

The New Face of Hunger and Homelessness in Westchester; One Company Fights to Change the Image

Hunger and Homelessness have a new face in Westchester and it's not the predictable one. That's an assessment being given by the Westchester Coalition for Hunger and Homelessness (WCHH), which has seen a 30-percent increase in the number of people seeking food and shelter during 2010. The needy reside in the county's major cities as well as tonier towns like Yorktown and Mt. Kisco.

Online PR News – 18-March-2011 – White Plains, March 14, 2011 -- Hunger and Homelessness have a new face in Westchester and it's not the predictable one. That's an assessment being given by the Westchester Coalition for Hunger and Homelessness (WCHH), which has seen a 30-percent increase in the number of people seeking food and shelter during 2010. The needy reside in the county's major cities as well as tonier towns like Yorktown and Mt. Kisco.

The new clients seeking assistance are not the destitute. They are professionals laid off from their jobs, as a result of the economic recession, and whose unemployment benefits have expired or cannot be stretched enough to feed their families. Or, there are some who've been able to find jobs or remain in jobs, but at significantly lower salaries, making their rent payments unaffordable. Consequently, according to Rosa Boone-Morgan, executive director of the Westchester Coalition for the Hungry and Homeless, "We have been working with the food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters in our network to provide more meals than we ever have before, more than 5.5 million meals, in fact. We're also counseling these new clients about ways to cope with their new realities and find resources; and we're negotiating with landlords, whenever possible, to reduce their rents."

The increasing demand for assistance and services has led the Coalition to ramp up its own fundraising efforts, with the first initiative being held on April 5, at 6:30 PM at the Reckson Metro Center, 360 Hamilton Avenue, White Plains.

Funds raised at the event will help augment the already wide range of services the Coalition offers. Unlike other organizations that strictly provide food to pantries and soup kitchens, the Coalition takes a more holistic approach to assisting the hungry and homeless. It not only provides food free to 141 direct food providers, but also through its Grants Program, awarded more than \$200,000 last year to help food pantries, soup kitchens and shelters purchase food and enhance their services as well as for eviction prevention. Technical assistance also has been supplied to new programs, 25 of which have been added in the past two years.

The Coalition also informs hungry and homeless people about food programs available to them as well as government aid to which they may be entitled such as food stamps and the federally funded health and nutrition program for women, infants and children (WIC).

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"We're committed to ensuring that no one goes to bed hungry or sleeps on the streets in our county," says Boone-Morgan. To that end, the Coalition also runs an Adopt-a-Family Program through which companies or other organizations adopt a family and provide resources including food, gift and gas cards and other necessities to keep the family afloat. Thirty-eight families were adopted last year.

"Help, of course, is not limited to organizations. Everyone can pitch in," Boone-Morgan points out. "One way is through the Change in Your Pocket program, where we place canisters in local establishments so that patrons or passers-by can drop in their spare change. These nickels and dimes add up, and we say, 'Loose change can change a life!'"

WCHH also collaborates with local groups to execute other activities, such as with the National Association of Letter Carriers, which each year uses post office trucks to collect food for delivery to emergency food providers and shelters in the county. Last year, more than 400,000 pounds of food were transported.

One of WCHH's most in-demand programs is Eviction Prevention, which saved 400 families from becoming homeless in 2010. Westchester residents in danger of eviction or foreclosure are able to consult with a counselor who evaluates their situation, gives budget counseling, mediates with landlords or banks, are provided a one-month back rent or past-due mortgage payment or assisted with presenting a case to the county's Department of Social Services.

Clothing drives, Thanksgiving turkey drives and a host of other projects enable the Coalition to help feed and clothes many of Westchester's needy residents.

The Westchester Coalition for the Hungry and Homeless, Inc. is a corporation currently comprising 141 direct service food providers, including 72 food pantries, 38 soup kitchens, 31 shelters and service organizations and individuals involved in alleviating hunger and homelessness. It enabled these organizations to serve more than 5.5 million meals last year in the region. In addition, the coalition endeavors to prevent evictions and assists low and middle-income families and individuals in finding resources to locate housing. The coalition provides funding, technical assistance to and information for organizations and individuals seeking to develop food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, transportation networks and other programs and services. It also provides a forum for members to discuss issues, and advocates for funds and services for the hungry and homeless.

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