

THE CLASS OF 1964 POLICY RESEARCH SHOP CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED NEEDS OF WOODSTOCK AREA RESIDENTS



PRESENTED TO THE HUB, A PROJECT OF THE WOODSTOCK
COMMUNITY TRUST

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The HUB, a project of the Woodstock Community Trust, facilitates in the coordination of resources and funding among local organizations to support Woodstock-area residents during times of personal and community-level crisis. This report identifies the current and future needs of Woodstock residents for The HUB, with particular attention to demand in the next 18 months. The report summarizes findings derived from local stakeholder interviews and provides recommendations to The HUB in order to meet the demands for support. In this report, we first outline our research methodology and highlight the 14 representatives from stakeholder organizations that contributed to this report. Next, we contextualize the changing needs of residents in the Woodstock area. We discuss how changing pandemic-era programs along with seasonal and inflationary pressures increase demand for local service providers in the area. The report focuses on three major personal and community-level crises of Woodstock residents: rising fuel/heating, housing, and food costs. Finally, we provide an overview of the resource landscape in the area and current coordination between local organizations.

1 INTRODUCTION

The HUB, a Woodstock Community Trust project, makes it easier for families and individuals in crisis to get what they need during emergencies and improves collaboration among local organizations, minimizing gaps and redundancy. Personal challenges include daily problems like student loan repayment and sudden changes like separation or divorce, while community crises like natural disasters and public health emergencies affect and often uproot residents across a region.

This report aims to assess the current needs for residents within the Windsor Central Supervisory Union region and to determine anticipated trends through the upcoming winter of 2022-2023. We first describe the methodology of our research before identifying key concerns from representatives of Woodstock-area stakeholder organizations. We conclude that the combination of inflation and seasonal challenges alongside the resolution or transformation of many COVID-19 relief programs will increase need among families and individuals in the Woodstock area in the next 18 months. We further note the compounding effects of prominent systemic and personal crises—namely rising fuel, housing, and food costs—that Woodstock residents face. In conclusion, we provide an overview of the service provision landscape in the Woodstock area and opportunities to support resource coordination efforts in the upcoming winter and beyond.

2 METHODOLOGY

Interviews from 14 representatives from stakeholder organizations inform this report. Interviews were conducted between July 27 and August 10, 2022 and sought to identify community needs as understood by those with ears to the ground in the greater Woodstock area. We interviewed individuals from United Way, Barnard Helping Hands, Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center (MAHHC), Ottauquechee Health Foundation, Plymouth Memory Tree, Reading Elementary School, Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf, Senior Solutions, Thompson Senior Center, the Upper Valley Haven, Vital Communities, Woodstock Food Shelf, and Woodstock Union High School and Middle School (WUHS/MS). In preparing this report, we also analyzed previous community needs surveys, including the 2021 Community Health Needs Assessment from MAHHC.

TABLE 2.1

Description of stakeholder organizations with their respective principal populations

RESOURCE	PRINCIPAL POPULATION	DESCRIPTION
United Way	Vermont	Statewide resource coordination for essential needs
Barnard Helping Hands	Barnard	Small grants and physical support
Mt. Ascutney Hospital and Health Center (MAHHC)	Windsor, Woodstock, and surrounding communities	Critical access community hospital
Ottauquechee Health Foundation	Barnard, Bridgewater, Hartland, Killington, Plymouth, Pomfret, Quechee, Reading, and Woodstock	Grants and support programs to help meet health and wellness needs
Plymouth Memory Tree	Plymouth	Small grants
Reading Elementary School	Reading	Education provider
Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf	Reading, West Windsor, and surrounding	Food pantry

	communities	
Senior Solutions	Majority of Windsor and Windham counties	Provides grants and guidance to seniors
Thompson Senior Center	Woodstock, Bridgewater, Pomfret	Programming and services for seniors
Upper Valley Haven	Upper Valley region	Temporary shelter, food, and programming for homeless families and adults
Vital Communities	Upper Valley region	Advocates for civic and economic vitality
Woodstock Food Shelf	Woodstock and surrounding communities	Food pantry
Woodstock Union High School and Middle School (WUHS/MS)	Barnard, Bridgewater, Killington, Plymouth, Pomfret, Reading, Woodstock	Education provider
Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf	Reading, West Windsor, and surrounding communities	Food pantry

3 CONTEXT FOR CHANGING NEED

This upcoming winter, the needs of Woodstock community members will likely change amid shifting economic conditions associated with the conclusion of the COVID-19 public health crisis, rising inflation nationwide, and seasonal weather pressures.

3.1 LOSS OF COVID-19 RELIEF FUNDING

The COVID-19 pandemic and consequential isolation disrupted working and family environments, intensifying need in all realms of Americans’ lives according to stakeholders within the Woodstock community. Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, federal and state legislators allocated millions of dollars to aid those facing unemployment, medical emergencies, and personal crises. As the country recovers and the public health crisis subsides, governmental programs instituted throughout the pandemic are also reaching their ends. Several stakeholders including United Way and MAHHC noted how important the federal funds from the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) and the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) were to their constituents. Stakeholder organizations in Woodstock also indicated that the evolution of pandemic-relief programs

available can be confusing and disorienting to people looking for help, according to a representative from MAHHC. Some constituents have been alarmed by the seemingly sudden end of programs they relied on during the past two years.

In addition to the expansion of regular federal programs such as Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), the State of Vermont received an estimated \$11 billion from the federal government through ARPA, the CARES Act, and other pandemic relief-related legislation.¹ Much of those funds went directly to businesses and individuals in the form of loans, grants, household stimulus payments, and unemployment compensation.² The state received another portion of those federal funds for healthcare services, broadband availability, and emergency rental assistance.³

State and federal spending on social services increased substantially during the pandemic. Vermont received 43 percent more federal funds between fiscal years 2020 and 2023 than the state would have in a non-pandemic era. In emergency shelter and housing services, Vermont has spent \$190 million since 2017, but nearly 90 percent of those funds were spent during the pandemic alone.⁴ In the winter of 2021, the federal government doubled fuel assistance benefits for those who applied.⁵

In 2022, Vermont officials approved an \$85 million measure, including the popular Vermont Emergency Rental Assistance Program (VERAP), involving mortgage and rent assistance, utility and home energy costs, legal and counseling services, eviction protection, and other housing support.⁶ Several community stakeholders, including those from United Way, Vital Communities, and the Upper Valley Haven, noted the importance of housing initiatives like VERAP to Woodstock area residents, especially considering the lack of affordable housing in the region.

Due to the end of the pandemic, however, VERAP funding and other state and federal programs instituted at the height of the public health crisis are either changing or dissolving. Although the increase in government spending during the pandemic supported millions of people, the loss of these funds upon the subsidence of the public health crisis amid rising inflation and stagnant wages will likely undo some of the progress made with COVID-19 expenditures.

3.2 THE NEXT SIX MONTHS: RISING INFLATION AND SEASONAL CHALLENGES

With more than eight percent of Woodstock community members living under the 100 percent federal poverty level, community stakeholders may struggle to meet the needs of their constituents—especially during certain times of the year.⁷ Community stakeholders from Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf, Barnard Helping Hands, Ottauquechee Health Foundation, and MAHHC reported heating costs during the winter months constitute a substantial cost burden that their constituents often struggle to manage. Stakeholders also explained how growing food, gas, and heating prices due to inflation have increased the demand for their services year-round. Thus, these seasonal pressures

along with the current period of high inflation brought forth by the pandemic and other political factors create vulnerability and increased need in the Woodstock community.

4 CURRENT AND ANTICIPATED NEEDS

The most pressing needs for the upcoming winter months are presented in this section under three broad categories: fuel and heating costs, housing costs, and food and household costs.

4.1.1 BACKGROUND: FUEL AND HEATING COSTS

Nine of 14 community stakeholders anticipate high fuel and heating costs in the winter, exacerbating demand for their organization's services. Fuel costs in Vermont have gradually increased over the past couple of years. According to the Vermont Department of Public Service, the cost of propane rose 36 percent from July 2019 to July 2022.⁸ Similarly, No. 2 heating oil and kerosene have nearly doubled in price.⁹ Woodstock community stakeholders noted the importance of providing heating fuel assistance support, especially as prices continue to rise.

Further, in Vermont, fuel assistance does not thoroughly cover all colder months of the year. Local stakeholders from United Way, Senior Solutions, and Plymouth Memory Tree described how fuel assistance benefits are only distributed from late November until March, often beginning after the first snowfall of the year. If constituents do not apply before November, they will only receive 40-80 percent of the heating assistance benefits available. Thus, community members are left ill-supported when it comes to heating their homes and staying warm in early and late cold months. Lastly, anticipated need will be greater in this coming winter due to low fuel inventories. According to the U.S. Department of Energy, heating oil and diesel supplies are 63 percent below the five-year average in New England.¹⁰

4.1.2 IMPACT: FUEL AND HEATING COSTS

Stakeholders at Plymouth Memory Tree explained how fuel costs greatly impact their residents. Average requests for fuel assistance at Plymouth Memory Tree tend to be around \$1,000, and stakeholders anticipate more requests coming this winter. Many stakeholders also expressed that their organizations experience requests for fuel assistance due to the later start of federal benefits in the winter season, insufficient coverage of benefits compared to fuel costs, and reduced access to benefits following late enrollment in Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP). For residents in need of firewood, stakeholders such as those at Barnard Helping Hands noted that residents often experience difficulties obtaining wood to heat their homes after September, when distribution programs have ended.

According to stakeholders at Senior Solutions, spells of cold weather burn through household fuel budgets in the winter and can have a particularly devastating effect on seniors and low-income households. Federal heating aid is provided on a limited basis through the LIHEAP. The government

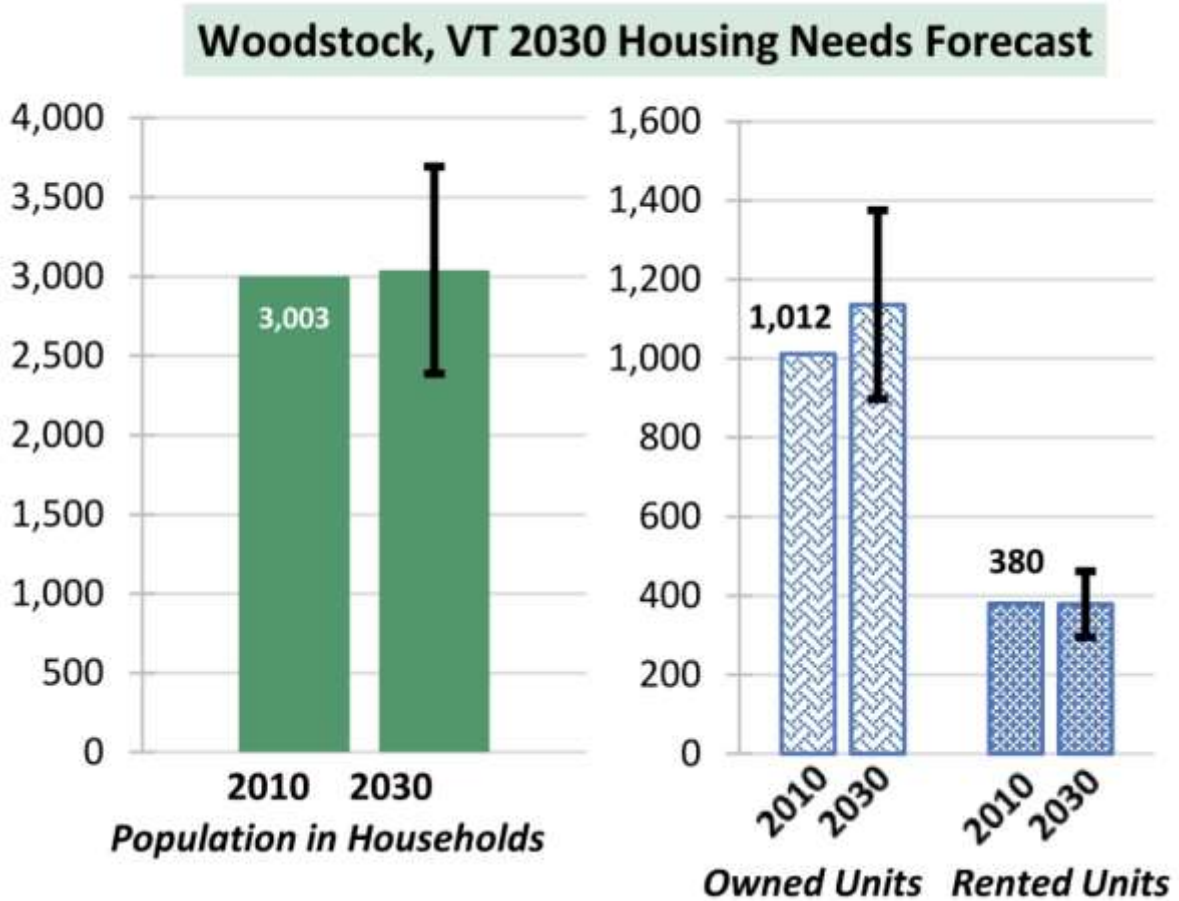
only grants \$400 in assistance every 12 months to people under 185 percent of the federal poverty line. Angela Zhang, the program director for LISTEN Food Pantry, however, explained that \$400 is less than half of the cost of a seasonal fuel delivery.¹¹ While the federal government doubled its aid during the pandemic, stakeholders from Senior Solutions described how the income limits of LIHEAP have not kept pace with inflation and fuel price increases.

4.2.1 BACKGROUND: HOUSING COSTS

According to community stakeholders, affordable housing has and will continue to be a pertinent issue in Vermont. From the Vermont Department of Finance and Management, housing prices in Vermont will rise by more than 10 percent in 2022, with a predicted nine percent increase in 2023.¹² This price increase has strained community members who currently work and live in the area and has forced others to decline employment offers given the housing shortage. According to a report provided by stakeholders at Vital Communities, it is estimated that the region needs approximately 10,000 new homes by 2030 to meet the housing demands of the broader Upper Valley.¹³ By 2030, there will be approximately 26,000 total households classified as cost burdened.¹⁴

From 2013 to 2017, in the one third of households which may be defined as cost-burdened, housing costs exceeded more than 30 percent of household income for Woodstock residents.¹⁵ Stakeholders at MAHHC, United Way, the Upper Valley Haven, and Vital Communities reported that residents they serve face challenges linked to the affordable housing shortage in the Woodstock area. These rates as shown in Fig. 4.2.1 are projected to rise in the next decade.¹⁶

FIGURE 4.2.1



Anticipated housing needs in Woodstock by 2030

4.2.2 IMPACT: HOUSING COSTS

Community stakeholders highlighted three housing concerns: (1) reduced congregate housing due to ongoing COVID-19 concerns, (2) reduced motel and emergency shelter capacity, and (3) high housing demand across the board. First, stakeholders at the Upper Valley Haven explained how their shelters are currently operating at 50-75 percent capacity due to COVID-19 protocols. This reduced capacity has impacted the ability of the Upper Valley Haven to keep up with demand, especially at times of higher need. The Upper Valley Haven shelter facilities have operated at lower capacity to limit person-to-person contact in a traditionally congregate setting that may facilitate the spread of infection.

Vermont instituted the General Assistance Emergency Housing program, which is also known as the motel voucher program, to reduce housing insecurity.¹⁷ The state also eased eligibility requirements for emergency housing during the pandemic. Stakeholders, however, anticipate reduced capacity at

motels and emergency shelters this winter, during the dangerously cold months in the region. Stakeholders at United Way and MAHHC explained that motel and emergency shelter availability seasonally declines in the winter as demand for shelter increases. These community stakeholders expressed concern over the capacity of temporary housing locations in the winter. There are many people who qualify for temporary housing but cannot find any accommodations because motels are full. A stakeholder at MAHHC explained that this seasonal variability greatly affects children who attend public schools in the region.

Pressures on shelters, emergency housing, and motels continue to be intensified by rising housing prices across the region. In July 2022, Woodstock home prices were up 64 percent compared to last year.¹⁸ The median house in the county now sells for \$590,000.¹⁹ Woodstock in particular has a higher proportion of cost-burdened households than towns in the surrounding Upper Valley.

4.3 FOOD AND HOUSEHOLD COSTS

While some food shelters and service providers like the Woodstock Food Shelf noted that their program participation numbers dropped during the pandemic, these providers anticipate more demand in the coming two years. As the country continues to experience a period of high inflation, food and household costs will continue to rise. U.S. consumer prices have continued to increase monthly, with June 2022 marking a 40-year high.²⁰ Food, housing, gasoline, utilities, and other goods rose by nine percent over the past 12 months, with prices rising 1.3 percent in June 2022 alone.²¹ In 2022, grocery prices are predicted to increase over 10 percent.²²

Community stakeholders from the Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf, WUHS/MS, and Ottauquechee Health Foundation reported the impact of increasing grocery prices in the last three to six months. The Upper Valley Haven has experienced an increase in community members they serve: people who would visit the Upper Valley Haven three times per year for food services now go six times per year on average. Stakeholders at Thompson Senior Center, which was serving 5,800 meals in 2012 and 18,000 meals in 2022, indicated that need has continually increased and that the organization is approaching capacity. These food shelves and providers also all note how strained staffing will impact their abilities to serve in the upcoming year. Finally, although Woodstock Union schools are not expecting an increase in the number of students on free and reduced lunch, the VeggieVanGo program operated at the school buildings is predicted to serve more residents in the coming five months. Low-income households and seniors on fixed incomes are especially vulnerable to these price surges and will become more reliant on local Woodstock organizations that provide food and other necessities in the upcoming months.

4.4 COMPOUNDING CHALLENGES

While food, fuel, and housing costs are on the rise, these issues can further compound with personal crises to force residents into vulnerable positions. Community stakeholders in the Woodstock area shared that personal crises arise when ongoing life pressures add up. Representatives from Senior

Solutions, Thompson Senior Center, and Reading School described how the coupling of seasonal and inflation challenges with personal matters like childcare costs, student loans, home repairs, routine medical and dental needs, substance use disorder, and medication costs may prove challenging or even disastrous for Woodstock families in the upcoming winter and beyond.

5 SUPPORTING WOODSTOCK

Both community and individual-level crises require coordinated responses to minimize inefficiency, confusion, and duplication of efforts among community organizations. For those in greatest need, collaboration between service providers ensures already stressful, highly personal situations are not unnecessarily complicated. In serving residents in crisis, successful coordination between local groups is fundamental.

5.1 RESOURCE LANDSCAPE

Despite the panoply of social programs available in the Woodstock area, community stakeholders described that the social service web can prove difficult to navigate for those in need. Without the assistance of caseworkers, residents can struggle to identify, apply to, and receive the benefits of public programs. For residents from vulnerable populations like seniors, as stakeholders from Thompson Senior Center and Senior Solutions shared, taking advantage of these programs can be even more difficult. Approximately 50 percent of eligible seniors, for example, do not participate in federally funded LIHEAP, which provides home fuel assistance.²³ Especially as programs change and, in many cases, shrink in response to the subsidence of the COVID-19 pandemic, accessibility of resources is critical to ensure residents have the support they need. A representative from MAHHC noted that changing COVID-19-era programs have been particularly difficult to utilize and keep track of for seniors.

Further, even when maximizing benefits, residents can struggle to make use of programs and funds available. For example, residents in need of medical and dental care in the area often find it difficult to identify providers who take public program beneficiaries, as stakeholders at Ottauquechee Health Foundation and Thompson Senior Center noted. Additionally, those qualifying for housing vouchers have faced challenges finding available units, a representative from Vital Communities stated. Some housing assistance agencies in nearby areas have even halted voucher applications due to the lack of available housing stock across the bi-state region.²⁴ As families and individuals look for assistance this winter, broadened accessibility of community resources can ensure Woodstock residents make use of support available and improve community health.

5.2 RELATIONSHIP BUILDING

Community stakeholders at MAHHC and United Way conveyed the pride Vermonters feel in achieving self-sufficiency. Most residents throughout the region live in small, rural communities and thrive in close relationships with their neighbors. Amidst crisis, though, residents can feel like they

have nowhere to turn without disclosing personal circumstances to those close to them, a representative from United Way shared; many United Way clients also often express that they feel they are taking away help from others who need it more. Stigma can particularly hold back residents from vulnerable populations like seniors, according to a stakeholder from Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf. Lastly, relationships with clients best extend beyond an initial consultation, as stakeholders shared. Follow-ups are necessary to maintain trust and break cyclical trends that see the same individuals going back for help again, a representative from Ottauquechee Health Foundation stated.

5.3 REACHING THOSE IN NEED

Stakeholders at Thompson Senior Center shared the importance of targeting those new to the area and those new to needing support. For example, families moving to Woodstock from elsewhere may be unknowing of the resources and programs available to them. As the Woodstock area adapts to inflationary pressures, many individuals look for support when and where they have not before. Reading-West Windsor Food Shelf, for example, saw more demand in the past three to six months as food and gas prices have increased. Further, organizations can look to those on the ground for assistance in getting the word out about their services. For instance, staff and teachers in local schools, according to a representative at MAHHC, can identify families who may need additional support beyond what the school district can provide.

6 CONCLUSION

This report compiled data from community health surveys and service provider interviews in order to gauge anticipated needs of Woodstock community members in the next 18 months. Residents are facing challenges related to the cessation and changing nature of COVID-19 relief programs and rising inflation. This inflationary pressure has led to dramatic increases in fuel, heating, food, and other household costs that will immediately impact the Woodstock community. Inflationary pressures compound with other obstacles residents face associated with personal needs like childcare and health costs to put community members in vulnerable positions. Coordination among local organizations is vital as the Woodstock community prepares for the coming winter season and future years.

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