

New Milford Department of Social Services



2015 – 2016 Annual Report

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Most of us can relate to having “one of those weeks” where everything seems to break or go wrong. Suddenly the checkbook balance hits a new low and funds are tight for a bit. You might have to forego shopping for pleasure or dinner and a movie until the next infusion of cash hits the bank. Imagine that feeling of funds being tight as your *never-ending reality*. Most of the households we see at Social Services literally live paycheck (or monthly fixed income check) to paycheck, month after month and year after year. There is very little opportunity to put money aside for a rainy day because that would mean taking it from what’s needed for rent or the car payment or the electric bill. Can you begin to imagine how stressful this can be?

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 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, 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: Despite an extraordinary combination of lower oil and natural gas prices and a very mild winter this past year, the energy affordability “gap” for lower income households exceeds \$1500! Operation Fuel, a non-profit that studies this problem states: “As a result of this mismatch between energy bills and the resources needed to pay them, low-income households incur unpaid bills and experience the termination of service associated with those arrears. In addition, the paid-but-unaffordable bill is a real phenomenon in Connecticut. Even when low-income households pay their bills in a full and timely manner, they often suffer significant adverse hunger, education, employment, health and housing consequences in order to make such payments.” 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. **A total of 476 applications for the CT Energy Assistance Program were taken at our office this winter.** (down 10% due to 50 fewer oil applicants) **Over \$341,000 in federal energy aid went to New Milford residents this year.**



Operation Fuel, a non-profit energy assistance organization mainly funded by private and corporate contributions, also chipped in to help residents. **60 of our local families received \$23,923 in combined winter and summer aid with heat or utilities** through Operation Fuel.

The greater New Milford community generously supports our efforts to help off-set the loss of government funds. Local generosity enabled our **Community Fuel Bank to assist 45 Social Services households with an additional \$10,688** 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 581 applicants with aid related to heating their homes.

FOOD: The rate of food hardship in the U.S. is slightly better with 16% of Americans (down from 19% in 2013) stating that there had been times over the past 12 months that they didn't have enough money to buy the food they needed. However, a sizeable number of people have not felt the improved economy of these post- Great Recession years and that includes many here in New Milford. **1525 town residents rely on SNAP (food stamps) to help purchase food while 20.2% of our school children participate in the free/reduced lunch program. Hunger continues to affect young and old in our town.** Sad to say, 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. **8805 such bags were distributed last year (up 3.2%) to approximately 170 weekly households.** Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 78 households. **Households with children comprise 38% and those with seniors are 34% of our program participants.**



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, Aldi, NM's Fort Hill Farm, Tamarack Farm in Roxbury 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 5860 homemade meals for clients (and 76,019 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 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, and Marvelwood Schools deserve an extra big bravo for their on-going efforts. Schaghticoke and NMHS clubs also held successful food drives. 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 count 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! One in particular, deserves special mention: five years ago, **Donald Franco** retired from PepsiCo and basically came to work for us, donating upwards of 20 hours a week ever since! Donnie has a hand (or two!) in just about every aspect of the Food Bank, never shy to recruit his brawny son Andrew, or loyal wife Allie when needed. Are we ever lucky!

HOUSING: Social Services handles many calls for help with housing problems. For many, this largest single expense presents a continual budgetary challenge. As the rental market grows, the extremely low vacancy rate has driven prices up, further burdening lower income renters. In the preface to "Out of Reach 2016", an annual report about the cost of housing, Julian Castro, Secretary of the U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development notes that "three-quarters of extremely low-income

families pay more than half of their income just to keep a roof over their heads”. He feels that tackling our unaffordability crisis isn’t just “the right thing to do, but is “is one of the most important steps we can take to help people succeed today”.

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 **52 residents with \$13,508 (up 31%)** through this fund that is supported by private contributions and grants. We were very happy to receive a donation from the Archbishop’s Annual Appeal thanks to Our Lady of the Lakes Church. Additionally, **The Goldring Family Foundation and Thrift Mart of New Milford** were major contributors. We are most grateful!

The office also assisted **58 disabled residents with applications for renter’s rebates totaling \$32,860** 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 148 grants totaling \$25,117 (down 17%) 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 assistance 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!: 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, 360 adults and 586 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 Ellen Knowles Harcourt and 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!**

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) **private donors and family foundations:** there are some special people who are in the fortunate position to give generously to their community, *and they do.* We are deeply indebted to five such entities, the Harcourt Foundation, Goldring Family Foundation and three who prefer to remain anonymous. They allow us to extend their helping hand through programs and direct support often stabilizing a dire situation or providing a lifetime opportunity in the process. On behalf of clients, we are ever grateful!!

(2) Over the years we've benefitted time and again from the energies of our pals at the **NM Youth Agency**. They recruit kids to haul boxes of toys at Christmas and play games with kids at our summer picnic. They refurbish used bikes for Bike Day give-aways and are always up for collaboration where our paths cross. Thank you wonderful staff and youth!

(3) For 3 years and counting **Megan Sokolnicki and company at The Kent School** have made up "weekend bags" of food for school kids, and driven them down to our food bank. Megan recruited **Wendy Love and Marvelwood School** to pitch in too and this vital need is filled twice monthly by our Kent friends. Awesome!

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, 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. This year Social Services has been particularly active with the NM Substance Abuse Prevention Council, a regional Housing Placement Committee that seeks to end chronic homelessness and together with the Youth Agency, Senior Center and Nurturing Families of the NMVNA, started a grandparents 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 students, and for a full range of people whose lives are enriched by giving back to their community. **Last year, we averaged 111 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 4455 volunteer hours. This represents a significant gift to the community under the capable guidance of social worker Ivana Butera, our volunteer coordinator 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:

Program	Participants
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	12 kids
• Back to School Clothes	256 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	305 HHs
• Santa Fund Children	500 kids
• Sibling Shopping	223 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	44 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	74



In closing, in this America, a person can work full time in most service industry jobs and still be unable to afford the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing.

In this America, nearly half of our child care workers need federal assistance with programs like Medicaid and SNAP compared to 26% of the workforce overall.

In this America, 62% of elementary public school teachers said that they had children in their classrooms who regularly come to school hungry because they lack food at home.

In this America, the wealthiest 160,000 families own as much wealth as the poorest 145 million families. Looking at the top 1% and the remaining 99% of earners, CT and NY are the *most unequal states in the nation.*

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