

New Milford Social Services 2022-2023 Annual Report



Ivana Butera, LMSW- Director • Monika Roberts, Office Coordinator
Alyssa Cole, LCSW- Social Worker & Post-Crisis Navigator
Maria DeOliveira, LMSW-Social Worker & Diverse Community Advocate
Wanda Fyler, Program and Volunteer Coordinator

2 Pickett District Road, New Milford, CT 06776: (860) 355-6079 socialservices@newmilford.org

Prepared 10/31/2023



The mission of the Social Services department is to offer resources and programs to enhance the well-being and sustainability of New Milford residents experiencing financial hardship by addressing basic needs including food and household self-sufficiency. We are in a post-pandemic era and our economy continues to be impacted by a residual aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Inflation and interest rates continue to rise. Low and middle income households in New Milford are being impacted by this economic flux. COVID related benefits instituted by the State and Federal governments have expired or their funds are near exhaustion. Prices for basic needs such as food, gas/transportation, childcare, heating, utilities and housing (rent/mortgage rates) have risen substantially this year, plateauing at much higher costs or wavering frequently. In addition, as we have seen prices increase, what we are not seeing is an exponential rise in wages and salaries making it difficult to manage an already constrained budget. New Milford Social Services remains committed to our mission and to linking residents to resources to help offset these economic hardship. New Milford Social Services is steadfast in supporting our residents-in-need through empowerment, advocacy, compassion and connection to opportunities aimed at building resilience and self-sufficiency.

Our department continues to see an increasing number of people facing employment, health, and financial roadblocks that continue to test their independence and ability to support themselves and their families without some kind of assistance. We continue to see a high volume of people at Social Services. Over 1000 households made of diverse characteristics including working families with children, single disabled households, and mixed generation households seek out services and resources through this office each year.

In fiscal year 2022-2023, the work of the Social Services department was carried out by five people: a full-time Director, a full-time Office Coordinator, a full-time Social Worker & Crisis Navigator, a 32-hour Social Worker/Diverse Community Advocate and our new full-time position, dedicated: Program & Volunteer Coordinator. We also could not fully function without outstanding contributions from our devoted volunteers and compassionate community partners.

The focal point of this department is to assist residents (individual and family units) with opportunities to ease their financial distress but also to work towards wider system changes that can positively affect our community's social cohesion. This report details our activities and main assistance programs of heating and utility assistance, food, housing, financial assistance, seasonal programs, and coordination with other community agencies and initiatives to positively impact various crises.

As mentioned in a previous paragraph, the national economy has taken a toll, creating a post-pandemic era of higher costs to consumers. State and Federal responses aimed at reducing financial burdens pressed upon families during the COVID pandemic subsided. Many programs such as SNAP fluctuated to lower benefit levels while expanded for some households with children as we saw an end to free/reduce lunch for all Connecticut children. This also has greatly impacted our low-income seniors and disabled adults. As the State launched the MyHomeCT program to assist homeowners financially impacted by COVID-19, renters saw the UniteCT program end, remaining open only for those the midst of active eviction court cases. For renters facing a monthly increase in the hundreds and not yet threatened with eviction, help was scarce. Many families struggled with shifting budgets, seeking additional jobs and sources of income, trying to reduce expenses as much as possible to secure housing and the basics for their families. In light of all these changes, New Milford Social Services was determined and diligent in our attempts to connect people to resources that would ease these financial burden.



ENERGY ASSISTANCE: Heating assistance is one of the most sought after needs we address, impacting hundreds of households year-round. These programs help residents offset their heating burdens-fuel based or electric. Social Services is the local intake/application site for residents under the age of 60. **The Connecticut Energy Assistance Program (CEAP)** is the most expansive of the heating assistance programs. Its application period is essentially from September to June. In FY 22-23, we saw a **7.6% increase in utilization of CEAP where our office processed 315 applications, leading to \$303,655.00 in federal energy aid awarded to residential households and local vendors.** **Operation Fuel**, a non-profit energy assistance organization mainly funded by private and corporate contributions was also accessed to help residents experiencing emergency heating situations. **31 of our local residents were helped through this office with \$21,621.80 of combined winter and summer aid for heat and utilities.** One important factor of Operation Fuel is that it helps to assist households whose income is just above State guidelines of 60% to 75% SMI. These households still face financial constraints but opportunities for assistance are limited. Additionally, generous contributions from our greater New Milford supporters helped fill in gaps in Federal and State funding through the local efforts of **The Community Fuel Bank.** This local charitable fund is shared with the New Milford Senior Center. **This year 37 Social Services households were helped with \$16,276.07.** This is a significant increase from FY 21-22 (70% higher application rate and over \$12,600 more in grant awards) for this local fund which is a crucial safety net for many vulnerable households; especially as we saw oil prices in 2022 jump to approximately \$7.00/gallon. Local vendors continue to work with us to provide the best cost to help the Community Fuel Bank. **In total, 383 applicants were helped with \$341,552.87 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**



FOOD: *Every day, many Americans, including New Milford residents, are pressured to make difficult decisions between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food.* There are approximately 1411 New Milford residents receive SNAP benefits (food stamps) but many more who are above those guidelines. **The latest Map the Meal Gap report lists Litchfield County at 10% food insecurity rate, with 44% of food insecure households above the income guidelines for most nutrition programs such as SNAP.** There continues to be a disparaging gap between income and the cost for

many basic goods and services needed to sustain one's household. According to the ALICE report by the United Way of Connecticut, 30% of New Milford households are struggling to make ends meet because they make less than the basic cost of living in our area. This percentage is higher than previous years. Struggling with hunger is not restricted to families. Many seniors and disabled in our town struggle with food as living on a fixed income leaves little room to accommodate any increase in living expenses. **The New Milford Food Bank** is our main tool to helping those combat food insecurity. We serve households with or without children, senior households and those with disabilities. **The New Milford Food Bank continues its response to combating the lingering food insecurity many residents face. With the help of many community partners, donors, volunteers and staff, we saw 9109 weekly visits to the food bank (up 13%), offering food that helped to prepare over 82,000 meals. The food offered at the New Milford Food Bank consists of many nutritional choices of shelf stable food, fresh produce, dairy and meat, and weekend bag lunches for children. 42% of users were families with children and 32% were seniors. Each month the food bank program fed an average of 249 children (up 30%) and 130 seniors (up 17%). An average of 300 unduplicated households utilized the food bank every month. Emergency food vouchers to local grocers were given to 26 households for a total value of \$975.00. In addition, we were able to provide over \$11,000 in gift cards through the food bank to over 300 households during the holiday months.** All food products received came from donations, but many were monetary instead of in-kind goods, which are used to pay for emergency vouchers and purchase food at local grocers or through CT FoodShare.

When budgets are restricted, choices of what to buy favor cheaper and less nutritious food items. Many families struggle to buy higher quality protein rich foods, whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables. We continue to operate as a full-choice pantry with many nutritional options under the SWAP (Supporting Wellness At Pantries) guidelines. *We continue to provide a supportive and safe-space that allows us to offer a dignified and respectful operation for participants to shop, and also provide them access to our other services and social workers.* **This year we were also able to increase access to the food pantry through appointments, early and late, five days a week, thanks to our devoted new Program Coordinator, Wanda Fyler. Her ability to manage the operations and 20+volunteers was greatly needed**

to improve access of services to the 749 registered families for the food bank. This equates to 2059 enrolled persons, a 34% increase in registration and the highest number of registrants we have seen in a very long time. For all these recipients we were able to offer a wide assortment of meat, dairy, fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as low sodium, low sugar, gluten free, and organic items. In addition, a variety of non-food items such as personal care products, household cleaners, and home paper products were available. We are very appreciative to our charitable vendors and grocers, **Big Y, Stop & Shop, Aldi, Northville, CT FoodShare, Fort Hill Farm of New Milford, Washington's Judea Community Garden, Riverbank Farm of Roxbury, Sullivan Farm, Food Rescue US- Northwest CT**, and many others, who partner with us to provide bakery, fresh produce, meat, food rescue items as well as hosts to many community food drives. **Mountain High Organics, a new supporter of the food bank, provided so much in a short period of time. We thank them greatly for this new partnership.** We also owe a special thank you to **Kent School for continuing to provide hundreds of weekend lunch bags**, enhancing the ability for families to feed their children when not at school. The New Milford Food Bank relies solely on community donations. We continue to see an impressive response from our community partners. For our food and financial donations we would like to thank: **The Silo, NM Lions Club, the Woman's Club of Greater New Milford, United Way of Western CT, New Milford Animal Welfare, Kimberly Clark, Paradise Cruisers the Rotary Club, AARP (New Milford and Brookfield chapters), the VFW Auxiliary, The Odd Fellows and Palm Rebekah Lodge, The NM Police Dept., NM Hospital, Candlewood Lake Club, Northville Baptist Church, St. Paul's Anglican Church (Brookfield), Temple Sholom, Our Lady of the Lakes RC Church, Housatonic Council #40 of the Knights of Columbus, First Congregational Churches of New Milford and Bridgewater, Washington Council of Churches, Trinity Lutheran, NM Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church (for its pantry "Our Daily Bread"), Affordable Automotive, NM Fitness & Aquatics Club, and many other local businesses. Kimberly Clark, the NM Board of Realtors and local banks have also helped to keep the Food Bank going and to St John's Episcopal Church of New Milford for continuing their monthly food drive and A Little Help From Our Friends. In the schools, Northville, Hill & Plain, Sarah Noble, Canterbury, and Kent School, deserve an extra big shout-out for their on-**

going efforts. Schaghticoke and NMHS clubs and teams also held successful food drives and participated in "Walk a Mile for a Meal". The Youth Agency, Mayor's Office and Town employees, also chipped in throughout the year. In addition, many warm thanks to the childcare centers, Girl and Boy Scout troops and other youth groups and businesses that held events or food drives and our loyal individual donors. New Milford as a whole shined brightly through the multitude of generosity from so many individuals, groups and businesses that may go unnamed but, truly, not unappreciated. We appreciate and rely on all of you!

To round off our connection to food assistance is the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative**. This is the seventh year of this program, which has given SNAP recipients more purchasing power by doubling their SNAP (food stamps) dollars to buy fresh fruits and vegetables from our local farmers. **We had a record number of customers to the market this year. 67 people covered 230 weekly visits producing coin sales as high as \$7,952. Another successful year of sale growth for our local farmers and participants.** We continue to have a strong and trusted relationship with our farming vendors and we are very grateful to them for their continued support and acceptance of this valuable program. We are also extremely grateful to our fiduciary donors who have helped with our doubling incentives: **The Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation, the Archbishop's Annual Appeal from the Archdiocese of Hartford, St John's Episcopal Church and other individual anonymous donors dedicated to increasing food security with fresh healthy foods.**



HOUSING: Inquires for housing assistance and access are numerous at Social Services throughout the year, and this year is no exception. It is the largest expense that poses the most daunting and frustrating challenge to many people facing budgetary constraints. Many rents continued to pursue the uptick in the housing market and monthly tenancy charges continued to increase by hundreds of dollars. A family of four looking for a 3-bedroom home would find it challenging to pay less than \$2500 plus heat and utilities. **That household of four would need an annual income of at least \$82,406 to afford it, according to the Out of Reach report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition. The United Way, through their ALICE report, states that a family of four would need an income as high as \$117,000 to meet their**

survival budget in a modern economy. And they project an additional increase due to inflation in the next year or so for a household to continue to meet their basic needs of housing, transportation, child care, food and other home needs.

For those searching for help with housing, this office can provide a starting point. We provide resources and referrals to housing agencies and advocacy with the goal of preventing an eviction or stabilizing a new tenancy. For homeowners, we connected many to CHFA and the MyHomeCT program created to help struggling homeowners financially impacted by COVID. MyHomeCT offered a significant relief to those struggling to keep up with their mortgages, real estate taxes, common charges, and HOA or lot fees. This program continued into FY 23-24.

Our office continued to respond with housing grants to offset a month of rent, security deposit, or mortgage. **The Hope Fund** is our way to assist with grants to help prevent evictions through rent assistance, mortgage payments, or even possibly, security deposits as residents deal with several other hardships such as job loss, illness, home/car repairs, or childcare cost increases. **Last year, we assisted 12 residents with \$6211.00 through the Hope Fund**, which is supported by private community donations and grants. Last year we received substantial donations from the **Archbishop's Annual Appeal thanks to Our Lady of the Lakes Roman Catholic Church, the Thrift Mart of New Milford, St John's Episcopal Church and many other individual donors.** We are extremely grateful to all our supporters!

We were also able to **assist 5 residents with \$1950 in funds from the Salvation Army for rent, and an additional \$2360.66 in gasoline and utility vouchers to 20 local households.**

This office also assisted **59 disabled households with the Renter's Rebate program totaling \$28,311.18 in grants** from the State of Connecticut.



FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: We are the responding agency when New Milford residents, under the age of 60, experience financial hardships. We assess their presenting financial needs, including consultation and budget guidance, and work to connect individuals to programs to try to help manage their limited funds. Within critical times, we are fortunate to assist with financial aid grants through our charitable **Good**

Samaritan Fund. This year, we issued **93 grants and vouchers totaling \$16,127.31 (an 18% increase from last year)** to households in financial distress. Many of the crises involved utility shut offs, medical needs, critical car or home repairs/expenses, job or education related expenses, as well as for children like childcare costs, enrichment programs, camperships, school expenses and holidays. As with our other programs like the Food Bank and Hope Fund, the Good Samaritan Fund operates solely on donations from private and community gifts. **We extend our gratitude to our dear supporters: the ThriftMart of New Milford, Goldring Family Foundation, and to the Martha and Mary Fund of St Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church and New Milford United Methodist Church for providing matching funds for some of our most vulnerable requests. Many more community groups and individuals have been so very generous. We are extremely grateful to all our donors.**

One of our most longstanding partnerships is with the United Way of Western CT. They continued their response to helping people in financial crisis by offering Prosperi-Key and the Healthy Savings program, savings and financial coaching and with **The Giving Fund** where they helped vulnerable New Milford families with **\$2784 in donations.**



ARPA FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: In late spring of 2022, we received ARPA emergency funds. This was a new resource rewarded to us by the Town of New Milford as part of the American Rescue Plan Act. These funds were created to offset a financial burden put on local households during the COVID-19 pandemic. By end of FY 22-23, we were able to grant 65 requests with \$53,441.49 to 59 households. These funds assisted with payment for rent, mortgage, utility and telephone, car-related, home expenses, medical care, and child related expenses. Without an income restriction placed upon these funds, it gave us an opportunity to help several households who had very limited traditional options of assistance. The fund is still available and we continue to utilize them into the next fiscal year.

Additionally, ARPA funds also created the opportunity for us to gain a new position for one of our social workers; that of a post Crisis Navigator. In FY 22-23, that position was first undertaken by Lauren Haire, MSW who did a wonderful job with this inaugural role of in-depth service management for cases involving individuals and/or family units experiencing a high level of distress in an unhealthy environment and high-risk

situations that may lead to life altering events. COVID brought forth added financial stressors, isolation and other pressures adding a higher risk to intimate partner and family violence in some households. CT Coalition Against Domestic Violence saw a 13% increase in sought-out services among their partner organizations. This position gives our social workers an opportunity to work closely with people and family units experiencing high risk challenges such as intimate partner or family violence, separation and isolation. From August 2022-June 2023, our social workers provided over 1000 hours of engagement and intervention to 76 households. In addition, Maria DeOliveira as our Diverse Community Advocate has matched those hours working with our Spanish and Portuguese residents providing in-depth service management and system navigation. Her work has increased exponentially as we have seen an increase in engagement from our diverse community by 30-40%.



COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS:

Our ability to accomplish much of the work we do at New Milford Social Services is not without the essential partnership and support of the greater New Milford community. Our office becomes a point of first contact for our partners and supporters to gauge community needs. These service providers include local civic and church groups, town departments, charitable organizations and youth groups, businesses and individuals, we have been extremely fortunate to be part of a team of compassionate supporters- a symbiotic relationship of giving and receiving that has improved the daily lives of many of our neighbors.

SPECIAL THANK YOU to a longtime supporter and vital asset to our community: The Community Culinary School of Northwestern CT. They has been an outstanding agency for improving the self-sufficiency in New Milford for over a decade, but COVID brought their efforts to a halt by end of 2022, ending their amazing efforts to teach hundreds of students in the culinary field and prepare them for new careers! Their job retention rate was consistently over 95%. Each week they prepared meals for our food bank patrons totally in the hundreds of thousands over the years. Even when COVID stopped their in-person classes and trainings, they pivoted to provide hot meals not only to our food bank, but to seniors in our community and to our most vulnerable during the holidays. They will be missed but their valiant efforts will not be forgotten and we are forever grateful for their tremendous contribution, endless compassion and

steadfast devotion to the town of New Milford.

This department also participates in regional and statewide organizations that advocate for or follow related topics of poverty, healthcare, mental health care, housing, heating, food insecurity and hunger, financial fitness and literacy, and homelessness. This department follows State legislators and legislating topics relevant to our focus. New Milford Social Services participates and collaborates with other town offices, boards and commissions to share information and advocate for the mission of our department. We continue to be part of the CT Local Administrators of Social Services, the regional Housing Solutions Committee, NM Housing Partnership Commission, and NMCAN (our local prevention council). We are also part of New Milford Community Response Team (NMCRT), a collaborative effort of our human services departments, first and second responders, and the Mayor's Office and the New Milford Food Insecurity Team (NMFIT).



VOLUNTEERING:

Social Services continues to provide opportunities for many generous adults and students looking to give back to their community and gain valuable life skills. For many high school and college students this experience provides exposure into the field of human services and the impact economic systems have on many communities. **Our volunteer team is our greatest point of pride. Many volunteers** for years have devoted hundreds of hours and days to ensure the success of our programs. **Within FY 22-23, 268 volunteers contributed 4792.5 hours with over 1085 visits to assist us with various programs, including the food bank, seasonal programs and in-office help.** These volunteer hours represent more than two full-time employees. Our very special volunteers work endlessly towards the success of all our programs. We cannot thank these generous and dedicated individuals enough for helping us with our very vital programs.



SEASONAL PROGRAMS:

When families are struggling to save for emergencies and unforeseen circumstances it leaves even less for special events and holidays, therefore adding to their struggle and stress. For our families, these programs have been key to warding off any further challenges on an already constrained budget. Our department takes a lead role in verifying residency, means-testing, and registration for many seasonal and holiday programs. We work closely with many community partners, like the Woman's Club

of Greater New Milford, the United Way of Coastal & Western CT, the Santa Fund committee, our Faith community NM Youth Agency and Parks & Recreation department, and the Salvation Army, to coordinate efforts to gather donations and distribute holiday goods to our participants.

The following programs represent those community efforts to help these struggling families and offer them equitable advantages as their neighbors and classmates:

Program	Participants
• Back to School Clothes	235 children
• Bike Day	42 children
• Youth Agency scholarship	11 children
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	10 campers
• Parks & Rec Scholarship	35 children*
• Thanksgiving Baskets	259 families
• Santa Fund Children	443 children
• Special Toy/Santa Event	168 children
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	72 adults

**Special mention to New Milford Refugee Resettlement Committee and MVPSOS for their donations for summer camp. Despite rising camp tuition, we were able to help as many children as last year in an equitable manner. Thank you friends!*

Milford residents in need. The people we see face frequent challenges, economically and emotionally, facing the harsh reality of financial insecurity that leads them to make tough decisions for themselves and their families. Some are dealing with compounded crises, making it even more difficult to navigate these added challenges on their own. It can be a humbling experience to ask for help but many strong, determined people have made that choice to come forward. We continue to see many resilient people, who persevere in the mist of obstacles. They face many roadblocks yet stand committed to move forward with determination. The Social Service staff is focused on addressing the needs of these residents with compassion and professionalism, doing our very best to help them maintain their financial independence with self-assurance, and advocate for change to ease their burden.

We continue to pursue our goal to be a safe place for those in need. To offer resources and provide the basic safety nets necessary for self-sufficiency. Even in the midst of obstacles and limits we face, we will continue to gather resources and information to help those entering through our doors. Our Social Workers and support staff remain resolute to helping those who reach out to us for support.

We are grateful to be in the position to try to answer the call to help residents with even the basic of assistance as they try to rebuild and maintain their financial security and independence among a strained economy in the midst of righting itself in this post-pandemic time.



In closing, we remain steadfast to assisting those in financial crisis. We are committed to our mission of impacting the well-being and sustainability of New



We Welcome You



Te damos la bienvenida

Nós lhe damos boas-vindas