

## The Bridge-House - A History

In 1988, a group of conscientious community members saw a need that escaped the attention of many local citizens. Because the Pemi-Baker Valley did not have pan-handlers and cardboard homes on its streets, homelessness was not perceived as a local problem. Only a few were paying attention to the growing number of area people becoming homeless and forced to sleep in the woods, under bridge abutments or cars. This group of twenty-nine citizens formed a local advisory council, from which came the first Board of Directors for what was originally called the Pemi-Baker Emergency Shelter, Inc. and then became Pemi-Bridge House Inc. [PBH].

This advisory council examined needs, considered possible solutions and initiated appropriate action to solve the problem of homelessness. By 1989, after many months of dedicated work, this group found a building and received a grant to purchase it. The first Board of Directors consisted of 15 people mostly from Plymouth, but with representation also from, Campton, Ashland, Wentworth Holderness and Laconia. This board worked under the direction of Tri County Community Action Program [TRICAP], and was advisory in nature. TRICAP had the expertise of rigid systems and strict government accounting, which comes with state funding and grants. TRICAP officials from Berlin assisted the board with structuring the shelter.

In 2004, the Board of Directors made the decision to become independent of TRICAP. By going out on their own, the board was able to pursue an active fundraising effort, which resulted in obtaining the necessary money to build the new shelter next to Whole Village. The primary source of funding for the new shelter was a CDBG grant sponsored by the Town of Plymouth. The new Bridge House shelter opened in May of 2005 and consists of 20 beds serving the needs of families with children as well as a dedicated wing for single men.

Since completing the shelter, the board has been primarily involved with developing their operational and personnel policies, as well as developing programs that directly relate to our participants. Connecting the residents with the proper agencies so that they may receive the training, skills and information they need to get back on their own is a priority. Providing extensive case management is essential for building the base of support participants need to become self-sufficient and productive members of the community.

Former Board President and community activist Cathy Bentwood has recently been named the Executive Director. The Board has been re-charged with a number of high-energy and dedicated volunteers who are focused on providing staff and volunteers the support needed to expand programs and services to participants.

An extremely high-priority mission is the development of additional affordable housing in Plymouth and allocating units for the benefit of Bridge House participants transitioning from the shelter to self-sufficiency. Partnering with long-time, affordable housing provider, First Plymouth Investment Corp/ Hanaway Management on the proposed Plymouth Woods development is the best, most logical approach to fulfilling this need in the Plymouth community.