

New Milford Department of Social Services



2012 – 2013 Annual Report

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“So, are things getting better?” This is the question we at Social Services are often asked by community members. The answer is an emphatic “Yes and No”! For the one-time client who recently called with a question, relaying that her new job is great and she’s earning more now than ever before, it’s *Yes*. For the father and husband who called the same week, lamenting that his small increase of retail income resulted in the loss of HUSKY (state covered) insurance for himself and his wife, both with medical needs, the answer is less positive. For the last class of Culinary School graduates, all working at area institutions, stores and restaurants, the answer is *Yes*. But for the woman with three children, uprooted from home and community as she leaves an abusive marriage once and for all, the road ahead will be very rocky and likely to keep her family in poverty for a long time to come. These are our residents and among those we seek to help at Social Services.

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 education, 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 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 Admin. Assistant, 32-hour Social Worker 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: One significant program that New Milford Social Services handles is the Energy Assistance Program. Given the high cost of home heating in the northern states, this program is meeting a critical need for New Milford residents. A combination of local, state and federal dollars comprise the resources of this program. Social Services is the access point for residents under age 60 who apply for energy assistance. During last year’s frigid winter federal cuts continued to impact overall numbers for this program. Meanwhile the application process was more rigorous and laborious. **A total of 494 New Milford households applied at our office (down 8%).** The department was able to access **approximately \$300,000 of federal dollars in-home heating assistance (down 23%).**

Operation Fuel, a non-profit fuel assistance agency funded by private and corporate contributions and some state funds, also chipped in to help residents. We were happy to see **54 of our local families receive \$26,025 in aid** through Operation Fuel. (up 98% !)

Once again, our own community rallied to help off-set the loss of federal funds. **The “Cold Homes, Warm Hearts 5-K Walk” for the New Milford Community Fuel Bank** took place on another seasonable January day this year. In all, **\$28,600** was raised by walkers and sponsors alike. In addition, kudos to Sarah Noble Intermediate School’s “Hats for Heat” fundraiser! Local generosity enabled our



Community Fuel Bank to assist 52 Social Services households with an additional \$16,661 (up 32% over last year) in fuel assistance. (The Fuel Bank also aided 56 Senior households in town) All told, Social Services helped 600 households to have help with heating costs totaling just under \$343,000 (overall decline of 17.5%) last winter.

FOOD: One in five CT households struggle to put food on the table. We may think this can't include New Milford, but it does. 21.4% of our school children participate in the free/reduced lunch program! Hunger continues to affect young and old in our town. To help address this problem on the local level our Food Bank is open weekly to provide one bag of non-perishable groceries and other goods to qualified households. Emergency food vouchers were also given out to 80 households. Households with children comprise 43% and seniors comprise 28% of our program participants. Senior citizen usage of the Food Bank continues to rise, with a 24% increase over last year in unduplicated seniors taking part.



The Food Bank could not exist without the help of our generous neighbors. We team with food vendors and growers, **Big Y Foods, Stop and Shop, Northville Store, Fort Hill Farm, Sullivan Farm 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 7000+ homemade meals for clients.** 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 Lions Club, The New Milford Women's Club, NM Moms Club, Paradise Cruisers ("Thanksgiving in July" car show), the Rotary Club, AARP (New Milford and Brookfield chapters), the VFW Women's Auxiliary, NM Postal Workers, The Odd Fellows and Palm Rebekah Lodge, Ch. 55 Order of the Eastern Star, The NM Police Dept., NM Public Works Dept., Curves for Women, Northville Baptist Church, Temple Sholom, Our Lady of the Lakes RC Church,**

The First Congregational Church, the United Methodist Church (for its extended hours pantry "Our Daily Bread"), and Walnut Hill Community Church. Local corporations, Kimberly Clark, Wal-Mart and Chemical Marketing have provided help to keep the Food Bank going. In the schools, Northville Elementary, Canterbury School, New Milford H.S. and Sarah Noble Intermediate School deserve a big three cheers for their extra efforts. We so appreciate the helping hands of many religious groups, Girl and Boy Scout troops (of special note, Cub Scout Pack 58) and other youth groups, 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 every Wednesday morning and 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 goods 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!

HOUSING: Social Services handles numerous calls for help with costs and problems related to housing. For many, this largest single expense presents a continual budgetary challenge. A newly released report from the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University states that **"April 2013 was the 34th consecutive month of growth in rents.** The median asking price for rent in 2012 of \$720 is the highest ever recorded. (it is far higher in CT!) The homeownership rate has been in decline since 2004 and 2012 saw a decline from 66.1% to 65.4%, resulting in a loss of 161,000 homeowners for the year. While the housing market is rebounding nicely, there is heavy demand in the rental market and a lack of affordable housing is leaving many families in the dust." It is a local and national problem that appears to have no solution on the horizon.

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 tremendous amount of time working to provide residents with information, referrals, advocacy and some direct assistance grants for housing needs.

The **Hope Fund** is our assistance fund to help clients with grants toward security deposits or with preventive rent/mortgage assistance during extraordinary circumstances such as illness or unemployment. Last year, we were able to assist **41 residents** with slightly over \$12,000 through this fund that is supported by private contributions and grants. Large gifts to the fund were received from **The Ellen Knowles Harcourt Foundation, The Thrift Mart of New Milford**, and three anonymous donors.

The office also assisted **73 disabled clients with applications for renter's rebates** from the State of CT. We are sad to note that legislation was passed to "sun-set" this program, negatively impacting the poorest of the poor.

FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE: When New Milford residents experience financial hardship, Social Services is a place people can turn to. Our assistance 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 200 grants totaling \$25,935 (down 9%) were distributed to households in distress.** Like the Food Bank and Hope Fund, the Good Samaritan Fund is completely reliant upon private contributions and grants. Examples of assistance include 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 and N.M. Rotary for their on-going support to this fund. The Lilla Fund and New Milford Hospital Registered Nurses** made special gifts last year. In addition, many groups and individuals donate sums large and small to help their neighbors.

Financial "fitness" continues to be a priority for the department. This takes place in conjunction with our client assistance programs and through workshops offered to the other organizations, such as the Community Culinary School, and the public. We have adopted the use of Financial Social Work curriculum to help clients look at their relationship with money, learn budgeting principles, explore "emotional spending" patterns and set goals to gain financial security.



FAMILY FIRST: Ten years ago, New Milford Social Services developed a program known as "Family First!" aimed at enhancing the quality of family life for lower-income residents. Started by a generous grant from the **Harcourt Foundation**, it is a weekend retreat experience offering workshops for parents on stress management, parenting and financial education, and recreational activities for both parents and children. Over the years, a total of 278 adults and 453 kids have been able to participate in this special program. In this year's reflections, one mom noted: "I had a rough time growing up, but I want something different. I am doing all that I can to be a loving, supportive mom and wife." Another was happy to hear many nice compliments about her parenting and said, "It helps me feel stronger with what I have to go through in my life". To improve feelings of self-worth and hope is some of the best work we can do at Social Services. **We are so grateful that MVP-SOS continues to support a portion of the children's participation. This year the Goldring Family Foundation stepped up in a big way to keep the program going while another wonderful anonymous donor has paid for the parent's costs. 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 the support and teamwork provided!

Three "special mentions" this year: (1) **The New Milford Police Dept.:** for years the PD has run a very successful "Stuff a Cruiser" toy drive at Wal-Mart at the holiday season. This bounty of gifts is of huge importance for our Sibling Shopping Spree event as well as holiday gift distribution. A couple of years ago, with Dispatcher **Chris Strolin's** leadership, they also organized a holiday food drive at Stop & Shop. Who can say "no" to a police officer?! We are grateful for their extra efforts on our behalf.

(2) **The Kent School:** Under the guidance of community liaison **Megan Sokolnicki**, teens at this private school have provided 75+ monthly

“backpack” packages of kid-friendly foods for families to use on the weekends. Going into its 3rd year, this project is of great help to our Food Bank families with children. In addition, the School is a big contributor to the Santa Fund holiday gift program for kids. Youth helping other youth—bravo! (3) **There are many unsung heroes in our midst.** Every month a certain Scotsman stops by with a check for \$25 and a twinkle in his eye . . . another gent used to buy goods weekly at Costco, and now that he has re-located to another town, drops off a monthly check instead! We receive occasional generous checks to the Food Bank or Hope Fund from a businessman up Rt. 7 who doesn’t even want a thank you note. A couple will go shopping and push a full cart in to us. Gift cards for gas or groceries will be dropped off at just the most needed moment. For these and our other quiet supporters, we are ever so grateful!

In the community, the department hosts meetings of the New Milford Social Service Providers Group, an informational exchange between area service providers. Time permitting, we participate in regional and statewide organizations that advocate or follow issues related to poverty, health care, housing, food insecurity, financial literacy and family strengthening. Efforts are made to maintain contact with state legislators who represent New Milford, and with town boards and commissions to share information and budgetary concerns.

Volunteerism is alive and well!: The Social Services Department provides volunteer opportunities for students in need of community service through their school or church and for a full range of people whose lives are enriched by giving back to their community. **Last year, we averaged 146 monthly volunteer visits and logged a total of 6224 volunteer hours (up 14%), or 120 hours per week! This represents a significant gift to the community under the capable guidance of social worker Ivana Butera, who manages volunteer activities for the department.** We simply could not function at the level that we do without our dedicated volunteers!

SEASONAL PROGRAMS: For many lower income families and individuals, Social Service programs make the difference at key times of the year when special events or holidays occur. These “extras” are a hardship to their personal 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 participant distribution.

The following programs represent community-wide efforts to give Social Service children and families the same advantages as their neighbors:

<u>Program</u>	<u>Participants</u>
• Bike Day	33 kids
• Camp ConnRI	14 kids
• Back to School Clothes	264 kids
• Thanksgiving Baskets	269 fams
• Santa Fund Children	570 kids
• Sibling Shopping	250 kids
• Parks & Rec Camp	27 kids
• Gifts to Disabled Adults	78 inds.



In closing, Social Services continues to operate at a very busy pace, a reflection of larger systemic issues that keep a segment of the population in prolonged struggle. While a new U.S. Census Bureau study (the American Community Survey) shows that New Milford had a significant gain of residents over age 25 with a bachelor’s degree, from 30.5% to 38% (one strong anti-poverty measure), we also had a significant increase in the number of residents with incomes under 200% of the federal poverty level, from 9.5% to 13.3% (this translates to a gross income of \$46,100 per year for a family of four). CT has the dubious distinction as *the state experiencing the highest rate of income inequality growth in the nation.* At the same time, the poor are taking the biggest hit with cuts to government social programs. Our residents cannot help but be affected by these trends.

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: donations and/or help with our events