



# New Milford Social Services 2020-2021 Annual Report



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The mission of the Social Services department is to offer resources and programs to enhance the well-being and self-sustainability of New Milford residents experiencing financial hardship by addressing basic needs including food and household self-sufficiency. Over the past year and a half, the New Milford community has been challenged in a way not seen by our nation in an extremely long time: that of the COVID pandemic. The impact of the pandemic on the hardship of many New Milford residents has yet to fully unfold. There has been an unprecedented State and Federal response to attempt to mitigate health and financial crises. New Milford Social Services has remained committed to inform and assist residents with connection to these resources, as well as offering our own programs to help offset their hardship. New Milford Social Services remains steadfast to supporting our residents in need through empowerment, advocacy, compassion and connection to opportunities to build resilience and sustainability.

The Social Services 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.

The work of the Social Services department is carried out by four people: a full-time Director, a full-time Office Coordinator, a full-time Social Worker/Volunteer Coordinator, and 32 hour Social Worker/Diverse Community Advocate. 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) and ease 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 energy/utility assistance, food, housing, financial assistance, seasonal programs, and coordination with other community agencies and initiatives.

As another year passed with our nation in the midst of the COVID pandemic, The State of CT and Federal Government continued their response to the lingering needs of our residents by extending executive orders and passing aid bills that offered financial relief. These temporary safety nets continued to help people grapple with the changes of their financial profiles. Aid for food, rent/mortgage, utility bills were some of the main basic needs addressed, and throughout this entire time of crisis and transition, New Milford Social Services remained diligent to connect people to resources that would help ease their financial burden.

**ENERGY ASSISTANCE:** Heating assistance is one of our most significant and largest programs that typically runs from September to May. This program helps residents offset their heating burdens- fuel based or electric. Social Services is the local intake site for residents under the age of 60 who apply for any of these forms of energy assistance. This year, our numbers are more reflective of an uptick of Federal support that kept people protected from shutoffs and from other economic mediations that, for the moment, kept cost increases at bay. In FY20-21, we saw a 23% decrease in utilization of **the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program where our office took 254 applications, leading to \$157,903.10 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. **33 of our local residents were helped with \$15,201.98 of combined winter and summer aid for heat and utilities.** One important factor of Operation Fuel is that it helps us assist households whose income is just above State guidelines. 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 22 Social Services households were helped with \$4461.44.** Local vendors continue to work with us to provide the best cost to help the Community Fuel Bank. **In total, 309 applicants were helped with \$177,566.52 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**

**FOOD:** In 2020, 13.9% (1 in 7) of our country were projected to be food insecure (according to Feeding America). Every day, many Americans, including in New Milford, were forced to make difficult decisions between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food. Over 1900 New Milford residents were receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps) in 2020. This Federal program did extend its eligibility through the P-EBT(pandemic) program, offering more opportunities to families with school-aged children, and, many saw an increase in monthly stipends, however, generally, this program continues to be a very income restrictive program, leaving many working families and struggling seniors and disabled with very little-to-no State help to combat food insecurity. Even before COVID-19, 53% of Litchfield County households (Map the Meal Gap) who are experiencing food insecurity are over the guidelines to receive SNAP benefits. For most participants, weekly access to a food pantry is part of a regular routine to manage tight budgets. Even before we saw a spike in unemployment after the onset of the pandemic, wages remained stagnant and not keeping pace with increases to living expenses such as rent, utilities, transportation, childcare, and food. According to the ALICE report by the United Way of Connecticut, 29% of New Milford households are struggling to make ends meet. 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 continued its response to combating the lingering food insecurity many residents are facing despite being back to work and school. With the help of many community partners, donors, volunteers and staff, we distributed 9170 of food totaling over 102,000 meals. These “bags” actually consisted of many bags of shelf stable food, fresh produce, dairy and meat, and weekend bag lunches for children. 36% of users were families with children and 43% were seniors. Each month the food bank program fed an average of 191 children and 141**

**seniors. An average of 283 unduplicated households utilized the food bank every month. Emergency food vouchers to local grocers were given to 54 households for a total value of \$2629. In addition, we were able to provide food gift cards through the food bank to over 200 households totaling \$9000.** 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 the CT Food Bank.

When budgets are restricted, choices of what to buy lean towards cheaper less nutritionally valued food items. Many families struggle to buy higher quality protein rich foods, whole grains, fresh fruits and vegetables. This year we were able to return to operating as a full-choice pantry with many nutritional options. To mitigate the risks of COVID and maintain safety protocols we spent this past year in a larger than usual space. We were able to continue to provide a space that allowed us to offer a dignified and respectful operation for participants to shop for a variety of healthy food options and maintain our commitment to SWAP (Supporting Wellness At Pantries). **This year we saw a 2.4% increase in registration, totaling 1824 registered recipients. This was actually a 19.5% increase compared to pre-pandemic fiscal years.** 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 vendors and grocers, **Big Y, Stop & Shop, Aldi, The Connecticut Food Bank, Fort Hill Farm of New Milford, Washington’s Judea Community Garden, Litchfield Food Rescue** and many others, who partner with us to provide bakery, fresh produce, meat, rescue items as well as hosts of many community food drives. **We also benefited from the receipt of hundreds of USDA Farmers to Families food boxes filled with fresh meat, produce, and dairy. A very special thank you to Litchfield Food Rescue, the New Milford Lions and the Town of New Milford Fire Marshall, Public Works and Community Care Coordinator for helping with coordination and transportation.** We also owe an incredible thank you to the **Community Culinary School of Northwest CT for donating 7878 of homemade meals** to our food bank families. Even without their students in session during the pandemic, the chefs stepped up to continue to supply weekly meals to our food bank patrons. **Kent School was able to resume weekend lunch bags, enhancing the ability for families to feed their children and through a special donation, Bonni Manning Catering was able to provide hundreds of**

**meals over several months.** The New Milford Food Bank relies solely on community donations. Throughout the pandemic, we have seen an overwhelming generosity 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, the local 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").** Tori & Howard Co., Affordable Automotive, and many other local businesses. Kimberly Clark, the NM Board of Realtors and local banks have also helped to keep the Food Bank going. Also to St John's Episcopal Church of New Milford for continuing their monthly food drive, to Bravo Pizza for continuing their delivery of meals through the end of summer, and to De Hoek Farm, . 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 hold 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!

The consequences of the pandemic outreached in many ways, even effecting our staff. We unfortunately spent several months without a designated staff coordinator for our food bank. Our reliance on volunteer support was even more crucial this past year than in prior years. Two volunteers, Diane D'Isadori and Kelli Sopko, were able to step up in a critical way to take on significant leadership roles. We owe many thanks to the both of them. They devoted endless hours to the success of this program, in addition, we had an additional ten to fifteen volunteers, some returning and others new, who dedicated each week to preparing and assisting our participants with their food choices. Throughout the week many helping hands came

together to pick up food donations, sort contributions and re-stock shelves, freezers and refrigerators, culminating in assisting our food bank clients on distribution day. Preparing for distribution is not an easy task and our volunteers worked with fortitude day after day to ensure food outreach to so many households in need.

To round off our connection to food assistance is the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative**. This is the fifth year of this program, which has given SNAP more purchasing power by doubling their SNAP (food stamps) dollars to buy fresh fruits and vegetables from our local farmers. **We once again built on our growth of this program with an increase from the previous year in utilization by almost 47% with farmers' sales exceeding \$6000.00.** We continue to build a strong and trusted relationship with our farm 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 Harcourt Foundation, St John's Episcopal Church and the First Congregational Church of New Milford and other individual anonymous donors dedicated to increasing food security with fresh healthy foods.**

**HOUSING:** Phone calls and inquires for housing are numerous at Social Services throughout the year. It is the largest expense that poses the most daunting and frustrating challenge to many people facing budgetary constraints. Local rents remain high. A family of four looking for a 3-bedroom apartment will find it challenging to pay less than \$1500 plus heat and utilities. **A household of four would have to earn at least \$4743.00 a month and without paying much more than 30% towards housing to get by, 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 with two small children would need a survival budget of \$7,374-\$9,548 to meet their 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 landlord with the goal of preventing an eviction or stabilizing a new tenancy. Sometimes this office is able 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, back mortgage payments, or security deposits as residents deal with several hardships such as job loss, illness, home/car repair, or childcare cost increases. This year, residents saw an unprecedented response from our Federal

Government and CT used this support to create UniteCT. This program was able to offer up to \$15,000 for each household to help with back or future rent to help those effected by COVID avoid eviction and stabilize their housing. With this opportunity and with the extension of eviction and mortgage, many people had a chance to regain employment, stabilize income, and find assistance without losing their home.

**Last year, we assisted 29 residents with \$14,018.69 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, The United Way of Western CT, and many other individual donors. We are extremely grateful to all our supporters! We were also able to assist 10 residents with \$2737 in funds from the Salvation Army for rent and shelter, and an additional \$210 in gasoline vouchers to assist with transportation.**

**This office also assisted 59 disabled households with the Renter's Rebate program totaling \$36,831.64 in grants from the State of Connecticut.**

**FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE:** As our mission states, we become the referred agency when New Milford residents experience financial hardships. We assess the presenting financial needs, including counseling and budget guidance, and work to connect individuals to programs to try to help manage limited budgets. Within critical times, we are also able to assist with financial aid grants through our charitable **Good Samaritan Fund**. This year, we issued **59 grants and vouchers totaling \$10,947.31** to households in financial distress. Many of the crises we have helped to relieve were utility shut offs, medical needs, critical car or home repairs/expenses, job or education, as well as expenses for children like child care costs, activities, programs, and holidays. As with our other programs like the Food Bank and the Hope Fund, the Good Samaritan Fund operates solely on donations from private and community gifts. **We extend our gratitude to our dear supporters like Faith Church, the ThriftMart of New Milford, Goldring Foundation, as well as the Martha and Mary Fund of St Francis Xavier Roman Catholic Church who has matched many grants for the more critical situations. Many groups and individuals have been so generous. We are extremely grateful to all our donors.**

**One of most valued agency partnerships is with the United Way of Western CT. They continued their response to helping people in financial crisis by offering virtual gift cards, Healthy Savings program,**

**savings and financial advice programs; and they continue to grow with platforms to aid in easing the burden of income constraint residents.**

**FINANCIAL FITNESS EDUCATION:** Helping residents with their financial situations by connecting them to skill-building tools that can better their budget management, increase savings, and improve mindful spending is imperative to our work. We see it as a principal focus to help people have a better relationship with their money and to set goals that can lead to financial security. Financial Education is shared directly with clients through our newsletter and website. Our staff utilizes learning tools provided by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Center for Financial Social Work to assist clients. The pandemic did prevent us from doing in-person financial workshops but we plan to bring back financial education classes, soon, to continue these opportunities for self-sustainability.

**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. 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.

**A special mention this year to a couple of new partners in service: A Little Help From My Friends for their amazing coat distribution, Mother's day gift bags for our food bank moms, and their awesome food drives. A thank you to the New Milford Day of Caring group who offered holiday and home help to a critical family in need by raising money for fuel assistance. They hope to continue to help our community for a long while.**

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 this department. We continue to be part of the

CT Local Administrators of Social Services, the regional Housing Solutions Committee, Housing Partnership Commission, and the NMCAN (the local substance use and prevention council). This year we actively participated in the Town’s Opioid Response Task Force and Coronavirus Task Force as well as the Long-term Recovery Committee.

**VOLUNTEERING:** Social Services continues to provide opportunities for students in need of community service for their school or church or to gain valuable life skills. We keep the door open for college students seeking experience and exposure in the human service field and many others who have a desire to give back to their community. **Our greatest point of pride is our volunteer team** who have devoted an enormous amount of hours to ensure the success of many of our programs, seasonal and food bank. **Last year, our volunteers contributed 5864 hours with over 1200 visits to assist us with various programs, including the food bank an office help.** These volunteer hours represent more than two full-time employees. As we ventured from closed doors to open doors with safety protocols in place, our very special volunteers worked endlessly through each transition to assist us in getting back to “normal”. We cannot thank these brave and dedicated individuals enough for helping us with our biggest and most vital program.

**SEASONAL PROGRAMS:** When families are struggling to save for emergencies and unforeseen circumstances it leaves even less for annual events and holidays, therefore adding to their struggle and stress. For our families these programs have been key to ward off any further challenges to an already constrained budget. Our department takes a lead role in verifying residency, income eligibility and registering 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 Western CT, and the Santa Fund committee, NM First Congregational Church, NM Youth Agency, NM Parks and Rec, 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 the same advantages as their neighbors:

Program	Participants
• Back to School Clothes	207 children
• Youth Agency scholarship	24 children
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	cancelled-COVID
• Parks & Rec Camp	31 children
• Bike Day	32 children
• Thanksgiving Baskets	289 families
• Santa Fund Children	444 children
• Special Toy distribution	125 children
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	77 adults

**In closing,** we stayed committed to our mission to help those in need in New Milford. 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. 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 to increase their well-being and that of their families. The Social Service staff is committed to 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.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to linger, our department continues to be thrust into a vital role to maintain a safety net for basic needs for those impacted so greatly by our nation’s health crisis and everyday financial challenges. Even in the midst of the obstacles and limits we faced as we gathered resources and information, we continued to persist to help those in need. Our Social Workers and support staff remain steadfast to helping those who reach out to us for support.

We believe that we have yet to see the long-term consequences of the impact the COVID pandemic has had on our economy and what local families will be facing as it continues. 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 their financial security.

