

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% SMI; up to 75% SMI. These moderate income households still face financial constraints but opportunities for assistance are limited. Additionally, generous contributions from our greater New Milford supporters help 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 **assisted 44 Social Service households with \$14,013.62.** Local vendors continue to work with us to provide the best cost to help the Community Fuel Bank. **In total, 369 households were helped with \$288,106.18 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**



FOOD: *Every day, many Americans, including New Milford residents, are pressured to make difficult choices between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food.* According to the Office of Legislative Research 2022 report, 1411 New Milford residents receive SNAP benefits (food stamps). And CT Voices for Children report the overall poverty rate jumped up to 12.1% (11.6% for children) in 2022, across CT. New Milford is not excluded from these statistical increases and 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 2024 update by the United Way of Connecticut, 44% 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 and it includes those at poverty level and well above. Struggling with food insecurity is not restricted to families. Many seniors and disabled in our town struggle with not enough food. Living on a fixed income leaves little room to accommodate the extra cost of food and personal care items. **The New Milford Food Bank** is our primary program to help those combating food insecurity. We serve individuals, couples, and families with children, senior households and those with disabilities. With the help of many community partners, donors, volunteers and staff, **we were able to provide over 344,000 pounds of food (<100,000 meals) to 825 local households. Our weekly patron visits were up by 18% (11,110 total visits).** Our pantry provides many nutritional choices from shelf stable food options, fresh and frozen foods as well as weekend bag lunches for children. **2342 adults, children and seniors utilized the pantry. We've seen a consist increase in utilization this year, creating a new level of constant use. 45% of users were families with children and**

30% were senior households. Each month the food bank program fed an average of 360 children (up by 31%) and 166 seniors (up 22%). An average of 378 unduplicated households utilized the food bank every month. This year's average is a 21% increase in regular utilization from last year. Emergency vouchers to local grocers were given to 37 households for a total value of \$1635.00. In addition, we were able to provide over \$11,875 in gift cards through the food bank to over 320 households during the holiday months. Food bank operation costs and inventory come solely from donations, monetary as well as in-kind goods. Donated funds are used to pay for emergency vouchers and to purchase food from local businesses as well as from 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 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 to our social workers.* **We continue to increase access to the food pantry through special appointments throughout the week, thanks to our dedicated Program Coordinator, Wanda Fyler. Her ability to manage the operations and the 20+ weekly volunteers, is essential to feeding over 1000 persons each week.** To 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, Centerbrook Farm** 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. An outstanding mention to **Mountain High Organics for the continued support and most generous donations. We thank them greatly for their 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 Classic 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 Shalom, 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, Barkery Boo'tigue 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. 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. Special shout out to Jenn Arnau and the downtown businesses for stepping up their efforts to support us! Amazing! 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 do 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 eighth year of this program, which has given SNAP recipients more purchasing power by doubling their SNAP (food stamps) dollars to buy fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and bread from our local farmers. **59 people visited the market 154 times and purchased and matched \$9658.00 in market coins.** Another successful year of sale growth for our local farmers

and participants. We continue to have a strong and trusted relationship with our farmers and market vendors. We are very grateful to them for their continued support and acceptance of this important program. We are also extremely grateful to our fiduciary donors who have helped with our doubling incentives: **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. A thank you to the Town for ARPA funds which allowed first time New Milford visitors received free coins to use at the market. Additional thanks to our new partner, Berkshire Agricultural Ventures for helping us increase matching funds to make it even more beneficial for our market SNAP patrons!**



HOUSING: Housing assistance inquiries are numerous throughout the year at Social Services. It is the largest expense that poses the most daunting challenge to many people facing budgetary constraints. Many renters have been faced with hundreds of dollar increases per month. New rentals are scarce and more competitive. A family of four looking for a 3-bedroom home would find it challenging to pay less than \$2,500 plus heat and utilities. **According to the Out of Reach report from the National Low Income Housing Coalition, someone working minimum wage would have to work 71 hours a week to afford a one bedroom rental.**

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. We continue to work to uncover any resources available to the families we work with to help them maintain their housing.

Our office assisted many with housing grants to offset a month of rent, security deposit, or mortgage. **The Hope Fund**, supported by community donations, helps to prevent evictions by assisting with rent, with mortgage payments, or supporting new housing with security deposits. **Last year, we assisted 26 residents with \$26,252.00.** We received substantial donations from the **Archbishop's Annual Appeal, the Thrift Mart of New Milford, St John's Episcopal Church and many other individual donors to which we are extremely grateful!** Through the Renter's Rebate program we assisted **44 disabled households receive \$23,299.23 in grants** from the State of Connecticut.

In addition, we were able to **assist 19 residents with \$6331.88 in funds from the Salvation Army for rent, gasoline and utility.**



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 **Good Samaritan Fund**. This year, we issued **83 grants and vouchers totaling \$18,539** 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, Bank Street Investments and Village Green Events, 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.**



ARPA FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: We continue to be able to offer access to these special funds provided to the Town of New Milford as part of the American Rescue Plan Act, to offset a financial burden put upon local households during and post the COVID-19 pandemic. **By end of FY 23-24, our efforts grew to assist 138 applicants with \$145,157.76 in grants.** These funds helped pay rent, mortgage, utility and telephone, car-related and other home expenses, as well as medical care and child related expenses. Without an income restriction placed upon these funds, it gave us an opportunity to help several households, otherwise ineligible for most State and local assistance.



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.

This year, we want to acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of Jenn Arnau, the Mayor and the businesses of New Milford. Over the past year we have seen an outstanding support with more businesses downtown and around town, lending space for donations that are helping our neighbors. These efforts are unsolicited by us but our town just knew this year was a year to help a bit more and offer more of ourselves to keep our community strong. We are grateful to receive much business support but we need to take this moment to shout out to the managers, employees and customers of Big Lots. At the time this report is being written, Big Lots has unfortunately closed, but the ongoing support we have received from them over the years was wonderful. Thank you!

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, NMCAN (our local prevention council) and Region 5 Suicide Post-vention committee. 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). This year we also became a member of the executive housing council for ODFC.



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 23-24, 418 volunteers contributed 5594.5 hours with over 1525 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. These extraordinary 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 challenges 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 financial crises. Our department takes a lead role in verifying residency, income means-testing, and registration for many seasonal and holiday programs. We work closely with many community partners to coordinate these seasonal programs. The Woman’s Club of Greater New Milford, the United Way of Coastal & Western CT, Santa Fund committee, our local Faith community, NM Youth Agency and Parks & Recreation department have been stellar partners in executing these programs to optimize the benefit to our local families.

The following programs represent those community efforts to help these struggling families and offer them equitable advantages among their peers:

Program	Participants
• Back to School Clothes	268 children
• Youth Agency scholarship	21 children
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	10 campers
• Parks & Rec Scholarship	34 children*
• Thanksgiving Baskets	355 families
• Santa Fund Children	531 children
• Special Toy/Santa Event	165 children
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	55 adults

**Another special mention this year to New Milford Refugee Resettlement Committee and MVPSOS for their donations for summer camp. Despite rising camp tuition, we were able to provide \$16,200 in scholarships for summer camp! Thank you friends!*



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 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. **Our social workers, Alyssa Cole and Maria DeOliveira have spent thousands of hours working with our most vulnerable families and individuals whose additional life crises and challenges add further risk to their well-being and slowdown their journey towards self-sufficiency.** 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. Our entire 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 uncover resources and information to help those entering through our doors.

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 an economy that is still trying to find its balance.



We Welcome You



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