

New Milford Department of Social Services



2016 – 2017 Annual Report

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The climate for serving those experiencing financial hardship is more challenging than ever. Federal and state budgets and priorities are in a state of crisis and flux making it hard to predict what resources will be available six months, a year or three years from now. CT job growth for 2016 was a negative number and the worst seen in seven years. Housing and food costs continue to rise making CT one of the most expensive states to live in nationwide. To take a spin on an old song, if it wasn't for bad news we would have no news at all! But we are determined and unwilling to let these challenges define our work. With the support of an amazing community, New Milford Social Services continues to focus on the many tasks at hand.

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 for 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. Once again last year we provided services to approximately 850 households from all walks of life and 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, Office Coordinator, and 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 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: Despite another fairly mild winter (excepting two late season blizzards!) and lower, stable oil prices, heating one's home has remained a large budget item in the northeast. One of our largest and most significant forms of assistance is helping residents access home heating resources. Social Services is the access point for residents under age 60 who apply for any form of energy assistance. **A total of 433 applications for the CT Energy Assistance Program were taken at our office last winter. Through this program over \$350,000 in federal energy aid went to all eligible New Milford residents this past year.**



Operation Fuel, a non-profit energy assistance organization mainly funded by private and corporate contributions, also chipped in to help residents. **74 of our local families received \$31,884 in combined winter and summer aid with heat or utilities** through Operation Fuel.

The greater New Milford community generously supports our efforts, filling in many gaps in federal or state funds. Local generosity enabled our **Community Fuel Bank to assist 69 Social Services households with an additional \$18,514** in fuel assistance. The Fuel Bank and Operation Fuel also aided a substantial number of senior households in town through the work of our counterparts in the Senior Center. **All told, Social Services provided 576 applicants with aid related to heating their homes.**

FOOD: It's disturbing to know that hunger is a fairly widespread problem in America, and that includes New Milford. **1536 town residents rely on SNAP (food stamps) to help purchase food while 22.7% of our school children participate in the free/reduced lunch program. Hunger continues to affect young and old in our town.** Due to prolonged hardship for those living in the lowest 20 percentile of income, relying on food pantries has become a

way of life rather than short-term need for many. On the local level our **Food Bank** provides weekly bags of non-perishable groceries, plus produce and other goods to qualified households. **8261 such bags were distributed last year to approximately 160 weekly household visitors.** Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 69 households. **Families with children comprise 36% and those with seniors are 34% of our average monthly program participants.**

Lower income families lack ready access to healthy foods. In her compelling essay about growing up in a poor, working household Carmen Rios writes: “Poor people will eat what they can afford, *not what is most nutritious*— and it’s one of the leading contributing factors to so many unjust health issues that people incur. We live in a country where most families can afford to eat dinner at Burger King, but can’t afford to buy fresh fruit on a regular basis.”

To impact this, NMSS created a coalition called the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative** that now provides doubled SNAP (food stamp) dollars for fruits and vegetables at the NM Farmers Market. **We are indebted to the donors who have made this doubling possible: United Way of Western CT, The Goldring Family Foundation, the Harcourt Foundation, St. John’s Episcopal Church, First Congregational Church of New Milford and Candlewood Valley Pediatrics. Bravo!**



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, Aldi, NM’s 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 6676 homemade meals for clients last year.** 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 Auxiliary, NM Postal Workers, The Odd Fellows and**

Palm Rebekah Lodge, 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, St. John’s Episcopal Church of NM, St. Andrew’s Episcopal of Marbledale, NM Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church (for its pantry “Our Daily Bread”), and Walnut Hill Community Church. Local business operations, Kimberly Clark, the NM Board of Realtors and Park Lane Animal Hospital have helped to keep the Food Bank going. In the schools, Northville, Hill & Plain, Sarah Noble, Canterbury, Kent School, and Marvelwood School deserve an extra big shout-out for their on-going efforts. Schaghticoke and NMHS clubs also held successful food drives and participated in Walk a Mile. Town Departments of Public Works, Parks & Rec, the Youth Agency and Town Clerk all chipped in, as did NM Ambulance. 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 rely on all of you!

Our Food Bank is a prime example of volunteerism at its best. Operating 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 food 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 handle many calls for help with housing problems. For many, this single largest expense presents a continual budgetary challenge. As the rental market grows, an extremely low vacancy rate has driven prices up further burdening lower income renters. Connecticut continues as one of the most expensive states in the country for housing costs. *Out of Reach 2017* finds that a CT household must earn \$24.72 an hour (or \$51,400 per year) to afford a typical two-bedroom apartment. Yet, in 2017, the average CT renter working 40 hours per week earns only \$16.97 per hour or \$35,298 a year. Those earning CT’s minimum wage of \$10.10 an hour would have to

work 98 hours per week to pay for a two-bedroom apartment!

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 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 **62 residents with \$16,774 (up 24%)** through this fund that is supported by private contributions and grants. We were very happy to receive a nice donation from the **Archbishop's Annual Appeal thanks to Our Lady of the Lakes Church. Additionally, The Goldring Family Foundation, The Harcourt Foundation and Thrift Mart of New Milford** were major contributors. We are most grateful!

The office also assisted **84 disabled residents with applications for renter's rebates totaling \$45,802** from the State of CT.



FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: When New Milford residents experience financial hardship, Social Services is often the place people are referred 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 175 grants totaling \$26,785 (up 6.6%) 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** made a special gift 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 occurs in conjunction with our client resource counseling and through workshops offered at the Community Culinary School, Family First Weekends 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!: For 15 years, New Milford Social Services has run a program known as "Family First!" aimed at enhancing the quality of family life for lower-income residents. This weekend retreat experience offers workshops for parents on stress management, parenting and financial fitness, and recreational activities for both parents and children. Overall, 388 adults and 629 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. **This year the Goldring Family Foundations and a loyal anonymous donor made Family First possible. We believe in the value of Family First and thank these sponsors for their trust in our work!** Next year the format will be changing from retreat to a more local program with the same objectives.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: The Social Services Department is able to accomplish its work because of 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) **Stop and Shop:** While this grocer has always been a terrific aide, donating baked goods, hosting food drives and raising "Food for Friends" funds from shoppers, this year they went above and beyond organizing a major food drive for us in conjunction with the CT Food Bank and NBC News. We appreciate you!!

(2) **The Community Culinary School of NW CT:** In the ten years since its inception, the CCS has made and donated almost **83,000 meals** to the Food Bank! Their special procurement relationship with **Aldi**, thanks to the CT Food Bank, intercepts hundreds of pounds of food that

would otherwise become waste each month. Best of all, the School offers a meaningful career path that many a Social Services client has taken to better their lives. **Bravo Dawn Hammacott and staff, and here's to the next ten years!**

(3) In addition to our funders, Family First has been possible through the dedication of several special people and one amazing place. A huge thank you goes to **YMCA Camp Jewell** as a most accommodating host, and to **Maureen, Jean, Angie, Lisa, Monika, Irma, Carlie, Sandy and Andrea**, the best team-mates anyone could ever ask for!

In the community, the department hosts meetings of the NM 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 & mental health care, housing, home heat, hunger, financial literacy, homelessness and family strengthening. We maintain contact with state legislators who represent New Milford, and with town offices, boards and commissions to share information and budgetary concerns. We continue to be active with the NM Substance Abuse Prevention Council, a regional Housing Placement Committee that seeks to end chronic homelessness and together with Nurturing Families of the NMVNA, co-facilitate grandparents and other caregivers raising children support group.

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/graduate students, and for a full range of people whose lives are enriched by giving back to their community. **Last year, we averaged 114 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 4123 volunteer hours. This represents a significant gift to the community under the capable leadership of social worker Ivana Butera, our volunteer coordinator.** 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:

Program	Participants
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	10 kids
• Back to School Clothes	289 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	272 HHs
• Santa Fund Children	525 kids
• Sibling Shopping	253 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	44 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	74



In closing we ended last fiscal year with a change in staff: our very capable part-time social worker Amy Bondeson left us to expand her mental health practice. She takes clients on HUSKY insurance and works right next door, so we are very grateful for her continued good work in NM. Sarah Geary, MSW has recently come on board and we already know that she is a great “fit” for our department!

We are ashamed and saddened to see an escalation of social policies that further the divide between the “haves” and “have-nots”. We don’t understand how hard working people living many years in this country and trying to seek permanent residency, can be viewed as criminals who must leave their US citizen children and the place they call home.

We wish that local, state and federal government would focus on many solvable issues like hunger, immigration and job opportunity rather than being mired in politics and inaction. There are good solutions at hand! The sad fact is that our culture and economy supports a reality that means Social Services offices will always be busy places. This one certainly is!

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