The Bulletin
June 6, 2019

Project taking on poverty

United Way: Education-focused initiative the start of something really big

By John Barry
jbarry@norwichbulletin.com
(860) 425-4221

NORWICH — A reported 54% of Norwich households struggle to pay for basic needs such as housing, food, health care and child care.

A partnership of local groups — including government, schools, social service nonprofits and businesses — is now working to reduce that number through an initiative called New Capacities.

The goal is to raise the percentage of financially secure Norwich families to 66% within 10 years, mainly by better educating students so they can get good jobs.

The initiative is being funded by the United Way of Southeastern Connecticut. The charity stepped up in 2018 after the partnership, which came together in 2016 to secure a Working Cities Grant of as much as $500,000 from the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, failed to receive it.

"I think about this project as the start of something really big," said United Way President and CEO Virginia Mason at "New Capacities Day," a gathering of the local partners and members of the public held Wednesday at Norwich Free Academy's Slater Auditorium.

"No entity by itself can solve community problems. We have to solve them together."

"I look forward to making this an incredible success," said Rodney Butler, chairman of the United Way board of directors that voted to fund New Capacities. Butler is also chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Council and acting CEO of the tribe's Foxwoods Resort Casino.

See POVERTY, A5

POVERTY

From Page A3

Wednesday's event was a pep rally for the initiative, featuring performances by the NFA Drum Line and Dance Team. Participants were handed towels they were encouranged to wave in celebration during speeches explaining what was being done and planned.

"It's talking about system-level change," said Dina Sears-Graves, vice president of community impact at United Way. "It's preparing youth for our future. We don't want our kids to be left behind."

Norwich Public Schools, which educates children through eighth grade, is now talking with students about their future careers and how their choices of high schools could affect them.

"Letting students know earlier and earlier what's out there is so critical," Norwich Superintendent of Schools Abby Dolliver said. "I always say, open every door."

NFA has introduced several programs as well, said Jessica St. George, chairman of the Guidance Department.

One is a partnership with Three Rivers Community College to allow NFA students to become certified nurse aides, and then either getting a job or continuing their education to become registered nurses, St. George said.

A second course is called the "senior seminar," Linda Farinha, head of NFA's career and technical education department, said. Involving 45 students, it will provide practical training about the working world in Microsoft Office, personal finance and workplace readiness.

A third program involves NFA's participation in the Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board "pipeline," which trains adults at Three Rivers and Quinebaug Valley Community Colleges to work at Electric Boat shipyard in Groton.

Last summer, 17 students took part in the pipeline, and all 17 completed it and were offered jobs either at EB or another manufacturer. This year, 19 students have qualified to take part in the program, Farinha said, and will start training on June 14, two days after they graduate.

NFA will offer a full-year course next year involving another 19 students, Farinha said.

The pipeline has placed almost 1,400 people in manufacturing jobs, EWIB Chief Operating Officer Mark Hill said.

He said expanding the program to NFA has worked well. "The employer feedback is really good," he said. "The NFA kids were prepared beautifully."

Lee-Ann Gomes, the city's human services director, said that Norwich has tremendous problems, including many residents living in poverty, and many others earning wages that are too low to support the cost of living here.

"We can do better. This program will make it better for our people," Gomes said. "I appreciate the United Way stepping up and funding it when we didn't get funding."

Otis Library Director Bob Farwell said the library serves many people who use its resources to help find better jobs.

"Part of our mission is education," he said.

Farwell said the initiative can reduce poverty with the support of the whole community.

"It has to have the enthusiastic support of everybody in this room," Farwell said. "I want to get you engaged in this process along with us."

Partners - there are more than 60, Sears-Graves said - include The William W. Backus Hospital, City of Norwich, Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut, Connecticut Legal Services, Eastern Connecticut Workforce Investment Board, Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold, Liberty Bank, Madonna Place, NFA, Norwich Public Schools, Norwich Regional Adult Education, Otis Library, Our Piece of the Pie, seCTer, Southeastern Employment Services, St. Vincent de Paul Place, Three Rivers Community College, TVCCA and United Way of Southeastern Connecticut.

"This wasn't created by United Way. This was created by the community," Sears-Graves said.