



New Milford Social Services 2018-2019 Annual Report



Ivana Butera, LMSW- Director; Monika Roberts, Office Coordinator,
Sarah Geary, MSW- Counselor/Advocate, Maria DeOliveira, MSW-Part-time Social Worker
2 Pickett District Road, New Milford, CT 06776 : (860) 355-6079 socialservices@newmilford.org



The people who look to the Social Services department carry many burdens. Although we may be a logical first stop and lead referral source for those experiencing the loss of a job or income, increase in living expenses, diagnosis of a severe illness, loss of a loved one, or another unexpected crisis, it takes a toll for many to walk into our office. The answer to a common question of “how are you” can carry overwhelmed responses heavy with emotion. Our hope and our goal are to be a place that can offer relief from the heaviness and overwhelming obstacles for those experiencing financial insecurity.

The mission of the Social Services department 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. We support our community through empowerment, advocacy, connection to resources and opportunities to increase the welfare of our residents in need. Providing connections to resources and programs to empower residents through challenging situations and promoting self-sufficiency is the main focus of the department. This 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. Social Services continues to provide services to approximately **980 households** made of diverse characteristics including working families with children, single disabled households, or mixed generation households, but the common thread is local New Milford residents experiencing financial difficulty.

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 a 21-hour part-time Social Worker. 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 of other community agencies and initiatives.

ENERGY ASSISTANCE: Heating assistance is one of our most significant and largest programs that begins in September and can last as late as May depending on the intensity of our long Connecticut winters. 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 the forms of energy assistance. **A total of 388 applications for the Connecticut Energy Assistance Program were taken by our staff at our office last season. Over \$244,965 in federal energy aid went to Social Services resident households and their vendors this past fiscal year.** **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. Although their funding was reduced across the State this year, **35 of our local residents were helped with \$16,405 of combined winter and summer aid for heat and utilities.** 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 is a local fuel bank we share with the senior center. This year **32 Social Services households were helped with \$7,186.** In total, **455 applicants were helped with \$268,556 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**

FOOD: **Ten percent of New Milford residents are affected by food insecurity (according to Feeding America) and are forced to make difficult decisions between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food.** 1524 residents are currently receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps) however those income guidelines are very restrictive, leaving a greater number of families struggling with their household budgets. For most participants, weekly access to a food pantry is part of a regular routine to manage tight budgets. Even though the unemployment rate is generally low, wages have remained stagnant and

not keeping pace with increases to such living expenses as rent, utilities, transportation, child care, 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 response to helping those combating food insecurity. **Last year we distributed 8893 bags of food totaling over 80,000 meals. This is almost a 5% increase from the previous year. 40% of users were families with children and 43% were seniors. We served 230 children and 105 seniors on average each month, and an average of 292 households utilized the food bank every month. Emergency food vouchers to local grocers were given to 74 households.** All food products received came from donations, but some donations were monetary instead of in-kind goods. **We expended \$21,560 for groceries and emergency food vouchers, but the majority of the thousands of items of shelf stable and fresh foods were generously donated directly from our community supporters.**

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. Our food bank continues to operate a full-choice pantry. Our space capacity continues to allow us to offer a dignified and respectful way for participants to shop for a variety of healthy food options. 1469 registered recipients were able to choose from a wide assortment of meat, dairy, fresh vegetables and fruits, as well as low sodium, low sugar, gluten free, and organic items. We are very appreciative to our vendors and grocers, **Big Y, Stop & Shop, Aldi, Northville Store, Walmart, 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 to many community food drives. We also owe an incredible thank you to the **Community Culinary School of Northwest CT** for donating 6261 of homemade meals to our food bank families. Another thank you to **Kent School and Camilla's Cupboard** for providing 2000 weekend lunch bags for the children of our food bank patrons. The New Milford Food Bank relies solely on community donations. For our food and financial donations we would like to thank: **NM Lion's Club, the Women's Club of greater New Milford, United Way of Western CT, Paradise Cruisers**

(“Thanksgiving in July” car show), the Rotary Club, AARP (New Milford and Brookfield chapters), the VFW 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, Trinity Lutheran, NM Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church (for its pantry “Our Daily Bread”). **Tori & Howard Co. and local business operations, Kimberly Clark, the NM Board of Realtors, local banks 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 on-going efforts. Schaghticoke and NMHS clubs and teams also held successful food drives and participated in “Walk a Mile for a Meal”. Parks & Rec, the Youth Agency and Town Clerk all chipped in, as did Public Works, the Mayor's Office and Town employees. 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!**

Coordinated by the strong efforts of our Social Worker, Sarah Geary, the daily operations of the food bank owe its success to the 15-20 weekly volunteers who devote endless hours preparing and assisting our participants with their food choices. Throughout the week many helping hands come together to pick up food donations, sort contributions and re-stock shelves, freezers and refrigerators, culminating in compassionate escorting of our food bank clients on distribution day.

To round off our connection to food assistance is the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative**. This is the third year of this program which has given SNAP recipients the ability to double their SNAP (food stamps) dollars to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables at the local farmers market. We continue to see a growth in utilization with a 27% increase over the previous year and have seen a stronger partnership with our farm vendors. We are also extremely grateful to our fiduciary donors who have helped with our doubling incentives: **The Harcourt Foundation, The Goldring Family Foundation, St John's Episcopal Church, the First Congregational Church of New Milford, Candlewood Valley Pediatrics and the United Way of Western Connecticut.**

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 folks facing budgetary constraints. Local rents are on the rise. A family of four looking for a 3-bedroom apartment will find it challenging to pay less than \$1500 plus heat and utilities. **The average CT household of four would have to make at least \$77,484 to survive, according to the United Way's ALICE report. And an average minimum wage worker would have to work 101 hours/week to afford a 2-bedroom apartment in CT, according to Out of Reach 2019.**

For those searching for help with housing, whether searching for new housing or trying to maintain the one they have, this office becomes a starting point. Sometimes this office is able to respond with housing grants to offset a month of rent or mortgage. We also provide resources and referrals to housing agencies and advocacy with the landlord with the goal of preventing an eviction or stabilizing a new tenancy.

The Hope Fund has been our way to assist with housing 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. **Last year, we assisted 42 residents with \$17,610** through this fund which is supported by private community donations and grants. Last year we received a substantial donation from the **Archbishop's Annual Appeal thanks to Our Lady of the Lakes Roman Catholic Church and from the Thrift Mart of New Milford** among other private donors and community groups and individuals. We are extremely grateful to all our supporters! We were also able to **assist 7 residents with \$2000 through support from the Salvation Army.**

This office also assisted 75 disabled households with the Renter's Rebate program totaling \$43,723 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 last year, we issued **172 grants and vouchers totaling \$36,204** 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 and programs. 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. Our gratitude is extended to our dear long term supporters like the **ThriftMart of New Milford, the Hartcourt 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 of situations. Also, many groups and individuals have donated very generously and **we are extremely grateful to all our donors.** **A special thanks to the on-going support of MVP-SOS for their sponsorship of children activities, and a special mention to Bank Street Theater for their extra effort this past year.** In addition, we were also able to **assist 43 residents with \$2334 towards utility and transportation assistance through support from the Salvation Army.**

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 priority to help people have a better relationship with their money and to set goals that can lead to financial security. This is done directly with clients, through educational writings in our monthly newsletter and through workshops such as the ones we do for every class of the Community Culinary School. We educate ourselves and use learning tools provided by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and the Center for Financial Social Work.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: Our ability to accomplish much of the work we do at the Social Services Department is not without the essential partnership and support of the greater New Milford community. Our office becomes a point of first contact. A place our partners and supporters will look to as a center point for services or to gauge community need. From services providers to civic and church groups, town departments, charitable organizations and youth groups, businesses and individuals, we have been extremely fortunate to be part of team of compassionate supporters- a symbiotic relationship of giving and receiving that has improved the daily lives of many of our neighbors.

Special mentions this past year to Paradise Cruisers. This community group has been friends of Social Services for many years and they have celebrated 10 years of community giving and community compassion that has been exceptional! We would also like to add special recognition to the **First Congregational Church of New**

Milford who has become our co-sponsor of our biggest food raising event Walk a Mile for a Meal and to **Our Lady of the Lakes Roman Catholic Church** and the **New Milford Police** for going above their usual support of our programs and had an exceptional year of giving. And, finally a special thank you to our **Girl Scout friends who created the “Little Free Library”**- a portable cart that is enjoyed each week by the young and old who come into our office. We also had a special event last year that was unique- three local hairdressers spent two days offering free back to school haircuts for our youngest population. Many thanks!

In the community this department is organizer and host to the Social Services Provider Group which is an informational and knowledge exchange between area service providers. 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 are active in the regional Housing Solutions Committee, Housing Partnership Commission, NMCAN, and Community Care Team. Within our department we facilitate the “Parenting Again” support group for grandparents and other relatives raising children. This last year we were also able to collaboratively run an eight-week support group, “Joining Together” for disabled adults.

VOLUNTEERING: Social Services continues to provide opportunities for many students in need of community service for their school or church and for college social work undergraduate and graduate students seeking experience and exposure in the human service field. We have become teachers and guides to these students as they have borne witness to the hardships that have interrupted the lives of many local residents and became exposed to the complex systems that many have to navigate to gain financial security. **Our greatest point of pride is our volunteer team** of community folks who have devoted an enormous amount of hours to ensure the success of many of our programs, seasonal and food bank. Last year, we averaged **314 monthly volunteer visits for a total of 3773 volunteer hours.** This time represents more than two full-time employees. And we have been very fortunate to see our Social Worker, Sarah Geary, take over the reins of organizing our volunteer program and

lead an amazing team of committed hard working, and compassionate volunteers.

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 to coordinating our efforts for donations and distribution 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	240 kids
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	11 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	43 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	310 families
• Santa Fund Children	461 children
• Sibling Shopping	289 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	72

In closing, although this was a transitional year for Social Services with many staff shifts, we maintained our commitment to our mission to help those who pass through our doors. The people we see face frequent challenges, financially 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.

Ongoing needs for our neighbors:

- ❖ Gift cards: food, gas, local shops
- ❖ Teen gifts for the holidays (especially boys!)
- ❖ Volunteer time
- ❖ Program support: financial donations and/or help with our events



