

The Community Forum, December 1, 2011

By Beth Farley, ABUW Board of Directors

**5 hundred 25 thousand 6 hundred minutes,
5 hundred 25 thousand moments so dear.
5 hundred 25 thousand 6 hundred minutes
How do you measure, measure a year?**

“Seasons of Love” lyrics from the musical RENT

For representatives from local social service agencies, law enforcement, government and the faith community at the ABUW Community Forum on Dec. 1st, “measuring” the year meant a lively discussion on the issues and trends of the last 12 months. The Community Forum, sponsored by the Acton Boxborough United Way, provides a unique opportunity for all to hear what others have experienced, assess if those experiences are unique or common across the towns and understand where the resources exist that can help solve or ameliorate the various human service needs facing the community. In a round table discussion, attendees shared updates on the issues they have seen affecting our youth, families and elders in Acton and Boxborough.

There was strong consensus that the fragile economy continues to provide the backdrop to a number of problems in our area; joblessness translating into homelessness, domestic violence, stress and other mental health concerns. Kelley Cronin and Fran Spayne of the Acton Housing Authority spoke of the need for more affordable housing due to an increase in the number of people with falling income levels. On average, at-risk clients have had a 15% decrease in income this year. Many work every day, but still don't make enough to cover food, rent and utilities. Consequently, transportation costs of car ownership/repairs, a necessity for becoming self-sufficient, are simply out of reach. Similarly, seniors living on fixed incomes have further felt the pinch this year as evidenced by requests for fuel assistance and tax relief, according to Sharon Mercurio from the Council on Aging. Jacquelin Apsler of the Domestic Violence Services Network, Inc. spoke of the increase in domestic violence situations, often triggered by financial frustration, situations that affect all members of families. All these problems have taken their toll on the children and youth in our community, stated Detective Tricia Sullivan and Deputy Chief Bob Parisi, reporting an increase in drug use, prescription drug abuse as well as more mental health and behavioral issues.

As the participants listened to updates from State Senator Jamie Eldridge and Representative Jen Benson, the need to truly ‘measure’ the year with quantifiable data became apparent. Rep. Benson stressed that the best way to illustrate local needs before the House Ways and Means Committee would be to present hard data on services rendered and outcomes. While individual organizations can put forth their own data, no aggregate source exists. The ABUW is in a unique position to address that need due to the data submitted as part of the Grant Application process and agencies’ midyear reports. Therefore, Liz Markiewicz, President of the ABUW, committed to compiling and reporting on our local needs, services rendered and outcomes in Acton and Boxborough. Participants left this Community Forum more informed, more encouraged and ready to write the next act.

Many thanks to Enterprise Bank for sponsoring the Community Forum. We also thank Dunkin Donuts of Acton for providing refreshments and our host, the Sargent Memorial Library of Boxborough.