

New Milford Department of Social Services



2017 – 2018 Annual Report

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Very often, when one of us asks a client how they are doing we hear, “I’m hanging in there”, “well, not so good” or simply, “I’m trying”. Other times a simple question like this sets off the “waterworks” as tears and a troubling story flow forth. Plainly stated, life is very difficult for the nearly 900 households who seek out Social Services aid in any given year. They often pay far more toward housing costs than the nationally accepted 30% of one’s income standard. Child care is also high and cuts to state and federal subsidies in both of these sectors haven’t helped. Our clients often drive older cars...that need repairs, have jobs with hours that fluctuate, or get cut... and generally live from paycheck to pay (or Social Security) check with little ability to save an emergency cushion for harder times.

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. The department continues to provide services to approximately 900 households from all walks of life and diverse neighborhoods, the common denominator being residence in New Milford and financial distress.

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, 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: We had a “typical New England winter” with lingering cold and storms that put home heating to the test. 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 400 applications for the CT Energy Assistance Program were taken at our office last winter. Through this program over \$260,956 in federal energy aid went to Social Service resident households this past year.**



Operation Fuel, a non-profit energy assistance organization mainly funded by private and corporate contributions, also chipped in to help residents. **92 of our local families received \$38,788 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 48 Social Services households with an additional \$13,820** 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 at the Senior Center. **All told, Social Services provided 540 applicants with aid related to heating their homes.**

FOOD: Recently, one of our residents confided that he’d been living on crackers for the past three days. This employed man was struggling to afford housing, transportation and food at once. Hunger is not unknown to this lovely Litchfield Hills community. **1536 New Milford 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. While use of food pantries is a chapter for those with a temporary financial setback, it has become an essential support for many others due to flat wage growth since the great recession or low fixed incomes. Our **Food Bank** provides weekly bags of non-perishable groceries, plus produce and other goods to qualified households. **8500 such bags were distributed last year to approximately 173 weekly household visitors.** Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 70 households. **Families with children comprise 37% and those with seniors are 33% of our average monthly program participants.**

When incomes drop and family budgets shrink, food choices shift toward cheaper but more energy-dense foods. The first items dropped are usually healthier foods – high-quality proteins, whole grains, vegetables and fruit. Low cost energy-rich starches, added sugars, and vegetable fats represent the cheapest way to fill hungry stomachs.

2017 was the first full season for the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative**, an effort that provides doubled SNAP (food stamp) dollars for fruits and vegetables at the NM Farmers Market. Last year saw a 90% increase over our first year in overall customers using this program. **We are grateful to the donors who have made the doubling incentive possible: The Goldring Family Foundation, the Harcourt Foundation, St. John's Episcopal Church, First Congregational Church of New Milford, Candlewood Valley Pediatrics and our local United Way. 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, The CT Food Bank, NM's Fort Hill Farm, and Washington's Judea Community Garden project** among others. These supporters 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 7304 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 Women's Club of greater New Milford, Paradise Cruisers ("Thanksgiving in July" car show), Litchfield Food Rescue, the Rotary Club, AARP (New Milford and Brookfield chapters), the VFW Ladies 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 Shalom, Our Lady of the Lakes RC Church, the local Knights of Columbus, 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 also helped to keep the Food Bank going. In the schools, Northville, Hill & Plain, Sarah Noble, Canterbury, and Kent School, deserve an extra big shout-out for their ongoing efforts. Schaghticoke and NMHS clubs and teams also held successful food drives and participated in "Walk a Mile for a Meal". 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 oversee and escort our participants. They also 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!

This year marked one of vast improvement for the operation of the Food Bank. By moving to John Pettibone Community Center, the Food Bank is set up as a "full choice pantry" for our clients, a far more dignified system. We have fantastic storage capacity and a lay-out that enhances functionality—staff, volunteers and clients are very happy!

HOUSING: Social Services handle many calls for help with housing problems. For many, this single largest expense presents a continual budgetary challenge. Housing is the most daunting and frustrating basic need our staff tries to address. Since the last recession, the rental market has grown and 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 2018* finds that a CT household must earn \$24.90 an hour (or \$51,799 per year) to afford a fair market two-bedroom apartment. Yet, in 2018, the average CT renter working 40 hours per week earns \$17.38 per hour or \$36,150 a year. A parent 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 provide residents with information, referrals, advocacy with landlords or agencies and direct assist grants for housing needs.

The Hope Fund is our way to assist 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 **59 residents** with **\$25,789** 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 Roman Catholic Church. Additionally, The Goldring Family Foundation and Thrift Mart of New Milford** were major contributors. We are most grateful!

The office also assisted **69 disabled residents with applications for renter's rebates totaling \$38,847** 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. 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 166 grants totaling \$30,484 were distributed to households in distress.** Like the Food Bank and Hope Fund, the Good Samaritan Fund is totally 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 Harcourt Foundation** made a special gift last year. **Martha and Mary Fund of St. Francis Xavier Church** provided key matching grants. In addition, many groups and individuals donate generously to help their neighbors in need.

Financial Fitness education is a priority for the department. This occurs in conjunction with our direct client contact and through workshops offered at the Community Culinary School and other opportunities. 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 strengthening family ties and enhancing the quality of family life for lower-income residents. Moving away from a retreat format, this program is currently in transition. We appreciate **Harrybrooke Park's** generosity in hosting our annual summer picnic and look forward to providing future updates on Family First activities. One terrific spin-off that occurred is that a large group of client families became Camp Jewell volunteers by participating in their annual "Woodcutter's Weekend" last November. This will surely continue, keeping our "community of friends" alive and well.

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) **New Milford Girl Scout troops:** from their

donations of cookies, “birthday bags” for families with kids and care kits for our disabled adults to participation in food drives, the “Walk a Mile for a Meal” food-raiser and holiday projects, our local scouts totally rock! We appreciate all of their efforts.

(2) **Barber Leslie Roy:** for the past six months, this skilled barber has been donating her time to us one day each month, enabling Social Services clients to receive free haircuts. What a great gift for the lucky men and boys who have come for appointments! Thank you, Leslie!

(3) **New Milford Public Works Dept.:** this department has truly been indispensable to Social Services this year. The Facilities Maintenance Dept. worked long and hard to help us move into renovated space in the John Pettibone building, handling much of the renovation and *all* of the trouble-shooting needed! The Highway Dept. sponsored a week long food drive and Town garage ably keeps our sturdy but aged van road worthy. Three cheers!

In the community, the department hosts 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 and homelessness. We maintain contact with state legislators who represent New Milford, and with town offices, boards and commissions to share information and budgetary concerns. We are active with a regional Housing Placement Committee that seeks to end chronic homelessness and we facilitate the “Parenting Again” support group for grandparents and other custodial caregivers.

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 and graduate students, and for a full range of people whose lives are enriched by giving back to their community. **Last year, we averaged 115 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 4664 volunteer hours. This time represents more than two full-time employees, 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
• Back to School Clothes	276 kids
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	9 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	269 HHs
• Santa Fund Children	493 kids
• Sibling Shopping	271 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	41 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	65



In closing, the year ahead is one of significant transition for Social Services as this Director is stepping down after many years at the helm. It is exciting to realize advancement from within as management will move into Ivana Butera’s able hands, while Sarah Geary will assume the full-time social worker/volunteer coordinator role. Bravo to these fine professionals!

As the excerpt that began this report notes, most of our clients live challenging lives filled with troubling choices and harsh realities. And yet, we’ll often hear a resonant sense of hope, that “this too shall pass” or “I’m not giving up!” and always, appreciation for our efforts to lend a helping hand. We are humbled by the strength and perseverance of those who willingly share their stories in an effort to gain stability and improvement for themselves or their families.

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