

Survival Center responds to needs

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Mention of Amherst generally evokes images of rural college campuses, peaceful farms and forests, or the quaint daily routines of small-town life. All of these reflect a certain reality, but are just one part of our story.

Families living in poverty, suffering from hunger or food insecurity, or who are just one paycheck away from homelessness also constitute a significant segment of our community. Because Amherst and Hampshire County are primarily rural, much of this suffering is hidden from view, but its existence has been well documented.

These needs are not new. When Jane Holappa introduced the concept of the Survival Center at Town Meeting in 1976, she spoke passionately about homelessness and waning government support for struggling families. She described single-parent households, families living in cars and an immigrant family who found themselves alone in Amherst, without friends or family.

For the last 30 years, hundreds of dedicated staff and volunteers under the energetic and devoted leadership of Evangeline Wescott have been a backbone in community efforts to supply basic necessities to anyone struggling to make ends meet. They worked to create a community center where the disenfranchised could connect and support each other. They have done so, moreover, with very limited resources, under sometimes difficult conditions, and in response to changing demographics due largely to a decrease in government support for poor, sick and homeless citizens.

The impact of the Survival Center has been enormous. Close to 100 people come through each day. In the last year, we prepared 10,000 hot nutritious lunches, provided boxes of food staples to 3,000 households, distributed at least 50,000 pounds of fresh produce and bread, and made roughly 12,000 pounds of donated clothing and housewares available to consumers.

These are extraordinary numbers for a little place like the Survival Center, situated in a few rooms in the basement of an old school. These programs, moreover, operate in a very cost-effective fashion. We cater lunch for 50 people at a cost of just \$150 per day, for example. A food box from our emergency pantry, which contains canned food, pasta, peanut butter, and often frozen meat, juice, and oil, supplies nine meals for a family of four for just \$10. Doing the math, this means that \$100 provides emergency supplies for 40 people for three days.

For all of these reasons, we are very proud to become a part of the center and its history. We are aware, however, that in recent years a number of consumers and volunteers have expressed concerns about things that have occurred there. We extend our most sincere apology to anyone who has suffered any pain, stress, or inconvenience because of anything that has taken place at the center.

These concerns have been one important stimulus for a number of significant changes at the Survival Center. These include revamped policies and procedures, an updated statement of clients' rights and greater opportunities for consumer input, newly elected board officers, a more inclusive process of board recruitment to promote a diversity of viewpoints, and more extensive board and staff training. These changes will enable us to promote transparency and accountability and to be more responsive to the needs of all of our consumers, volunteers and donors.

As the new leaders of the Survival Center, our first priority is to strengthen its ability to provide for basic needs in a safe and welcoming environment for all individuals and families. We have also reaffirmed our commitment to Jane's original mission of empowering consumers to "move beyond a condition of need."

This broadened definition of survival means that the center will provide a more extensive support system for consumers by making it both a partner with, and a gateway to, the broader human service network in the Valley. At minimum, we will improve our referral system to other agencies, but we also plan to bring more services directly into the center through collaboration with local organizations serving victims of domestic violence, providing training for people who want a second chance at a high school diploma, or offering classes in parenting skills or financial literacy. Our goal is a center that meets immediate basic needs while helping to build a path to a more stable future for consumers and their families.

We are planning an open house in the fall to which the public will be invited. Please join us in rededicating the Survival Center under its new leadership and allow us to thank you, the community, for your 30 years of support. On that afternoon, we will hang a plaque to acknowledge the hard work and dedication that has sustained the center for over three decades, and we will reaffirm our mission to serve the community by providing the means for anyone in need to move beyond basic survival to a life of security and hope.

Cheryl Zoll is executive director of the Amherst Survival Center and Ruth Wade is the president of its board.