

## **Bennington Banner**

# **Coalition adopts new name, sets new goals**

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BENNINGTON -- The Bennington Coalition for the Homeless will now be called the Bennington County Coalition for the Homeless, the organization announced at their annual meeting on Wednesday.

"Our guests come from all over the county to use our services," said coalition secretary Mary Gerisch, who is also the founder of the Vermont Workers' Center and a nationally-known activist. "We don't want anyone to think our services are only available to the town of Bennington."

The coalition also announced that it will be naming a paid executive director of the organization by early next year, a position that did not previously exist. The coalition is currently run by a board of directors made up by President Stacey New, Vice President Bob Marine, Gerisch, Treasurer Sarah White, Kathleen Wilkinson, Nora Lantz, Nan Lowary, Ceil Petrucelli, and Brian Maroney.

Chris Oldham, who also serves as the circulation sales and marketing manager for New England Newspapers, Inc., the parent company of the Bennington Banner, was previously the treasurer of the organization, but stepped down from the board earlier in the meeting. He will remain with the coalition as an advisor. Sarah White, the newest member of the board, was elected treasurer in his place.

The coalition also honored staff members Tiffany Sausville and Sharon Farrell for their service. New presented them both with flowers and a gift bag.

"They appreciate the courage it takes to be homeless and to strive towards stability. Their courage gives others the courage to do that," said Gerisch of Sausville and Farrell.

New gave a brief overview of what the coalition has done over the last year. Due to lack of funding, the coalition was forced to close its shelter in Manchester early in the year, as well as its residence on Bank Street in North Bennington. The residence on Bank Street was

being considered for closure before an infestation of bed bugs forced it to be closed ahead of schedule.

The coalition also had to cut back in other areas. "We had to lose lots of valuable, long-term employees," said New, "that was the hardest part. That was the worst."

Gerisch spoke about the future of the organization. She stressed the importance of working with other community organizations, including the Bennington Rutland Opportunity Council (more commonly known as BROCC), United Counseling Services, and other organizations. She also talked about how important it was to not just send people to those organizations, but to work with them to make sure the person is getting all the care they need.

Unfortunately, said Gerisch, not everyone will be able to turn their lives around. "Some will return to the street," she said, "because of PTSD [Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome], or whatever the reason."

Gerisch stressed that "the only way to break that cycle is by fulfilling basic human needs. These needs are so diverse," which is why working with such a wide variety of organizations is necessary. "We don't see a point in moving a person into an apartment today that they're not going to be in two months from now. That just continues the cycle," said Gerisch.

Marine, who is the homelessness liaison with the Southwest Vermont Supervisory Union, said that about 56 SVSU students are currently classified as homeless.

Gerisch, who also pointed out a part of the proposed panhandling ordinance would prevent Bennington residents from sleeping in their cars, and urged citizens to oppose the ordinance, spoke to why homelessness was such a difficult problem to fight. "We don't necessarily know [statistics] because the problem is invisible. People don't necessarily want people to know they're homeless, because there's a stigma attached to homelessness."

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