

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 21 Social Services households were helped with \$4684.19, which includes the value of many certificates, gifted to us by local vendors.** Local vendors continue to work with us to provide the best cost to help the Community Fuel Bank. **In total, 407 applicants were helped with \$237,181.68 in financial aid for their heat related home expenses.**

FOOD: Ten percent of our county are affected by food insecurity (according to Feeding America) and are forced to make difficult decisions between paying rent/mortgage and utilities over food. Over 1500 New Milford residents were receiving SNAP benefits (food stamps), before COVID-19; however those income guidelines are very restrictive, leaving a greater number of families struggling with their household budgets. Even before COVID-19, 51% of CT households experiencing food insecurity are over the guidelines to receive SNAP benefits. For most participants, weekly access to a food pantry is part of a regular routine to manage tight budgets. Even before we saw a spike in unemployment after the onset of the pandemic, wages remained stagnant and not keeping pace with increases to living expenses such as rent, utilities, transportation, childcare, 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 combat food insecurity. We serve households with or without children, senior households and those with disabilities. **This past fiscal year we saw an increase to food bank usage even before COVID-19. By January 2020 we saw an 8% increase in weekly visits, by the end of FY19-20, the food bank saw an additional 20% increase as job insecurity and unemployment rates spiked.** The New Milford Food Bank responded in full force, with the help of its community partners, donors, volunteers and staff. **We distributed 9785 bags of food totaling over 91,000 meals. These “bags” actually consisted of many bags of shelf stable food, fresh produce, dairy and meat, and weekend bag lunches for children. 35% of users were families with children and 41% were seniors. We served 226 children and 131 seniors on average each month, and an average of 322 households utilized the food bank every month.** Emergency food vouchers to local grocers were given to 60 households for a total value of \$2510. In addition, we were able to

provide food gift cards through the food bank to over 200 households totaling \$7125. All food products received came from donations, but many were monetary instead of in-kind goods. **This year, through the generosity of community supporters, we were able to hand out over 130,000 pounds of food to local households.**

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 as a full-choice pantry with many nutritional options. 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. **This year we saw a 17% increase in registration, totaling 1779 registered recipients.** 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. At the beginning of the pandemic in the Spring, the shutdown affected many vulnerable people from getting out for food. **We would like to acknowledge the valuable partnership of the New Milford Senior Center and New Milford Youth Agency** for stepping up to deliver hundreds of meals to shuttered Seniors, disabled, and families compromised by COVID-19. 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 7878 of homemade meals** to our food bank families. Even without their students in session during the pandemic, the chefs stepped up to continue to supply weekly meals to our food bank patrons. Another thank you to **Kent School who were able to provide over 500 weekend lunches for children** prior to shutdown of schools in the Spring. The New Milford Food Bank relies solely on community donations. Especially, during the onset of the pandemic, we saw an overwhelming generosity from our community partners. 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, The Odd Fellows and Palm Rebekah Lodge, The NM Police Dept., Helping Hands for Heroes, NM Hospital, Candlewood Lake**

Club, 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 Council of Churches, 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.

A special thank you to St John's Episcopal Church of New Milford for beginning a monthly food drive as churches shuttered due to the pandemic and to Bravo Pizza for delivering a nightly meal for several months to over 60 families and counting. 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 the Mayor's Office and Town employees. We are grateful to the NM DTC for their gofundme campaign, and to the NM RTC. 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!

Coordinated by the strong efforts of our Social Worker, Sarah Geary, the daily operations of the food bank owes 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 escorting of our food bank clients on distribution day. Even at the onset of the pandemic, as we had to scale back on volunteers and change our method of distribution, the few that were able to help, worked with fortitude to provide the same equitable service to so many looking for food.

To round off our connection to food assistance is the **New Milford Farmers Market Collaborative**. This is the fourth 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 once again built on our growth of this program with an increase in utilization by 25% from

the previous year. We continue to build a strong and trusted relationship with our farm 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 Harcourt Foundation, St John's Episcopal Church and the First Congregational Church of New Milford**

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 people facing budgetary constraints. Local rents continue to 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 \$90,000 to survive, according to the United Way's ALICE report. Moreover, an average minimum wage worker would have to work 96 hours/week to afford a 2-bedroom apartment in CT, according to Out of Reach 2020.**

For those searching for help with housing, whether 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. Fortunately, for many effected financially by the onset of the pandemic, many stays on eviction and foreclosure were put in place. However, as they are due to expire; New Milford Social Services stands ready to offer help.

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 34 residents with \$8,173** through this 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, and The Goldring Family Foundation**. We are extremely grateful to all our supporters! We were also able to **assist 18 residents with \$4650 through support from the Salvation Army.**

This office also **assisted 56 disabled households with the Renter's Rebate program totaling \$33,512.14 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 **69 grants and vouchers totaling \$10,788.24** 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 Harcourt 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. In addition, many groups and individuals have been so generous, and **we are extremely grateful to all our donors.** In addition, we were also able to **assist 26 residents with \$1298 towards utility and transportation through support from the Salvation Army.**

One or most valued agency partnerships is with the United Way of Western CT. Through their COVID-19 Response Fund, we were able to connect 39 New Milford families with a total of \$7800. Thank you!

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 service 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 a team of compassionate supporters- a symbiotic relationship of giving and receiving that has improved the daily lives of many of our neighbors.

Our special mention for this year goes to the entire Town of New Milford. We bared witness to a crisis not seen by our nation in over 100 years. This was, and continues to be, a crisis that has touched every resident of New Milford, from the youngest to the oldest. As we individually faced our unique challenges thrust upon us by the COVID-19 pandemic, whether it be health and safety, financial or a combination, as a community we rose together to a level of stewardship and togetherness to remind each other how strong we can be. New Milford Social Services and the people we serve received an overwhelming contribution of support in so many ways. For this, we are extremely grateful and appreciative!

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 continue to be part of the CT Local Administrators of Social Services, the regional Housing Solutions Committee, Housing Partnership Commission and NMCAN. This year we actively participated in the Town's Opioid Response Task Force and Coronavirus Task Force. Within our department, we facilitated the "Parenting Again" support group for grandparents and other relatives raising children, until the pandemic shutdown.

VOLUNTEERING: Social Services continues to provide opportunities for many students in need of community service for their school or church and for college students seeking experience and exposure in the human service field. We became teachers and guides to these students as they borne witness to the hardships that interrupt the lives of many local residents. In addition, they gain exposure to the complex systems that many navigate to gain financial security. **Our greatest point of pride is our volunteer team** of community people who have devoted an enormous amount of hours to ensure the

