our Lady of the Lakes RC Church, First Congregational Churches of New Milford, Bridgewater and Washington, St. John's Episcopal Church of NM, St. Andrew's Episcopal of Marbledale, the United Methodist Church (for its pantry "Our Daily Bread"), and Walnut Hill Community Church. Local corporations, **Kimberly Clark and Wal-Mart** have helped to keep the Food Bank going, plus special efforts from **Candlewood Valley Health and Rehab and Candlewood Valley Country Club.** In the schools, **Northville Elementary, Hill & Plain, John Pettibone Sarah Noble Intermediate, Canterbury, Kent, and Marvelwood Schools** deserve an extra big bravo for their on-going efforts. **Schaghticoke and NMHS** also held successful food drives. **We are grateful to many child care centers, Girl and Boy Scout troops and other youth groups and 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 June report entitled "[State of the Nation's Housing](#)" released by the [Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University](#), it is evident that for many of us, housing has become less affordable. The report found that the U.S. housing recovery lost momentum last year:

- homeownership rates continued to fall;
- single-family construction remained near historic lows;
- existing home sales cooled.

And while rental markets and households continued to grow, the study concluded that "with rents rising and incomes well below pre-recession levels, the U.S. is also seeing record numbers of cost-burdened renters." Affordable housing continues as 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 **40 residents with \$10,295** through this fund that is supported by private contributions and grants. **The Thrift Mart of New Milford** has been the one consistent donor to this fund in the past year. Additionally, **The Harcourt Foundation** made a major gift. We are most grateful!

The office also assisted **75 disabled clients (up 17%) with applications for renter's rebates totaling \$40,762** from the State of CT .



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 170 grants totaling \$30,356 (up 35%) 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 NM Stop & Shop and NM Board of Ed secretaries** 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 at the Community Culinary School and to the public. Using materials from The Center for Financial Social Work and the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, we help residents explore their relationship with money, learn about budgeting, recognize "emotional spending" and set goals for financial security.

FAMILY FIRST!: In 2003, 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. Overall, 335 adults and 544 kids have benefited from Family First! To improve feelings of self-worth and offer respite and hope is some of the best work we can do at Social Services. **We are so grateful that MVP-SOS continues to provide vital support for 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) **Park Lane Animal Hospital** and **The NM Town Clerk's Office:** It is well documented that pets enhance the lives of families, the disabled and elders. These two organizations have helped our client's pets! Park Lane held a free rabies clinic, provides free vet services and has been dropping off dog and cat food routinely over the past year. The Town Clerk's office has run a #1 Dog contest, bringing in funds and attention to the needs of lower income pet owners; as a result they deliver a huge supply of donated pet food each summer. Thanks guys!!

(2) **United Way of Western CT** has been a

long-time partner to this department and has found several ways to benefit this community. Under Kathy Thomas' local leadership, they sponsor the Back to School Clothes for Kids program, have teamed with the Women's Club to "Stuff the Gazebo" in preparation for Thanksgiving food distribution, and have an awesome Youth Volunteer Corps that engages in projects with Social Services. Additionally, the United Way published the **ALICE Report**, a pivotal document for illuminating the issues of the hard working, lower income population. Bravo!!

(3) **John Pettibone Elementary School:** this year we say good-bye to a long-standing supporter, JPS. For over 20 years, their students did chores and good deeds at home to raise funds, providing 20+ NM children with holiday gifts and clothes delivered to Santa with great fanfare! JPS conducted many a school food drive as well; we appreciate *all* of their efforts!

In the community, the department hosts meetings of the New Milford Social Service Providers Group, an informational exchange between area service providers. 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.

OUR SHINING STARS!: 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 150 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 6549 volunteer hours or 126 hours (3.2 FT employee equivalent) per week! This represents a significant gift to the community under the capable guidance of social worker Ivana Butera, who coordinates volunteer activities for the department.** We simply could not function at the level that we do without our fantastic volunteers!

SEASONAL PROGRAMS: For many lower income households, Social Service programs make the difference at key times when special events or holidays occur. These "extras" are a challenge to their 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 adults the same advantages as their neighbors:

<u>Program</u>	<u>Participants</u>
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	14 kids
• Back to School Clothes	238 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	290 HHs
• Santa Fund Children	565 kids
• Sibling Shopping	247 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	45 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	66



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. The State of Working CT reports that the large majority of workers have faced stagnant or falling wages over the past decade, accelerating the rise of inequality. Only Connecticut's highest earners have seen wage growth since 2000. The 2015 Kids Count report shows that nearly 20% of Litchfield County children are under the 200% poverty level and 29% live in homes that lack secure employment. Daily life in these circumstances is challenging. We hear this in our clients' stories and bear witness to the continual obstacles they face.

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