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Notes from editor (not for publication):



HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

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1 United Way of Windham County charts new course

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2 A longstanding organization gets new leadership, new
3 office space, and a new focus on making direct connections with
4 county communities — including the needs of kids

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5 TEXT BODY:

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6 With a new executive director at the helm and a recently
7 relocated office, the United Way of Windham County is
8 embarking on what administrators describes as a period of
9 listening, learning, and renewal — with community connection
10 at the heart of its refreshed mission.

11 Rebecca Baruzzi, who stepped into the executive
12 director role Jan. 5, came to the organization from Green
13 Mountain United Way in Central Vermont, where she was
14 director of community impact.

15 She has spent her first months meeting partners across
16 the county, attending community tables, and asking a simple but
17 pointed question: “Where can we be useful?”

18 The answer, she says, is emerging clearly.

19 “Connection as a basic need is very important,” Baruzzi
20 says. “It factors into mental health, democracy, and how we show
21 up for each other — and those are things we’re really struggling
22 with right now.”

23 A ‘white-glove’ approach to 24 volunteering

25 One of the organization’s flagship initiatives under the
26 new direction is a revamped Volunteer Connect program, which
27 aims to move away from the impersonal, web-based matching
28 model that has been common in the sector.

29 Instead, United Way staff members will work one-on-one
30 with prospective volunteers — at farmers markets, Gallery Walk
31 nights, and other community events — to understand their
32 interests, skills, and passions before personally connecting them
33 with a nonprofit partner. The tagline: “No pressure, just
34 connection.”

35 “It’s not a transaction,” Baruzzi explains. “It’s really with
36 the purpose of connecting people to meaningful work.”

37 She described conversations that might lead a writer with
38 a marketing background toward helping a local nonprofit shape
39 its messaging, or a parent looking to give back toward
40 engagement opportunities within their child’s school.

41 Partners in the program include school districts, Turning
42 Point of Windham County, the Ethiopian Community

43 Development Council (ECDC), and a number of other local
44 nonprofits.

45 **Tackling a kids' safety net**

46 A striking observation early in Baruzzi's tenure came at a
47 Situation Table meeting, where she witnessed close coordination
48 between service providers and law enforcement. It was, she
49 says, an encouraging model — but it raised a harder question.

50 "We really have some robust safety net systems for
51 adults," she says. "But what do we have in place for kids? How
52 do we make sure that the kids who are struggling right now are
53 not the adults we're later trying to catch in this safety net?"

54 She is now working to convene a cross-organizational
55 "kids' table" — bringing together partners from across the county
56 to map existing resources, identify gaps, and build what's
57 missing.

58 Central to that effort is the issue of chronic absenteeism
59 in local schools. Before the pandemic, roughly 6% of students in
60 the district were chronically absent. That figure has since climbed
61 to approximately 30% — a number that mirrors the Vermont state
62 average and reflects a national trend.

63 Colleen Savage, who joined the United Way staff on
64 April 7 as manager of marketing and community engagement —
65 and who serves on the Windham Southeast School District board
66 — underscores the breadth of the problem.

67 "It's not just our school district — it's the state," she says.
68 "Thirty percent."

69 Baruzzi connects the issue directly to the organization's
70 broader mission around belonging.

71 "One of the easiest ways to make people belong is to
72 help figure out how to get kids in schools so they can get the
73 services and resources they need to be seen," Baruzzi says.

Kids in Coats evolves

The well-known Kids in Coats program, which began when United Way took over the Reformer Christmas Stocking in 2015, is also being reimagined.

The Brattleboro Reformer's all-volunteer initiative, which purchased children's winter clothing for Windham County families in need for more than 70 years, was continued on a smaller scale by United Way. Now, Kids in Coats is expanding its mission and taking on a new name, Kids in School.

United Way is transitioning the program toward flexible spending that gives school social workers, nurses, and teachers the ability to address whatever a child actually needs, whether that's dental care, hygiene items, or boots.

"They're not restricted to coats," Baruzzi says, adding that fundraising for this expanded model will be a priority in the coming year.

A new home at Winston Prouty

The organization recently relocated from its former space in the Vermont Building on Putney Road to Winston Prouty, a nonprofit hub where United Way joins a community of like-minded organizations under one roof.

"So we can be with our people," Baruzzi says with a smile.

The move also came with lower rent and included utilities — a practical benefit for a lean operation. The current staff of three shares a single office space.

The United Way has been present in Windham County since 1958, when it operated as a community chest focused on direct service to individuals. Over the decades, its model shifted toward grant-making for specific causes and around 2013 a community health assessment identified dental access as a critical gap — leading to the creation of a local dental center.

106 Today, the organization sees itself returning to its
107 community-building roots with connection as its central purpose.

108 Funding comes from a mix of workplace campaigns — a
109 hallmark of the United Way model worldwide — as well as local
110 support from institutions such as Savings Bank of Walpole and
111 anticipated public health grants to support belonging-focused
112 initiatives.

113 “There’s been a United Way in Windham County since
114 1958,” says Baruzzi. “And now we’re back to [asking], ‘What’s
115 important now?’ And it’s community connection.”

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