

Acton-Boxborough United Way Community Forum
May 5, 2011

By Beth Farley, ABUW Volunteer

Collaboration and integration; those were the buzzwords stressed by the Executive Director of Lazarus House of Lawrence, MA, Bridget Shaheen. Shaheen was the featured speaker at the Spring Community Forum sponsored by the Acton-Boxborough United Way on May 5th. Speaking to nearly 40 representatives of community service organizations from the Acton and Boxborough area, Shaheen highlighted the methods and techniques that have proven successful at Lazarus House as they strive to positively impact the lives of the people in Lawrence.

With a staff of only 58 employees, Lazarus House provides food, housing, education, counseling and job training to a city where 46% of its population of 70k live below the poverty line. Because the funding for Lazarus House comes largely from donations, Shaheen strives to honor the generosity of donors and make the most of their gifts. By integrating services such as housing, education, childcare and job training, Shaheen and her forces are able to tackle the many causes of poverty simultaneously, giving their clients the means to maintain dignity and accept personal accountability.

By collaborating with other service agencies in Lawrence, Lazarus House seeks to never replicate existing services. Encouraging the attending agencies to also work together, Shaheen stated, "When we stop being territorial, people are better served". Toward that end, Lazarus House schedules regular roundtable discussions with agencies targeting similar needs so that through constant communication and coordination, cost-effective and appropriate services can be offered.

Following Shaheen's presentation, Community Forum attendees held their own roundtable discussions comparing their services and seeking the common ground that would allow them to be more effective in the Acton-Boxborough area. Discussions focused on how networking would allow agencies to be better informed of all resources in the area and therefore better able to direct people appropriately. The possibilities for sharing resources such as physical locations as well as transportation and volunteers were also identified. In addition, the value of collaborating with the local business community was roundly applauded.

The Spring 2011 Forum left attendees with a renewed sense of purpose and a willingness to pursue the goals of service integration and collaboration. For the towns of Acton and Boxborough, this type of focus can only help to improve the lives of all in our communities.

Acton-Boxborough United Way warmly thanks Dunkin Donuts of Acton for their delicious donation of coffee.