

Notes to the ABUW Community Forum November 29, 2007

Attendees: Sandy Campbell (ABUW), Betsey Sweet, Megan Foley, Kelley Cronin, Nancy Tavernier, Pat and John Fallon, Marlana Patton, Ellen Weisstein, Charlene Merritt, Patty Ochoa, Bob McGowan, Steve Baran, Christian Schiavone (The Beacon), Rhett Cahill, Zoila Ricciardi, Lauren Rosenzweig, Tina Grosowsky, Shirley Ormsby, Fran Spayne, Joe Chappell, Carol Steiner, Brenda Simpson (ABUW), Paul Henrion (ABUW), Eleonora Pontoriero (ABUW), Barbara and Ira Smith, Joan McKenzie (ABUW), Ingrid Holcomb, Marilyn Peterson, Brian Angel Burke, Corrina Roman-Kreuzer (ABUW), Dore Hunter, Guy Marchmont (ABUW), Rev. Ute Molitor, Chickey Henderson (ABUW), Marge Kennedy (ABUW).

Sandy Campbell welcomed everyone to the Forum. She thanked Marge Kennedy for providing the coffee and donuts. She introduced herself and the members of the ABUW Outreach Committee present.

Sandy mentioned that the ABUW started holding community Forums in 2001 to bring stakeholders together for the purpose of finding out issues and needs. The end result of the various forums has been the lasting connections and collaborations established among the different organizations and agencies.

Some of the issues raised out of past meetings are:

Lack of local transportation:

- Commuter rail concerns (parking, etc.)
- Transportation for vulnerable populations (elderly, children, immigrant families)

In January 2005 a task force was created to look into the above issue. Lauren Rosenzweig reported that this is a challenging work in progress.

Adolescents and risky behavior:

- The ABUW sponsored a challenge grant initiative that resulted in the formation of the AB Coalition for Healthy Youth

Immigrant population challenges:

- The immigrant population of Acton and Boxborough has increased significantly in the past few years. The ABUW Outreach committee identified the Brazilian population as the most in need.
- Last summer a model English at Large class was started in West Acton for Brazilian immigrants (ABUW funds books and supplies), with capacity for 15 learners.

Sandy invited attendees to introduce themselves, their organizations and to identify their pressing concerns.

Betsey Sweet, Community Partnership for Children

This organization provides scholarships for quality childcare to financially stressed families (below 50% state median income). They depend on state and private grants and serve Acton, Boxborough and Littleton.

Betsey mentioned that thanks to ABUW forums she has found a way into that community.

Concern:

Transportation is their main problem, especially in the 2A area. Families are stranded and away from public transportation.

Megan Foley, Habitat for Humanity

They provide affordable housing for needy families (income of 20K to 40K per year for a family of 4). Megan is pleased by the support of the AB community. She is hoping for additional opportunities, such as land donated by individuals or business. They are building their first house in Acton, on town land.

Concern:

Transportation.

Kelley Cronin and Fran Spayne, Acton Housing Authority

They provide financial assistance for rent relief, especially for families with mentally disabled members and people with disabilities. They gave out 175 vouchers this year.

Concerns:

Town Social Worker.

Affordable housing.

Services and economic development so that disabled people can live independently. Connect with other organizations in town.

Transportation.

Nancy Travernier, Acton Community Housing Corporation

They facilitate and monitor affordable housing for people below 80% of the area median income.

Concern:

Financial Credit Counseling. Young families need to be educated on how to get ready to buy their first house, and to have knowledge on foreclosure prevention.

John and Pat Fallon, Friends of Boxborough Council on Aging

John pointed out that seniors are the fastest growing population. Their organization provides social programs, classes, day trips and services to Boxborough seniors.

Concerns:

Transportation.

Activities to get people out of their houses in order to prevent loneliness.

Formal outreach.

Affordable housing.

Marlana Patton, English at Large

They address a national problem at the local level by providing English language services through a one-to-one tutoring model. They are based in Medford but have been operating in Acton and Boxborough for a long time.

They recruit and train volunteers, serving the local immigrant population.

Concerns:

Childcare.

Flexible work time. The class in West Acton brought to light the fact that immigrants work many jobs. Employers should allow them to schedule time for classes.

How to expand services. This could be a good match with Seniors, to get them out of the house and involved. Half of their volunteers are over 60.

Ellen Weisstein, First Connections (*)**

They provide information and resources regarding domestic violence issues, benefits, food stamps, etc. Located at Emerson Hospital, concentrating on parents of children from birth to age 3.

Concern:

Town Social Worker

Charlene Merritt, Minuteman Senior Services

They are an agency services access point for 16 towns. They provide health benefits counseling, Meals-on-Wheels, home care, referral information for state and federal grants, abuse investigation, fraud investigation, etc.

Concern:

Transportation

Patty Ochoa, MinuteMan ARC for Human Services

They provide therapeutic and vocational services for children and adults with disabilities. They provide early intervention services for children birth through age 3 at risk of developmental delays, and provide intervention services for people with disabilities (age 6 to 22), so that they can achieve potential in all areas of their lives.

Their program also includes residential support, rehabilitation, recreational activities and transportation.

Concerns:

Transportation. Volunteers provide transportation for some of their activities.

Outreach to immigrant population. Early intervention is crucial.

Collaboration with other agencies to learn of resources.

Aging population. Some of their clients have been with them for 40 years. They need home support, and to keep homes viable.

Connection to the community. Neighbor interaction.

Bob McGowan, CAFY (Community Alliance for Youth)

CAFY was formed to be a source of information and support for parents of adolescents. They provide education programs for parents and youth. Underage drinking stands out as the most common risk behavior. They just launched a yearlong initiative to reduce underage drinking with a pledge letter sent to parents with the report cards (Safe Homes program). Statistics show that 40% of high school kids party with alcohol provided by parents.

Concerns:

Underage drinking.

Restorative Justice (***) . This program takes a different track for first or second misdemeanor offenses. The court creates a volunteer circle between the victim(s) and the offender. The offender owns up and apologizes, and then they work out a community service program as a sentence. There's no permanent record on file. CAFY is in conversations with the Acton and Boxborough chiefs of police to implement this program locally. It's been very successful in Carlisle.

Steve Baran, Friends of the Acton Council on Aging

They provide well-being classes, social programs and services to seniors.

Concerns:

Lack of space at the Senior Center. There are more than 3000 seniors in town. A Senior Center Expansion Committee and 3 task forces are working on this project. Pauline Knibbe is heading one of the task forces, and they're recruiting for the other two. They are deciding if the current site can be built on and expanded.

Social services.

Steve Baran, No Place for Hate (*)**

To promote harmony among diverse ethnic groups.

Paul Henrion has been instrumental in establishing and coordinating the Martin Luther King Day celebration.

Concerns:

Outreach to immigrants.

Become culturally competent, through compassion and knowledge.

Rhett Cahill, Community Supper

To provide hot meal programs and food pantry. They are located on Windsor Ave. in West Acton. They hand out 120 to 130 bags per week to families.

They also organize a weekly supper at the Acton Congregational Church for 40 to 50 people. They have 200+ volunteers per week.

Concerns:

Legal services

Beefing up of referral lists

Transportation. Volunteers provide transportation for food bag pick-up/drop-out, but for the supper it's an issue, especially in winter.

Economic outlook. They're dependent on donations and state funding, and these resources could change due to the economic climate.

Zoila Ricciardi, Latino Family Network

This organization was created to connect Latino families new to the area and to prevent isolation. They also run a school to teach kids to read and write Spanish. They have 180 names in their distribution list, with around 60 families in this area.

Concerns:

Translation services. Families should be treated as cases, not just for translation. Need to empower the parents.

Better communication between schools and parents.

Bilingual therapists.

Schools need to communicate among themselves, to pinpoint new families at the time of registration. That will provide a wealth of information.

PTSO can create a buddy system so children are not isolated in new schools.

Lauren Rosenzweig, Acton Board of Selectmen

Concerns:

To address the needs, in order to get people more involved and connected.

Town social worker.

Integrate immigrants that are moving to the suburbs.

Transportation. It has been more difficult than expected. We need money not only to get started, but to sustain the challenge. This is an essential service for people, the business community must be willing to help.

Marketing study and survey.

Comprehensive community plan. What services will we need for the future?

People should show support at town meetings.

Tina Grosowsky, Acton-Boxborough Coalition for Healthy Youth

Concerns:

Underage drinking is a national issue. There is a grant for substance abuse prevention. They run a local campaign to prevent underage risk behavior. The Acton-Boxborough Coalition for Healthy Youth needs assessment for adolescent risk behavior in the area. They will conduct a youth summit in the spring (May 10th), to promote leadership skills, connect youth in the AB area and to teach them how to be a responsible part of the community.

Superintendent Bill Ryan runs a Health Advisory Committee Meeting twice a year. It's an open forum relating to school population.

Rev. Ute Molitor, United Church of Christ, Boxborough

Representing Acton/Boxborough/Stow Clergy Association

Their parishioners benefit from services provided in the community. The clergy would like to understand how they could be more active in outreach. They have a Community Needs Book, provide gas and food vouchers, but are not in a position to assess needs. They appreciate the 211 initiative.

Concerns:

Town social worker.

Create a similar service to what the Loaves and Fishes organization in Ayers currently operates.

Ira and Barbara Smith, Joe Chappell, Household Goods Recycling Ministry

Provides furniture, small appliances and household items for families in need (any conceivable need). In a nutshell: accept donated goods, stack them up and then give them away. They help 50 to 70 families per week, 25% come from AB and Maynard, and 75% agencies referrals. They are connected to 400 agencies in the area. They have 150 volunteers, some come several times a week. Many of their volunteers come from the JH and the HS, some even college. This organization is unique because everybody is treated with respect.

Concerns:

Young, strong backs for pick-up and delivery.

Volunteers for delivery.

Car donation program.

Car repair program.

Dore Hunter, Chairman, Acton Board of Selectmen

Acton has a Veteran Service Officer. The State provides support programs for veterans and their spouses (Chapter 115).

Call extension 9603.

There's also fuel help for people in need.

Shirley Ormsby, Network for Women's Lives

They're dedicated to the prevention of domestic violence, which has no socio-economic boundaries. They create awareness and provide resources through pamphlets distributed at the police station, libraries, school nurses offices, churches, grocery stores, ladies' washrooms. They network with many other agencies. They hold a symposium for clergy every two years on what to do in case a victim comes to them for help and how to educate the congregation to recognize signs.

Concerns:

Violence prevention through community education in area homes and outreach.

School and youth programs regarding teen dating violence and school bullying (rising issues). Parents need to be more involved.

Elderly abuse.

Lack of consistency and continuity on training.

Make public aware of when and where to go for assistance.

40 to 50% of homeless women are victims of domestic violence.

There's a link between kids that are homeless and risky behavior.

Carol Steiner, Acton Council on Aging

They provide information, referrals, local transportation (they own a van), Shine counselors (medical insurance forms), etc. to improve and maintain the quality of senior lives in Acton.

Concerns:

Transportation. Their van is available from 8am to 4pm 5 days a week. Very difficult to drive to Boston or Westford.

No availability for transportation to Town Meetings or community supper. Perhaps volunteer driven?

Town Social Worker. 1/3 or 1/2 of inquiries are from individuals under 60.

Support for fuel. They had 30 applications for fuel assistance.

Advocacy for people that have been shut off. Very time consuming.

Home visits is a challenge.

Immigrant seniors, non-English speakers, may be isolated.

Ingrid Holcomb, Acton-Boxborough Coalition for Healthy Youth

The target audience is grades 7-12 (private school and home-schooled kids too). The objective is how to prevent substance abuse, youth violence, mental health issues and to connect organizations and find gaps in services. The Coalition has a wealth of talent and expertise, and collaboration with the youth at risk behavior data.

Concerns:

Youth volunteers.

Marilyn Peterson, Domestic Violence Services

They cover 7 towns, collaborate with police. Do not provide counseling but advocate to court for restraining orders.

Concerns:

Increase in dating abuse and elderly abuse (by children and caregivers). This is a difficult and complex area.

Immigrant population. There's underreporting, fear of police, especially for illegals.

Brian Angel Burke, South Middlesex Legal Services

They cover 36 towns. Pro bono legal assistance for violence victims, homelessness, representation and advice on eviction notices, subsidies for public housing. The family unit deals with domestic violence and custody of children (representation of those families).

The benefit unit deals with social security cases and public benefits (food stamps) and the homeless unit deals with people who are denied housing or are terminated. They can represent undocumented individuals.

Concerns:

More outreach to the Brazilian and other immigrant groups.

Priority is with the population rather than with the issues.

Sandy mentioned 2-1-1, a free service available from 8 am to 8 pm, Monday through Friday, to connect people in need of support. The challenge is to make sure that all organizations are listed.

To summarize, Sandy pointed out the key underlying issues:

- She encourages the organizations to reach out and connect.
- Resource guides: duplication of services. If anyone is working on a guide, perhaps get together in a smaller venue to collaborate. Translations would be a good idea.
- We should meet more often
- The common issues are:
 - Transportation
 - Affordable housing
 - Town social worker
 - Outreach and connect people
 - Communication among agencies

Conclusions:

- Tina Grosowsky volunteered to petition for a town social worker within the next week to get it into the budget and raise public awareness of this need. Sandy will put out an e-mail to drum more support.
- Transportation: Lauren Rosenzweig is trying to put a steering committee together. We need people to drive it. David Sharfarz is finding out what's available. Sandy committed to spread the word even more.
- Affordable housing: Nancy Tavernier mentioned that it's very difficult to get the word out on new opportunities. Right now they have 11 new homes available. A resource guide would be a great asset to them.

- Ira Smith suggested a project to get cars donated so people can go to work.
- Marge Kennedy wondered if there is a way to connect everyone through Yahoo groups. Sandy mentioned that the ABUW website has a chat room capability and is available. She encouraged everyone to use it.
- Zoila stressed that the challenge is to connect with each other.
- Lauren Rosenzweig mentioned Acton's willingness to combine services with Boxborough. Paul Henrion mentioned Maynard.
- Carol Steiner pointed out that the Senior Center gets calls from neighboring towns, and not necessarily from families but also from singles or unmarried couples. Mental illness is a huge area of concern. The school system is a good way, but others are very hard to reach.
- Fran Spayne suggested we work together for car repairs to help with the transportation issue.
- Sandy will send out notes on the meeting along with contact information.