Addison County Hunger Council Meeting
December 10 2013 4:00-6:00PM at the Champlain Valley Unitarian Universalist Society
Topic: 3SquaresVT

In Attendance:
Mark Perrin, Mary Ann Castimore, Gary Lewis, Annie Harlow, Donna Bailey, Emily Joselson, Frank Mazza, Sharon Tierra, Kate Ash, Catherine Willson, Peter Burrows, Michele O’Neill, Gillian MacMurtry, Megan Lausted, Peter Carothers, Dottie Neuberger, Jane Steele, Amethyst Peaslee, Rev. Barnaby Feder, Christa Gowen, Emily Mathews, Dave Sharpe, Beth Diamond, Jeanne Montross, Amanda Rinehart

Hunger Free Vermont Staff: Marissa Parisi, Jenna whitson, Faye Conte

Notes:

Welcome and Updates:
Update from Dottie Neuberger: Middlebury Community Care Coalition is now Charter House Care Community Action.

3SquaresVT challenge: Beth Diamond shared her experience taking the 3SquaresVT challenge in November with the council. Beth reported that she and her husband wanted to try and see if they could eat local and healthy on a small budget. They did manage to eat healthy meals (though monotonous) by making a large pot of soup to act as 4 of 7 dinners and relying on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch and organic oats and bananas (on sale) for breakfast. They were able to have proteins, vitamins, etc, but the challenge was having fresh, uncooked vegetables. They also found that in order to eat healthfully for a week it took a lot of work. They spent a great deal of time planning, shopping, and preparing food. Beth shared that it was a great experience to remember what it is like to eat on such a small budget.

Holiday Food Resources: Beth Diamond shared with the council that there are only 2 holiday meal sites in Addison County. Dottie Neuberger’s meal on Christmas Day at VT Commons and the holiday meal at St Marys Church on December 15th. All are welcome to both of those meals.

Frank Mazza updated the council on the Middlebury warming shelter initiative developed in response to a state request last year to identify community resources for dealing with homelessness because the state’s emergency homelessness program was significantly over budget. The warming shelter is at memorial Baptist Church in Middlebury and can be accessed through any human service organization (for example, HOPE). The shelter is open when the state designates a cold weather emergency day (nights below 20 degrees and inclement weather when it is below 30 degrees.) People can go through a human service agency to know when it is open or can show up at the shelter from 7-10pm and the doors will be open. This shelter is for adults only and people can come in if they are under the influence of drugs and alcohol if they do not create a disturbance. There is room for 12 individuals.

Frank shared two ways that this work intersects with the council’s work:
   1. Homelessness and hunger are linked. People who are homeless are often not meeting their nutrition needs and not accessing services

Action Items and Handouts:
Handout: 3SquaresVT challenge article from the Addison Independent

Action Items:
like 3SquaresVT. HOPE provides snacks at the warming shelter and they send attendees to HOPE the next day.

2. There is an increasing pattern of communities being asked to address human service needs. Which sets up some challenges/worries. The response to human service needs across the state varies by town and county. Some communities are saturated which puts stress on resources and volunteers while in others little is available.

**Update from last meeting:** Jenna Whitson gave an update on school meal enrollment in Addison County following our last meeting. Official data for the October enrollment numbers will not be available until our next meeting in March. For now, Jenna can share that some schools in the county have increased enrollment while some have decreased enrollment. Anecdotally, we are seeing an increase in reduced lunch enrollment likely due to the reduce price lunch bill passed last year eliminating the reduced lunch category in Vermont schools.

Q: Dottie Neuberger asked why children that qualify for free and reduced lunch have to pay for milk if they do not want the entire lunch.
A: Christa Gowen answered that it is because the school would not be reimbursed for that meal due to federal guidelines. Marissa Parisi reminded the group that we are coming up on reauthorization. These are the types of issues we can share with lawmakers to make the changes we want to see at the federal level. Christa also shared that they always encourage kids to eat the meal.

Q: What happens to food that is not eaten?
A: The food is often thrown away. There may be some ways to reduce waste. For example in Bridport, there is a lunch count early in the day so that exact number of lunches can be prepared. However, this is more challenging at the middle and high school level. Donna Bailey suggested that it would be a good idea for decision-makers to see how these regulations actually play out in the school cafeteria and to see these challenges and successes.

### 3SquaresVT Program Overview
Faye Conte, the 3SquaresVT Advocate from Hunger Free Vermont, gave the council an overview of 3SquaresVT (formerly food stamps) which is a USDA federal nutrition program administered at the state level by the Department of Children and Families. The program is known nationally as SNAP. The program is available for anyone in the state who is eligible (seniors, individuals, families, employed, unemployed). Everyone who is eligible can receive funds – the funds do not run out. The amount each person receives is based on an individual calculation of gross monthly income and a series of deductions. To use the programs, benefits are deposited onto an EBT card each month which acts much like a debit card at the store. The card can be used all over Vermont in most grocery stores, convenience stores, coops, and even 40 farmers markets across the state.

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<td>3SquaresVT Front Porch Forum Post</td>
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IMPORTANT NOTE: The card can have money on it from several different programs including Reach Up and General Assistance. These programs offer more flexibility then 3SquaresVT in that you can buy other items besides food.

Who Qualifies for the Program? The amount given to an individual or family is based on the household size and gross monthly income. In Vermont the household income must be below 185% of the federal poverty line (this amount changes each October). Other expenses are then considered as deductions to your gross income such as medical costs, childcare, housing, and other necessities. The amount provided is based on net income after deductions. The benefit amount varies but the average is $240 (this represents a wide range of benefit amounts).

1 in 6, or a little over 100,000 Vermonters participate in the program. 34% are children, 13% are seniors, about 1/3 of households have someone working and about 35% have a child. Over 40% of the households have a person with a disability and 23% have a senior. This program brings in about $12.4 million a month to Vermont.

In Addison County, 4500 people participate (about the average in most counties) 1.631 children participate. This brings in about 541,000 which is spent in and around Addison County.

Beth Diamond commented that it may not all be spent in Addison County. Faye agreed that this may be true as people move between counties to make purchases; however the majority of these funds are spent within the state.

November ARRA Reduction: On November 1st cuts to 3SquaresVT occurred. People are receiving less now than they were in October. In 2009 ARRA boosted benefits. The idea was to help after the recession after inflation caught up. Inflation has not caught up so on November 1st benefits were cut across the board based on family size.

Error Rate Legislation (refer to handouts for more information): Marissa Parisi shared with the group that Vermont has not been doing a great job determining benefits. They have been sanctioned by the USDA for having an error rate over 6%. In fact, the error rate is 53rd in the country - behind all other states and territories. The majority of errors are in overpayments. If you are found to have been overpayed $400 or more, it becomes a debt to the household even if the error was the state’s error. This year, Hunger Free Vermont’s legislative agenda is to ask the legislature to hold families harmless for agency errors. We would love your help with this during the session.

Q: Why are there so many errors?
A: Marissa answered that there are many reasons we have so many errors such as; developing modernized system, state offices reestablishing after Irene, Human Services lost a lot of staff that were let go as part of
challenges for change, the department has lost many long-term workers and have used a lot of temps recently.

**Legislative Update – Kate Ash Office of Senator Leahy:** Kate Ash is a new field representative with the Office of U.S Senator Patrick Leahy. Kate is excited to be here as she grew up in Addison County. She is very new to Leahy’s team and to nutrition programs. She will be reaching out to Hunger Free Vermont and Hunger Council members individually to be fully up to speed. Kate gave us an update on progress with the Farm Bill as there are a variety of proposed changes which will impact food assistance. There are 3 critical updates she wanted to share.

1. Senator Leahy is on the conference committee to merge the proposed house and senate bills. It has become clear that some provisions such as removing categorical eligibility, mandatory drug testing, and a work requirement will likely not be included in the proposal moving forward.

2. Heat and Eat Provision: Currently, anyone who is receiving a LIHEAP (fuel assistance) benefit can claim the highest standard utility allowance on their 3SquaresVT application. This increases benefits for those that are eligible for 3SquaresVT because it increases their deductions. Currently, there is no minimum for fuel assistance. The Senate Farm Bill proposes at $10 minimum (this creates a $4.5 billion cut to SNAP benefits). Right now, they are discussing raising this minimum to $20 which would result in an $8.6 billion cut to SNAP. It is unlikely most states will be able to continue the heat and eat program.

3. Senator Leahy’s staff are in close communication with the state of Vermont to look at ways to cover that $20 minimum and make up the difference even though it is much larger. They want to make sure to keep Vermonters from losing benefits if this is passed. Kate shared that this is not something Senator Leahy is in favor of but in the context of where we are in passing the overall Farm Bill, he doesn’t know where he stands on this yet. That is why communication with the state is critical.

Kate also shared that she does not have any new information on TEFAP and that they do not expect passage of the Farm Bill before January. Also, keep in mind that they are very interested in local food initiatives at the federal level – contact Kate to discuss these initiatives. They are also looking at expanding opportunities to access local food and CSAs with 3SquaresVT benefits.

Q: Dave Sharpe asked to clarify what the cuts would look like if the state could not cover the $20 fuel assistance minimum. Faye Conte answered that if the state could not cover the $20 there would be a reduction of about $90 a month in benefits to about 15,000 households.

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<td>Jeanne Montross: HOPE</td>
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<td>Contact Jeanne at <a href="mailto:jmontross@hope-vt.org">jmontross@hope-vt.org</a> if you</td>
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population at the food shelf and are seeing a huge increase in participation. Additionally, Bart Litvin at the meat market has seen a decrease in purchases at the shop likely due to 3SquaresVT cuts. However, the higher numbers are not just due to a reduction in benefits but also due to sequestration, freezing and possible pulling away of Section 8, a decrease in heating benefits, loss of good manufacturing jobs in the area, new growth in part-time low-wage jobs, etc. This is an issue of disparity and inequality. Government programs have their place and are valuable but there needs to be fundamental change and political action to address what is going on here. There is something very wrong when a huge number of children in our country are growing up in poverty. In Addison County, there is an effort to create creative solutions to develop a food system to feed the community. This needs to be an effort driven in a way that it does not become only expensive, gourmet foods but serves the whole population.

**Donna Bailey: Addison County Parent Child Center**
Donna is seeing that there is an increase in the number of children living in poverty and food is a big part of that. The Parent Child Center is seeing more families that they haven’t seen before contacting them for basic needs such as utilities and food. The Parent Child Center works with young families and offers home visiting as well as intensive services on-site. They serve 42 kids at childcare and 28 parents and provide meals twice a day. All families use support of the food shelf year-round. Donna recently spoke with families about the cut in food stamps and they shared that the money makes a huge difference for them. Already, the end of the month is a critical time for them and this makes the money run out sooner. This increases the level of stress a family endures as well as affects the health and safety of young children. When families have less money they have to shift costs to make ends meet and have less money for food, for heat, for diapers, etc. Part of the work to help is educational – helping families cook healthy foods, teaching them to garden and shop. The other side of this is addressing it at a policy level. We hear from lawmakers that “there is no money” but what that really means is that these issues are not a priority. Remember – people are hungry all year long, and not just at the holidays, and keep in mind the added challenges of living in a rural area. Food is connected to everything for us; it is a part of our culture and part of what it means to feel good.

**Dottie Neuberger: Charter House Coalition**
The community supper program averages 200 meals. A couple of weeks ago, they served 250. The reason the program works so well is that the community supports it. They are able to go out into the community and get the support and resources they need. Dottie expressed how upsetting it is that there are still so many people who do not know about the community supper despite the fact that it has been happening for nine years. When a group comes in and hosts a meal it is education for everyone – both nutritional education and also education that there are people in the community who need this meal. In Dottie’s work in Bridport she sees what happens to families in rural areas with limited access to...
resources. She wishes she would see more families at the community suppers.
Dottie discussed how important it is to move forward together and not look at it as “them and us.” It is so important to allow people to feel respected and welcome and loved. Many people come because they are lonely which can lead to negative things. Another attendee mentioned how welcome she feels at the suppers due to the table cloths, the music and the flowers. The meals offer a nice setting for the community to share a meal.

Christmas Dinner will be served at the VT Commons on Christmas Day at 4pm. They expect about 150 people to attend and will deliver if ordered ahead of time.

Q: Do you need anything for the Christmas meal?
A: Dottie asked the council to contribute desserts. If you bake something homemade, they would love it! The dessert can be dropped off at the meal or you can call Dottie to arrange drop off.

Rev. Gary Lewis and Mary Ann Castimore Vergennes Congregational Church and Vergennes Community Food Shelf:
The Community food shelf is supported by the community. The church provides space and often many volunteers, but the donations and support are coming from schools, banks, post offices, individuals in the community, etc. The goal at the food shelf is to provide food without a lot of hoops to jump through and make sure that anyone who comes in can access food. The only thing people must do is sign up for TEFAP and 99% of them also qualify for 3SquaresVT. The food shelf controls how much is available while the people who attend choose what they want to eat. The food shelf served 288 families in 27 towns in Vermont and one in NY. A total of 6274 people were served with 40% coming from the greater Vergennes area. Many come from Bristol and some from Middlebury. In Bristol, there is a food shelf however it is only open once a month so many people have to travel a ways to access the Vergennes food shelf.
It is really too early to say whether the reduction in 3SquaresVT benefits is impacting attendance, but they have certainly seen an increase in attendance (however this time of year there is often an increase) in attendance. Gary Lewis shared that in Addison County, we are so fortunate to have so many agencies working together in many ways. Often pride can get in the way and we don’t want anyone we serve to feel put down or alienated. We want to welcome people and make them feel as comfortable as possible. Sometimes people just need someone to talk to.

Council Discussion and Questions:
Transportation: Beth Diamond brought up the issue of transportation as it is often an issue. Maybe there are grants available to expand delivery services or maybe we could invite transportation sector to attend the meeting and build a relationship between food and transportation. Jeanne Montross mentioned that maybe there are ways to satellite or look

Action Item:
Host a Friday night supper or make a donation to cover the cost of a supper. Contact Dottie at 802-388-7613
at mobile pantries for hard to reach areas. Dottie Neuberger added that she would love to have a mobile site at some places such as a local mobile home park; maybe they could eat a meal, take home a meal, and get a bag of food from a pantry. The challenge that has come up is costs such as paying the driver.

Q for Dottie: Do you have enough groups hosting Friday night suppers?
A: We are always searching for more.

Q: Does the Christmas dinner get a donation from Casella? They used to donate to a $100 gift certificate to Greg’s Meat Market which would be matched.
A: They do not, but that would be great. The group would also love to see Thanksgiving dinners continue as well. Maybe they can donate to both.

Q: Rev. Barnaby Feder asked if there are lobbying opportunities for others on the conference committee as he could contact UU ministers in other states to advocate against SNAP cuts.
A: Yes. There are opportunities to engage members from other states. Marissa Parisi named a list of several members and committed to a list with contact info attached to notes. Another advocacy opportunity would be to contact the administration. President Obama also has a say in this. Let him know the importance of protecting SNAP funds.

Peter Carothers announced that the Nash Farm has the capacity to increase production. If there were a way to process and store food, this could be a significant source of food for the community; however developing this capacity is costly and challenging. He wondered if there are grants available for these types of capital expenses.

The council discussed the importance of processing, freezing and canning. Jeanne Montross mentioned that this is the type of work a food hub in Addison County could do. There could be one location, or several in close proximity. She shared that this would be a huge undertaking and would need staffing, need to be climate controlled, etc.

Q: Christa Gowen asked how far the discussion has come on this project and what work has been done.
A: Jeanne answered that she is looking at applying for a USDA grant and the project seems to be gaining forward momentum.

Q: Rev. Feder asked whether there are other communities doing this work as a model.
A: Annie Harlow answered that there are some strong models but they vary in their projects and their capacity. She shared that there is huge potential for schools, gleaning, value added projects, etc. ACORN has begun the process of looking at sites within the county with potential. Marissa Parisi also mentioned that the Hunger Council in Windham County has been working with Food Connect in that county and they are doing
some great work. Salvation Farms was also mentioned as a partner to develop gleaning work next year.

Action steps were reviewed (see right hand column) and the meeting was adjourned.