

Acton Boxborough United Way Community Forum welcomes new Community Services Coordinator and focuses on growing local needs

By Suzanne G. Joris

On January 29th, representatives from 20 agencies and groups that help local residents met with Acton's new Community Services Coordinator Laura Ducharme. The event was a forum organized by the Acton Boxborough United Way (ABUW), and was the first time agencies came together since Ducharme began her position in January.

The forum was an opportunity for the agencies to introduce themselves to Ducharme, discuss their work, the services their agencies provide, and the issues they are experiencing during the current economic downturn. Many are facing greater demand for their services and declining access to financial resources.

The Social Service Coordinator is a new municipal position for the town of Acton, and the need for such a position came out of last year's ABUW forum. Funds for the position were approved at Town Meeting last spring. Since she started in January, Ducharme has worked with several Acton residents to help them find assistance with housing, rent, food, and fuel concerns. She praised the town for having 'such a strong support network already in place.'

During the forum the Executive Director of ABUW, Laura Bourne, took the opportunity to describe United Way's new 2-1-1 program where anyone can dial 2-1-1 to gain access to human service information. The system was used with great success by MEMA and Governor Deval Patrick during the ice storm in December to communicate vital information to Massachusetts residents. Bourne also introduced Jan Stewart, new coordinator for the Acton-Boxborough Coalition for Healthy Youth (ABCHY).

As the agencies shared their most pressing concerns, one of Acton's largest charitable organizations Household Goods Recycling Ministry (HGRM) which provides furniture, small appliances and household items for families in need, noted that during the winter months there is a sharp decline in donations. Current needs are for beds, bureaus, and other items of furniture, as other agencies have funds to move people from shelters and hotels to apartments.

The elderly can be intensely affected during tough economic times and many of the agencies felt that fuel, housing, and food assistance were a top priority. Carol Steiner from the Acton Council on Aging (COA) stated that the jittery economy has affected every generation of residents, and felt that Ducharme's role would be very helpful to senior citizens. Steiner added that the contributions of volunteers were also much appreciated. As an example she described the Safety Sand Program in which ABRHS students distributed sand to senior residents for safer walkways during icy conditions. Jean Fleming, also of the COA, added that the Handyman Volunteer Program has been enormously helpful by making small household repairs to senior citizen's homes.

Kelley Cronin of the Acton Housing Authority which owns and operates residences in Acton for eligible residents noted that they have a long waiting list and are in 'chronic need' of emergency housing.

As people are losing their jobs and the state is cutting back on local aid, many families are under a lot of stress. Local organizations remain committed to understanding and providing resources to families in need. Among those at the forum were First Connections which focuses on families with young children, the Doli Atamian Campership Fund which provides summer camp scholarships, the Acton-Boxborough Coalition for Healthy Youth (ABCHY) which focuses on youth and teen risky behavior, the Community Alliance for Youth (CAFY) which provides information and support for parents of teenagers, the Domestic Services Network which assists those affected by domestic violence, and the Latino Family network. Most have seen increased requests for their services since last summer.

In addition to financial resources, many of these organizations stressed how they rely on volunteers in order to remain effective. These volunteer opportunities can require limited amounts of time such as the Handyman program which helps senior citizens with small household repairs to intensive training as needed by volunteers at the Domestic Services Network. Kay Steeves from ABRHS noted that the high school has many students interested in community service and a website for listing volunteer opportunities. The ABUW also plans to have a link from their website to allow agencies to list volunteer opportunities.

More information about the agencies, the services they offer, and 2-1-1 can be found on the Acton-Boxborough United Way website: www.abuw.org.