

The Franklin County Resource Network

The Franklin County Resource Network (FCRN) started over 12 years ago by a small group of concerned service providers in response to the growing number of people that were homeless in Franklin County. As more and more providers joined the network it became clear that there was a need and a tremendous value in meeting and sharing information, providing opportunities to make connections and referrals. There was also a tremendous benefit to be able to advocate as one voice for issues impacting the people we serve. As the FCRN grew, it became apparent that there was a need for someone to have dedicated time to help coordinate the group and facilitate the meetings and other group efforts. Community Action offered to provide support by dedicating staff time and financial assistance.

The FCRN has grown to over 225 members. Its mission continues to be to provide information and support to service providers working with people in need in our county. The FCRN meets on a monthly basis and the majority of the meeting is spent informing each other on current programs, events, and issues. Crucial connections are made and support is given. Most of the monthly meetings also have a presentation about a new program, state-wide issue, or an update on the work of a FCRN sub-committee. There is also a monthly e-newsletter that is sent to 240 providers.

FCRN has had several sub-committees over the years that focus either on current issues or long-term community issues. For example, several years ago we formed an Advocacy committee to help educate community members around the proposed repeal of the state income tax rate. We designed a "DID YOU KNOW" postcard campaign to help voters understand the history of the MA state income tax cuts and to remind people that we are no longer "Taxachusetts". We highlighted the importance of taxes and the impact a state income tax cut would have on our community. We also did another postcard campaign, to the Commissioner of the Department of Transitional Assistance, around funding family shelters.

Because of the growing need for food and the increasing demand on the local pantries and meal sites, over 5 years ago we formed the Franklin County Hunger Task Force to look at short and long term projects to address this basic need. Task Force member agencies include: Community Action, The Center for Self-Reliance, the Franklin County Home Care, Franklin Area Survival Center, the Salvation Army, CISA, The Food Bank of Western Massachusetts, Greenfield Public Schools, Catholic Social Ministries, and Franklin County Community Meals. The FCRN's task force has played a key role in coordinating events that address hunger-related issues in our county. These events include:

- The annual community-wide *Fill the Belly Bus Food drive* that over the course of 5 years has distributed 17,294 lbs. of food to local pantries and helped raise the awareness of hunger in Franklin County. Over 30 local businesses and agencies participate in this event each year by holding week long internal food drives, and community members also donate food.

- A free Community Meals program held on Saturdays throughout the winter months for the last 4 years. Local churches and volunteers serve over 300 meals each winter to community members. The First Methodist Church, Second Congregational Church, St. James Church, and the Moldavian Baptist Church participate each year.
- The Plant-a-Row Campaign that was launched this year and encourages folks to plant an extra row and donate extra produce to local food pantries. The Hunger Task Force is also working on expanding a gleaning program in Franklin County.

In the fall of 2008, the FCRN received \$5,000 from the Women's Fund of Western Massachusetts to fund an initiative called *Bridging Compassion and Service*. The overall goal of the initiative was to provide an opportunity for members of the Franklin County Resource Network (FCRN) and members of the Interfaith Council of Franklin County (IFC) to work together more closely and strengthen each other's work. A planning committee was formed to help figure out what a partnership might look like. Five members from the FCRN and 5 members from the IFC met over the course of the year and planned two events that brought over 60 members from the two groups together. Even though the grant ended in June 2009, the planning committee continues to meet and is looking for ways to continue to collaborate.

This is our 5th annual Legislative Breakfast. Over the years, our primary theme has been *"Overcoming Barriers to Self-Sufficiency"*. Barriers related to transportation, affordable housing, child care, and access to education. Last year we focused on *Strengthening Our Communities Through Collaboration*, and highlighted how successful Franklin County is in working together, even in the midst of budget cuts, to address the needs of the community. This year we are focusing on youth – as they really are our future. In light of all the recent budget cuts to prevention programs we wanted to remind our legislators of the importance and positive impact these types of programs have on our youth and how they are critical in helping build strong, healthy, and engaged youth. We have always tried to present the information through stories told by the people most affected. We thank all the youth that have told their stories today and to the youth that came to listen.

The Franklin County Resource Network is open to all people who provide service to community members in Franklin County. To find out more about the meetings or to receive the monthly e-newsletter, please contact me.

Sara Cummings
 Coordinator of the FCRN
 Director of Special Projects, Community Action
scummings@communityaction.us
 413-376-1129