

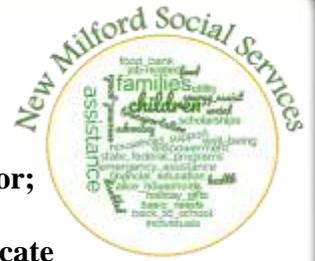


New Milford Social Services 2021-2022 Annual Report



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The mission of the Social Services department is to offer resources and programs to enhance the well-being and sustainability of New Milford residents experiencing financial hardship by addressing basic needs including food and household self-sufficiency. As our nation has turned the corner on the health impact of the COVID pandemic, we are now facing a challenging economy. Although the State and Federal governments continue to offer some financial relief programs, the economic markets have reacted with increased prices, higher interest rates, and expensive production costs causing many consumer markets to yield less than equitable returns for essential basic needs. Food, gasoline, heating and housing are a few examples of the basic needs that succumbed to the state of inflation that we are currently witnessing. New Milford Social Services is committed to linking residents to resources and programs to help offset their hardship. New Milford Social Services remains steadfast to supporting our residents-in-need through empowerment, advocacy, compassion and a connection to opportunities to build resilience and self-sufficiency.

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.

In fiscal year 2021-2022, the work of the Social Services department was carried out by four people: a full-time Director, a full-time Office Coordinator, a full-time Social Worker/Volunteer Coordinator, and a 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) with easing 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 heating and utility assistance, food, housing, financial assistance, seasonal programs, and coordination with other community agencies and initiatives.

As we saw a transition from a severe health pandemic to an economical one, Connecticut and Federal governments continued their response to extend financial relief to offset the interruption of COVID-19 in our communities. Aid for food, rent/mortgage, heating and utility bills were some of the basic needs addressed, and aid to municipalities were also implemented to address specific impacts local communities experienced. This local aid came through the Americans Rescue Plan Act. Throughout this time of market inflation and constrained supplies, New Milford Social Services remained diligent, connecting 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. However, this past year, the State extended the program by one month to motivate more households to connect to this opportunity. 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. In FY 21-22 we saw a 14.6% increase in utilization of the **Connecticut Energy Assistance Program where our office took 291 applications, leading to \$307,333.59 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. **36 of our local residents were helped with \$17,013.19 of combined 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. 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 11 Social Services households were helped with \$3,604.79.** Local vendors continue to work with us to provide the best cost to help the Community Fuel Bank. **In total, 338 applicants were helped with \$327,951.57 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**

FOOD: Every day, many Americans, including New Milford residents, were forced to make difficult decisions between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food. According to CT Foodshare, New Milford has just over a 9% food insecurity rate (equating to approximately 2,470 households). Currently there are approximately 1411 New Milford residents receive SNAP benefits (food stamps). 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. 51% of Litchfield County households (Map the Meal Gap) who are experiencing food insecurity are over the guidelines (>185%FPL) to receive SNAP benefits. Area wages for many have not been able to keep up with the rate of cost for many goods and services needed to sustain one's household. According to the ALICE report by the United Way of Connecticut, 26% 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 face. With the help of many community partners, donors, volunteers and staff, we saw 7928 weekly visits to the food bank, offering food that helped to prepare over 95,136 meals.** The food offered at the New Milford Food Bank consists of many nutritional choices of shelf stable food, fresh produce, dairy and meat, and weekend bag lunches for children. 37% of users were families with children and 34% were seniors. Each month the food bank program fed an average of 176 children and 108 seniors. An average of 239 unduplicated households utilized the food bank every month. Emergency food vouchers to local grocers were given to 32 households for a total value of \$1040. In addition, we were able to provide \$12,000 in gift cards through the food bank to over 300 households during the holiday months. 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 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 supportive and 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 social workers. **1364 persons registered for the food bank this year, and each month we fed, on average, 637 of those persons.** 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 charitable vendors and grocers, **Big Y, Stop & Shop, Aldi, Connecticut FoodShare, Fort Hill Farm of New Milford, Washington's Judea Community Garden, Litchfield Food Rescue, New Milford's Sullivan Farm** 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 owe an incredible thank you to the **Community Culinary School of Northwest CT** for donating thousands of homemade meals to our food bank families. **Kent School provided 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 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").** **Tori & Howard Co., Affordable Automotive, NM Fitness & Aquatics Club, 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 and A Little Help From Our Friends. 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!

Our Food Bank is coordinated this year by our very own Social Worker, Lauren Haire, who jump valiantly into a dual role of Volunteer Coordinator and Social Worker. She skillfully toggled the duties of food bank and volunteer coordination as well as responding to the socio-economic needs of our social work clients. Throughout the week, we also have many helping hands come together to pick up food donations, sort contributions and re-stock shelves, freezers and refrigerators. Our volunteer base is back up to 15-20 generous individuals who also help on distribution day. This is not an easy task and our volunteers work 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 sixth year of this program, which has given SNAP recipients more purchasing power by doubling their SNAP (food stamps) dollars to buy fresh fruits and vegetables from our local farmers. **We had a record number of customers to the market this year. 61 people stopped by weekly and coin sales were \$7,593. That is an 18% growth of sales for our local farmers and participants.** We continue to have a strong and trusted relationship with our farming 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 Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation, the Archbishop’s Annual Appeal from the Archdiocese of Hartford, New Milford 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, and this year is no exception. It is the largest expense that poses the most daunting and frustrating challenge to many people facing budgetary constraints. This year, many

rents followed the housing market and increased by hundreds of dollars for some. A family of four looking for a 3-bedroom apartment will find it challenging to pay less than \$1800 plus heat and utilities. **That household of four would have to earn at least \$6,978.00 a month to manage their housing needs, 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. This year we also helped over 60 households connect to UniteCT, a State program to help struggling families and landlords effected by COVID. UniteCT offered a significant relief to those struggling to keep up with their rent. New Milford saw at least 180 approved applications with a total award of over \$690,000 towards rent relief. Our office continued 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 other hardships such as job loss, illness, home/car repairs, or childcare cost increases. **Last year, we assisted 18 residents with \$7,820 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 Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation and many other individual donors.** We are extremely grateful to all our supporters! We were also able to **assist 8 residents with \$2,950 in funds from the Salvation Army for rent and shelter, and an additional \$1,798 in gasoline and utility vouchers to 37 local households.**

This office also **assisted 63 disabled households with the Renter’s Rebate program totaling \$36,221.58 in grants from the State of Connecticut.**

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: As our mission states, we are the responding agency when New Milford residents experience financial hardships. We assess the presenting financial needs, including consulting and budget guidance, and work to connect individuals to programs to try to help manage their limited funds. Within critical times, we are also able to assist with financial aid grants through our charitable **Good Samaritan Fund**. This year, we issued **83 grants and vouchers totaling \$13,708.22 (a 25% increase from last year)** 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, 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: the ThriftMart of New Milford, Goldring Foundation, the Housatonic Council #40 of the Knights of Columbus, as well as the Martha and Mary Fund of St Francis Xavier Roman Catholic 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.**

One of our most longstanding partnerships is with the United Way of Western CT. They continued their response to helping people in financial crisis by offering Prosperi-Key and the Healthy Savings program, savings and financial advice programs and especially with The Giving Fund where they helped vulnerable New Milford families with \$7,800 in donations.

FINANCIAL 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. **This year we were able to bring back financial education classes in a virtual format. We proved a 36-week course covering topics of budgeting, savings, checking, taxes, investing, insurance, credit types and management, and paying for college. We graduated 5 students. Each student earned a certificate of completion and savings incentives from our sponsors Savings Bank of Danbury and the United Way of Western CT.**

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.

A special mention this year to two our longtime supporters: The Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation and The Archbishop's Annual Appeal of the Archdiocese of Hartford. Both of these foundations recognized the critical needs of local residents during the extended pandemic period and were able to enhance their giving to assist our emergency programs including the New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative (SNAP @ the farmers market), Community Fuel Bank, and the Hope Fund.

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 NMCAN (our local prevention council). We continue with our participation in the Town's Opioid Response Task Force and Coronavirus Task Force.

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 high school and 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 has devoted an enormous amount of hours to ensure the success of many of our programs (seasonal and food bank). **Last year, our volunteers contributed 5,823 hours with over 1,300 visits to assist us with various programs, including the food bank and in-office help. These volunteer hours represent more than two full-time employees.** Our very special 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 circumstances 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 challenges on an already constrained budget. Our department takes a lead role in verifying residency, means-testing, and registration 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	214 children
• Youth Agency scholarship	24 children
• S.A. Camp CONNRI	cancelled-COVID
• Parks & Rec Scholarship	36 children
• Thanksgiving Baskets	233 families
• Santa Fund Children	439 children
• Special Toy distribution	105 children
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	62 adults

In closing, we remain steadfast to assisting those in financial crisis and we are committed to our mission of impacting the well-being and sustainability of New

Milford residents. 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. The Social Service 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 gather resources and information to help those entering through our doors. Our Social Workers and support staff remain steadfast to helping those who reach out to us for support.

We are in the midst of witnessing the long-term economic consequences brought on by the COVID 19 pandemic. How long it lasts has yet to be determined. 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.



We Welcome You



Te damos la bienvenida

Nós lhe damos boas-vindas