ACAP to launch “Hope and Prosperity Center” to meet immediate and growing community need
Support from philanthropist and Presque Isle native Mary Smith paves the way for new facility to open this fall; while plans for more comprehensive center guided by community leaders is in the works

Aroostook County - A large increase in individuals and families seeking assistance who are experiencing crisis, homelessness or housing insecure, and turning to the Aroostook County Action Program for help, has prompted The County’s most comprehensive social service agency to launch a new service.

The Hope and Prosperity Center, located at ACAP’s 771 Main Street Presque Isle location, will open its doors this fall. The center will bring into one space same day access to all of ACAP’s programs such as coaching (including recovery coaching), workforce development, housing, preventative health and other services, as well as those offered by partner agencies.

“The need for this has been evident over the past year as more and more County residents in crisis have turned to us. We have been able to not only assist these individuals and families move beyond the emergency situation, but to help them get housed, connected with employment, education, numerous services, and on the road to economic security and prosperity,” said Jason Parent, ACAP Executive Director/CEO. “This is the best next step in providing more comprehensive services to our customers across The County, and continuing the expansion of our coaching services region-wide. Over the past several months it has become clear that the current configuration of space at our Main Street Presque Isle location is not reflective of the more extensive work our dedicated and caring staff are so effectively delivering. This is not only about providing the community the service it needs, but our staff the appropriate space they need to do it.”

The center will offer space for customers to access computers for conducting job searches and other resources online, meeting rooms for individuals and families to work with ACAP coaches, employment counselors, program staff and professionals from other agencies. A noontime meal for individuals actively working with staff will also be provided. Connection to other services across Presque Isle will be more easily accessible to and from ACAP with The PI Loop bus service coming on-line in October.

Between April 1 and June 30, 2019, ACAP served more than 180 individuals and families who were homeless or housing insecure, including 28 people who walked-in to the location near Walmart in Presque Isle. Another 42 connected with ACAP by phone and through other outreach seeking shelter. Related services provided have included assistance with avoiding eviction, provision of security deposits to help with obtaining housing, and navigation of numerous services – most notably education and employment.

“By comparison, numbers for this most recent quarter are similar to what we tracked in all of 2018,” said Heidi Rackliffe, ACAP program supervisor. “The demand has been overwhelming at times. People are turning to us because they know they will not only get the immediate assistance they need, but understand that we will continue working with them to help ensure they not only get through the crisis, but are given assistance and tools they need to go from crisis to thriving. It has been so rewarding to work with families and individuals who can at times come to us with almost a hopeless feeling, but have trusted us enough to allow us the opportunity to work with them side by side to help access safe housing, secure employment and/or the beginnings of an educational pathway, giving us the opportunity to help transform their lives for the better.”

Rackliffe, who just three years ago was ACAP’s lone case manager – now coach, is part of an eight, soon to be ten-member team spread across Aroostook County. Coaches are embedded in ACAP locations in Fort Kent,
Madawaska, Caribou, Presque Isle and Houlton and serve all of northern Maine. A year ago, the Agency added recovery coaching to its portfolio of services ensuring they have the ability to serve those affected by substance misuse, serving 48 individuals since September 2018.

Aside from internal allocation of funds, support for the Hope and Prosperity Center has come from private donors, including Presque Isle native and philanthropist Mary Smith. The California resident, who has supported numerous organizations and projects in her hometown including Northern Maine Community College, University of Maine at Presque Isle, Mark and Emily Turner Memorial Library, to name a few, recently pledged her support for the initiative.

Smith has provided the funding for a year for a center director to get the project off the ground, lead day-to-day operations, and plan for future expansion and a more permanent home for the facility. ACAP recently tapped Rackliff, a licensed social worker, the agency’s longest serving coach and a well-known and highly respected go-to resource across the region, to assume the new responsibility.

Smith’s gift will also provide ACAP with the funds needed to make the modest facility changes to bring the center on-line in the coming weeks. She has additionally provided financial support for a consultant to work with ACAP and an advisory/project steering committee to plan for and build support for a more comprehensive facility and long-term community solution that will better serve Aroostook County moving forward.

“This year I became interested in the homeless problem in Presque Isle. I contacted Homeless Services of Aroostook and met with them in April. During that visit, I was introduced to the Homeless Stakeholders Group of Aroostook which broadened my understanding and desire to support comprehensive solutions that will reach the most number of people. Since April, I have worked closely with the team at ACAP and have been impressed with their dedication and drive to support as many people as possible,” said Smith. “I encourage those in the community who are not involved to become involved. This issue will touch all of our lives in one way or another.”

Smith is additionally providing consultancy support to the Aroostook County Homeless Stakeholder Group. The more than 50 community leaders, representing social service, healthcare, mental health, law enforcement, staff from Maine’s Congressional Delegation, and others have been meeting for three years. Convened jointly by ACAP and Homeless Services of Aroostook, the group was instrumental in identifying the need to add a low barrier shelter option to the area’s only overnight homeless shelter.

This goal was accomplished on July 1, as HSA repurposed part of its existing facility in Presque Isle to include an emergency overnight shelter open to more individuals. The focus of the stakeholder group has transitioned to developing a strategic plan that includes establishing a more comprehensive and long-term solution to meeting the needs of all people facing homelessness in our community.

“Getting the Hope and Prosperity Center off the ground this fall, in this initial capacity, is the first step in getting to an even better and more sustainable solution that will best serve our area long term,” said Rackliff. “That conversation is ongoing, happening at numerous levels and has many individuals and organizations at the table. It includes the steering committee looking at the future permanent development of the Hope and Prosperity Center and the Aroostook County Homeless Stakeholder Group. In the coming weeks it will also include joint facilitated meetings between ACAP and HSA to identify ways we can collaborate and come together to find greater program, operational and administrative efficiencies.”