

The Wellesley Friendly Aid Association

Our History: Celebrating 110 years of Community Service

The roots of charity in Wellesley can be traced back to one of the first town meetings after incorporation in 1881, during which a vote was taken to appropriate funds for the poor. Wellesley had become well known as a place of beauty with healthful air. Home to over 2,500 residents, it had been observed to be a town of dichotomies where wealthy businessmen and the newest technologies co-existed with farmers and transients. The development of the public water system in Wellesley and the steam-engine operated ice house on Morse's Pond brought European immigrants into town. It was a time of great possibility.

In 1898, the town had grown to a population of 5,000, some of whom were destitute. In fact, the town maintained a "poor farm" in a stately home (on the grounds of the current Wellesley Country Club), which provided shelter for those in need. While the modern convenience of the street lamp illuminated the town of Wellesley, the founding members of Friendly Aid shed light on the poor and needy. One family's devastating fire became the catalyst for the formation of the new "Friendly Aid Committee." A group of three women from the Wellesley Hills Women's Club set out to provide aid to this family in need. In 1899, the committee expanded to eleven members and often obtained counsel from Selectmen and local clergy regarding the general relief needs of the population. At the request of the Selectmen, the Friendly Aid Committee made visits to the "poor farm" to "carry a bit of brightness and cheer into the daily life of some of its inmates." The philosophy of the committee maintained the need for a friendly hand to the poor, not alms, and asserted that "the leading aim of our committee is to help equalize opportunities."

As the century began and new trolley cars ran through Wellesley's Washington Street and Boston/Worcester Turnpike (Route 9), the committee's "friendly hand" was further extended. A bureau of information was started, as well as an employment bureau. A free bed at the Newton Cottage Hospital was established from funds raised by giving a benefit operetta. A sewing school was initiated to keep a large "maternity trunk" stocked, as well as to "maintain the supply of clothing for the needy of all ages." A summer kindergarten was inaugurated in 1903, the first of its kind in the area, at the original Fiske School on Cedar Street.

In 1908, Nursing and Health Services began with the hiring of a qualified nurse to make home visits. The record states, "it is necessary to have a nurse that a helping hand may be extended to many in their homes at a time of sickness. Her fee shall be twenty-five cents an hour and that only if the family can pay." All of the programs relied on donations; at that time, most of the gifts were from members and friends of the Wellesley Hills Women's Club.

In 1909, after ten years of service to the community, the "Wellesley Friendly Aid Association" was incorporated as a private, not for profit organization for the purpose of "promoting the welfare of the poor, suffering or friendless in Wellesley."

The by-laws provided for "twenty directors, each of whom shall be called a friendly visitor and, on accepting her position, must pledge herself to active duty." Duties of the directors included delivering food and clothes to residents, including those living in 'tar paper shacks' around Morse's Pond, and offering a helping hand to those in the "poor farm" (until its closure in 1910). Duties of the early presidents involved frequent interruptions at their home from "callers and needy persons" until the first office was established on Grantland Road.



Photo Courtesy of the Wellesley Historical Society

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Volunteers remained the lifeblood of Friendly Aid, drawing from the Wellesley population which had grown to 6,400 by 1915. In conjunction with the local Board of Health and Public Schools, a new Friendly Aid Surgical and Sick-Room Committee set up many new services that were professionally staffed: Nutrition, Child Welfare, Pre-natal, and the Eye and Dental Clinics.

Historical events impacted the residents of Wellesley and the country at large. When the world-wide flu epidemic of 1918 swept through Wellesley, so many residents were struck with the disease that the Maugus Club was turned into a hospital. In 1930, the Depression hit and hundreds in Wellesley were unemployed. The country was in crisis and many significant social programs were established by the government, among them, employment relief and opportunity, housing assistance and health provisions. The old trolley cars were replaced by two bus lines that continued to run along Washington Street and Worcester Street until this service was phased out in the 1950's. There were times of catastrophe, such as when a hurricane hit Wellesley in 1938. For 3 hours the town was battered by fierce winds, ripping off roofs and chimneys, blowing small buildings away, and tearing out 1,500 trees at Wellesley College alone.

Wellesley's philanthropic and civic roots run deep. In support of the WWII civilian effort, Wellesley served the needs of the country, not only by sending many of its own to war, but by opening up its two colleges to meet the growing war demands. When 100 hungry and war torn children were evacuated from Britain, Wellesley College became their temporary home. Between 1943 and 1945, some of the facilities at both Babson College and Wellesley College were relinquished to the U.S. Navy for use in the war effort. The Wellesley Housing Authority (WHA) was established in 1949 to provide subsidized housing for veterans and their families. In early 1950, the construction of 90 new garden style apartments began at Barton Road. As the need for veteran's housing diminished, WHA also accepted people with a connection to Wellesley to the housing at Barton Road. More recently, eligibility requirements for WHA residence have been set by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. New sites were opened for the elderly and disabled. The WHA oversees 200 households in Wellesley located at Barton Road, Linden Street, Morton Circle, Washington Street, River Street and Weston Road. These households have become the prime focus of most of Friendly Aid's services.

In 1949, the Wellesley Friendly Aid Association was in need of more space to accommodate its growing programs and staff, and acquired the property at 219 Washington Street from the "heirs" of a former Friendly Aid President, Mrs. Arthur Brown. The land included a barn that is still rented to the Wellesley Service League for \$1 a year, as well as a large home. It was here, in the parlor, that the Friendship Circle was initiated and women of "golden age" gathered for weekly social events. Since the 1940's, Friendly Aid has coordinated the camp programs in town, helping many children who otherwise could not share this experience. Many town organizations, church groups, and individual donors have given to the camp fund. The Wellesley Service League contributes significant support for both the camp program and Friendship Circle.



The Friendship Circle circa 1950's



Artwork by M. Fitzwilliam

By the 1960's, the Wellesley Friendly Aid Association was a multi-service community and United Fund agency, offering visiting nurses, family counseling, and other professional services, in addition to several long-standing programs. Professional staff at this time included a registered physical therapist, home health aides, psychologists, and social workers.

The economic crisis of the 1970's was marked by historically unprecedented high inflation rates and high unemployment rates. The combination was coined "stagflation." In spite of this economic crisis, Wellesley residents donated funds to build a Community Center on land owned by Wellesley Friendly Aid. The new center opened in 1977, offering space to meet the needs of residents of all ages. Earlier, in 1974, the Wellesley Historical Society had moved the 1824 Dadmun-McNamara house to Friendly Aid land where a vegetable garden once grew.

By 1974, the Wellesley Friendly Aid Nursing Services, which had begun in 1908, spun-off to become the Newton-Wellesley Visiting Nurses Association. During this decade, the Friendly Aid Family Service Committee focused on services to seniors. The committee initiated the Wellesley Council on Aging and supported its evolution from an office at the Friendly Aid building to its present home at the Wellesley Community Center. In assessing the needs of the elderly, it was discovered that some homebound Wellesley seniors were in need of nutritious meals. Friendly Aid introduced the "Meals on Wheels" program to Wellesley in 1974 and administered the program until 2007 when it was taken over by Springwell. Since providing food has been a long-standing tradition, in 1989 two Wellesley Friendly Aid board members proposed that Friendly Aid's work expand to include a food pantry.

Presently, Wellesley has grown to a population of 26,600 and remains known for its beauty, excellent education system, and wealth. However, poverty exists among us and the basic needs of the past continue to be at issue in present times. The many well-established programs of Wellesley Friendly Aid continue to be a lifeline to those in need. Wheelchairs, walkers, and other medical equipment have been loaned to Wellesley residents for over 90 years. In 2009, 25 members of the Friendship Circle celebrated their 60th anniversary with a cookbook to benefit charity. For over 60 years, Friendly Aid also has given an enriching camp experience to Wellesley children in need.

The Friendly Aid tradition that started with the delivery of food baskets in the early 1900's has evolved today into the gift of food vouchers. Holiday baskets with whole turkeys and the trimmings were given until 2002. The Wellesley Hills Junior Women's Club and Roche Brothers have contributed to this program for many years. Over 180 Wellesley households received food vouchers last Thanksgiving for a special holiday meal.

WELLESLEY FOOD PANTRY

The Wellesley Food Pantry has been a vital program of Wellesley Friendly Aid for the past 20 years. The food pantry opened its doors for the first time in July of 1989. The community effort that began the Wellesley food pantry included representatives from local churches, synagogues and civic organizations, as well as public housing residents. Led by two Friendly Aid board members, the representatives helped with donations, referrals, and food drives.

Many dedicated volunteers continue to contribute countless hours. The number of Wellesley households registered for the food pantry now totals over 200, an all-time high. With many community organizations still actively involved, the Wellesley Food Pantry successfully pools local resources to provide food for those at risk of hunger.



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During the current economic recession, the needs of Wellesley residents continue to increase. As it has in the past, Wellesley Friendly Aid is meeting contemporary needs by offering new classes in "English as a Second Language" and becoming an application site for Fuel Assistance. Other new programs include helping residents apply for SNAP benefits (food stamps), sponsoring a monthly social hour at Wellesley Health Department Keep Well Clinics, offering an information and referral service, providing a free resume service for those with low income, and distributing a new resource booklet for Wellesley residents in need. Collaborations have increased as Friendly Aid hosts an annual safety net forum with area organizations. New partnerships, including Cradles to Crayons, allow Wellesley residents to benefit from additional services.

As needs grow, so do the costs of programs. The Wellesley Friendly Aid Association relies, as it has throughout its history, on the generosity of our community. What began as a helping hand for one family 110 years ago has become a support system for many Wellesley residents: neighbors helping neighbors.

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Resources:

"Five Pounds Currency, Three Pounds of Corn" Wellesley's Centennial Story by Elizabeth M. Hinchliffe

Historical documents of the Wellesley Friendly Aid Association, including previous histories written by Marion H. Niles and Helen Hood Taplin

John Schuler, Wellesley Housing Authority
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