



Hunger Council of Washington County

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## Hunger Council of Washington County Meeting Minutes

**Meeting Date: December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015**

**Present:** Barbara Bendix (The Health Center in Plainfield), Laura Biren (VISTA member, Montpelier Planning and Community Development), Don Carrigan (USDA FNS – retired), Will Eberle (Another Way), Jen Evans (Capstone Community Action), Krystal Fuller (Hunger Mountain Coop), Liz Genge (Downstreet Housing and Community Development), Dan Hoxworth (Captone Community Action), Jeff Hunsberger (Youth Services Bureau), Courtney Pletzer (Vermont Department of Health), Rachel Rolfe (Vermont Department of Health), Carl Hilton VanOsdall (First Presbyterian Church)

**Chair:** Tawnya Kristen (Green Mountain United Way)

**Hunger Free Vermont Staff Present:** Faye Conte, Monica Taylor, and Jenna Banning,

<u>Welcome and Updates:</u>	<u>Action Steps &amp; Handouts:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Updates and Introductions:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Eileen Peltier, co-chair, was unable to join today’s meeting.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>Announcements from Members:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ <i>Jen Evans</i> – Capstone will be starting a TLK series this afternoon, and someone from the USDA will be visiting.</li> <li>○ <i>Jeff Hunsberger</i> – The Thanksgiving meal is continuing to be a great success in Montpelier. There were over 110 volunteers this year, and 700 free meals were served, half on-site and half delivered.</li> <li>○ <i>Rachel Rolfe</i> – Building Bright Futures has been recreating a flyer for food shelves and meal sites. This was run by Green Mountain United Way in the past, and Building Bright Futures will be trying to keep it updated.</li> <li>○ <i>Barb Bendix</i> – The Health Center has been running the “Health Share” program for many years. Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (VYCC) raises vegetables during the summer and distributes them to people throughout the year who may not be able to access organic vegetables otherwise.</li> <li>○ <i>Tawnya Kristen</i> – Tawnya has been working with Carl Hilton VanOsdall, Jeff Hunsberger, and other partners throughout the region to host the “Community Spiral” even on December 9<sup>th</sup>. This event will focus on community healing, not specifically for one tragedy, but encompassing all that has happened and how the community can move forward. This will be similar to a vigil, with a spiral of greens set out in Currier Park open for people to drop in at any time.</li> <li>○ <i>Faye Conte</i> – Vermont Afterschool is working to increase public funding for afterschool and summer learning programs. Faye shared their advocacy postcards, and encouraged members to sign on in support of these programs, which can be meal sources for children.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<p><u>Action:</u> Visit <a href="http://www.vermontafterschool.org/zapthegap/">http://www.vermontafterschool.org/zapthegap/</a> to learn more about Vermont Afterschool and sign their petition in support of public funding for afterschool and summer learning programs.</p>



**WIC: Program Overview, Updates, & Discussion**

*Presentation of the purpose and function of the WIC program, the WIC food package, WIC participation, and the transition to Electronic Benefits. Council member Rachel Rolfe, and Courtney Pletzer, a nutritionist with the Vermont Department of Health, Barre District Office, shared a powerpoint presentation and other information.*

*Rachel Rolfe* – The Vermont Department of Health has been planning the transition to electronic benefits for many years and talking with many partners throughout the process so far. Most WIC participants are very excited, while some are sad to be saying goodbye to their delivery drivers, who are being transitioned out. The transition to electronic benefits is happening due to a federal mandate to switch all WIC programs to the electronic system by 2020. Vermont is transitioning from a home-delivery system, which it has been running for over 40 years, and is one of the first states in the country to go to eWIC, which is a big change. The transition is rolling out across the state incrementally, starting in Rutland in the late summer, and it has been a continuous learning process. The WIC program has very large geographical coverage across the country, and is a supplemental nutrition program. Eligibility is based on residence, category, income, and risk. There are 12 District Offices across the state – participants must enroll at one of the District Offices and be a resident in that area, although participants can be switched between offices, and there is no citizenship requirement. Participants must have incomes at least 185% of the federal poverty limit or be enrolled in an assistance program (such as Doctor Dinosaur or Medicaid), which allows a much higher eligibility limit. Participants must fit into one of the “categories” of the program – they must be pregnant or post-partum mothers, infants, or children up to the age of 5. Finally, participants must be at “risk,” although that can be relatively flexible in definition, as most Americans don’t meet the nutritional guidelines.

*Courtney Pletzer* – Courtney presented an overview of the WIC program, which is a supplemental nutrition program that is federally funded through the USDA and coordinated in Vermont by the Department of Health. In addition to the foods, WIC provides many services, including in-person nutritional counseling and educational opportunities (i.e. a class on making your own baby food), breastfeeding support, and referrals to health care and other programs. Over 13,000 Vermonters participate in the WIC program, including 900 families in the Barre District Office’s area (which includes some towns in Orange County). WIC participation has been declining in past years in both Vermont and the United States, although there has been an increase in clients with the new electronic system in Vermont. Potential factors for the decrease are declining birth rates and the use of food stamps (which are easier to get and have less restrictions than WIC benefits) instead of WIC. Outreach to combat this decline and increase access to the program is a big priority in Vermont.

Handout: Visit <http://healthvermont.gov/wic/> for information and materials on the WIC program.



*The Council discussed some of the potential reasons for a decline in participation and why participants might drop off of the program. Rachel shared that the Montpelier, Middlesex, and Warren areas are hard to reach. Outreach events and clinics in Plainfield and Waterbury have had good attendance.*

*Courtney Pletzer – The current home delivery system delivers foods in a prescribed food package, although the delivery and storage limitations restricts what foods are available. WIC participants will have much more choice when using the new eWIC card, as well as greater convenience and flexibility, as they can use their benefits at any time of the month, instead of only receiving the foods twice a month. All foods available to be purchased using WIC benefits will be in the system when the card rolls out, and the store’s point of sales (POS) system should recognize the foods and charge the card automatically. Most store brands and national brands will be included, as well as some local products and organic and gluten free foods. Foods will continue to be added and edited based on participants’ choices.*

*Tawnya Kristen suggested that the data collected from the new system on participants shopping patterns be shared with other social service partners, as well as with transportation services, so that ridership plans can be developed.*

*Courtney and Rachel – A mobile WIC app will be available to help participants identify what foods are eligible. When participants get their receipts, they’ll be able to see what amounts they have left on their card, and they’ll get a food benefits list every 6 months to show what they’ll be receiving. VDH staff are planning to have staff in many stores when the new system is being rolled out, and are conducting education with current clients so they’ll know what brands and food sizes are eligible. (Benefits are issued by food amounts, not cash amounts, i.e. 2 gallons of milk, 1 loaf of bread, etc.) Learning sessions will be taking place throughout April. Participants need to come in twice a year for assessments, as well as participate in two nutrition activities per year. Participants can attend activities happening at organizations partnering with WIC.*

*Liz Genge noticed that there are no learning session in Waitsfield where she has a solid community base, and offered to help the WIC staff with the Evergreen Senior Center to hold a WIC clinic.*

*Courtner and Rachel – Looking at retailers, the WIC office has been learning from other areas and trying to do a lot of outreach to make sure that stores are prepared when the new electronic system rolls out. Rachel shared a list of stores in the area that will be accepting WIC benefits. Krystal Fuller from Hunger Mountain Coop shared that the store is dealing with some issues with their POS system, but will be working to join the list.*

Action: Share the learning sessions schedule and encourage participants and potential participants to attend. (see attached)



*The Council discussed some of the potential motivations behind the switch to electronic benefits, and the program’s hope that there will be a better return on investment, which will depend on increased participation and use of the benefits.*

*Rachel solicited feedback from the Council, and asked for help with promotion and outreach. The WIC staff have presentations available that can be personalized, and translation is available for many languages, including sign language.*

**Housing and Food in Winter**

*Liz Genge – Liz, in addition to working at Downstreet, also serves as co-chair for the Washington County Continuum of Care. Liz shared updates from others in the group:*

- The Good Samaritan Haven offers 14 beds for overnight housing. They have been averaging 6 guests for most nights, but are expecting to reach capacity once it gets cold. Volunteers have been providing meals, and the Haven is continuing to do outreach for people not using the shelter. The Haven has applied for funding from the GA to help lessen the costs of motel housing.
- The Youth Services Bureau, Capstone, and Downstreet Housing and Community Development also applied for GA money for 5 apartments for families. *Dan Hoxworth, Executive Director of Capstone, shared that they are optimistic about receiving the funding, and expected to hear a decision by Friday, Dec. 5<sup>th</sup>.*
- The Continuum of Care is helping to coordinate the Annual Point in Time Count on January 7<sup>th</sup>, which helps show how many people are homeless.

*Carl Hilton VanOsdall – Carl shared a flyer describing the Community Meal and Warm Sites (attached). A year ago, people were concerned about people who were homeless and without shelter during the day. Since the Good Samaritan has varying abilities to stay open during the day, the Barre Interfaith community collaborated to develop a warming shelter during daylight hours, and has been parceling out church spaces to make this happen. There have been some talks about designating one site as a warming shelter every day, which could be both positive and negative, especially for volunteer recruitment and community perceptions. *Tawnya Kristen shared an example of a similar initiative in St. Johnsbury, which ended up having the shelter housed by the hospital and has had trouble recruiting for volunteers and services.* Many churches have been offering breakfasts for years, which are great for both providing food and for creating a community by breaking down barriers. Since church spaces are typically very underutilized, Carl sees this as a great opportunity. Spaulding High School students have been very involved and want to volunteer in the community. The students are currently staffing 2 meals, and will soon be covering 3 meals.*

Handout: Barre Community Meal and Warm Sites (attached)

Action: Contact Carl at [fpcbarre@gmail.com](mailto:fpcbarre@gmail.com) if your church or organization can offer a meal or warm site.

Action: Join a Barre Interfaith Group (BIG) meeting, which meets once a month for an hour on the first Thursday of the month from 1:00 – 2:00.



*The Council praised the students’ involvement and this positive example of young adults being involved with their community.*

*Will Eberle* – Will is the Executive Director of Another Way, a community center in Montpelier for social services. Will is looking to expand Another Way’s connections with communities around Montpelier. Another Way works with 300 clients per year, but feels underutilized, and wants to partner with others and increase usage. Another Way has a recovery-oriented, non-conventional, approach to mental health and drug abuse issues, and offers a wide range of supports to all community members, including yoga, counseling, weight-lifting, and job-seeking advice. Another Way has a meal program that could be grown, currently serving community dinners on Fridays and breakfasts on Wednesdays. Another Way currently has 15 core staff, and Will would like to have more people able to volunteer so that the center could offer more hours, meals, and services.

*The Council discussed funding challenges for such a dynamic positive organization, and Dan Hoxworth recommended tapping into the judicial system for support. Dan shared updates on the Patchworks initiative in Morrisville, which is trying to create a shelter that also offers a range of services on-site. Patchworks has a lot of community support, and is in the process of looking for a site. [Jenna shared that the Hunger Council of the Lamoille Valley will be meeting on Dec. 17<sup>th</sup> to hear updates on the Patchworks initiative, and invited members of the Washington Council to join the meeting.]*

**Upcoming Events and Opportunities:**

*Faye Conte* – Our last meeting focused on the Reach Up program, and Chris Curtis from Vermont Legal aid talked about the lawsuit against the state fighting cuts to the program. Since that meeting, that case was lost, and the court upheld the decision to make the cuts. This is very disappointing. At the state level, the state legislature will be back in session in January, and it’s looking like another dismal year of budget restraints and shortfalls. Hunger Free Vermont is part of the governor appointed group of anti-poverty advocates called the Pathways from Poverty Council, which develops a set of comprehensive recommendations that the State could do to make positive changes. Faye shared a section of the Executive Summary of the Council’s report (attached), which includes a number of interesting ideas and proposals. Hunger Free Vermont will be taking the lead on advocating for capital investments in the Agency of Human Services’ IT system. All of the IT systems are very outdated, and while this will take a lot of money to update, it’s very important. The legislature is understandably wary of investing in IT after what happened with Vermont Health Connect, but this is a necessary investment that can’t be pushed back any further. Depending on what happens in the next 6 months, we may be calling upon our Councils to help advocate for this. At the federal level – NOTE: This is updated after the Council meeting to reflect the most recent information available (as of 12/17/2015) - Congress approved the



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<p>omnibus spending and tax bill on December 18<sup>th</sup>. The Child Nutrition Reauthorization (CNR) was not included in the omnibus spending bill, and is expected to be considered early 2016, which will allow opportunities for mark-up and improvements. The Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit (CTC) have been made permanent, which is a big win for anti-poverty reform. Congressman Welch has been a strong advocate of these tax credits, and co-sponsored the bill in the House to make these permanent.</p> <p><i>Laura Biren</i> – AmeriCorps is organizing a MLK Day of Service on January 18<sup>th</sup>. There will be 3 parts to the event – a community clean up project, a community meal at the Unitarian Church, and a community discussion following the meal. Details are still being finalized.</p> <p><i>Will Eberle</i> – Another Way is running a program for people who are homeless to design and build tiny homes that will be placed in the city and used for housing. Yesterday just donated a tiny house, and Another Way needs a little more money and volunteers to finish the project and get someone housed, as well as a list of sources for siting tiny houses.</p>	<p><u>Action:</u> Dan Hoxworth and Will Eberle will connect to access Capstone’s weatherization team.</p>
<p><b>Meeting Adjourned</b></p>	
<p><b>Next Meeting: January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 from 2:00 – 4:00 at Capstone Community Action in Barre</b></p>	