

Leominster Champion

LOCAL

Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts marks 20 years of caring

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FITCHBURG — While you may have heard of the Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts, you may not be aware of how deeply the organization is engrained locally and their longtime commitment to making a difference in many communities — especially during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

CFNCM was created 20 years ago by and for the people of the North Central Massachusetts region.

“The Community Foundation grew out of an awareness by community leaders from across North Central Massachusetts that the region had both the capacity and desire to support a community foundation focused on local challenges and opportunities,” said President Stephen Adams. “They created the CFNCM to allow individuals, families, businesses, and agencies to establish permanent charitable funds to benefit the region forever.”

Since it was launched in 2001, the tax-exempt public charity has accumulated \$70 million in philanthropic assets, supporting about \$4.5 million a year in grants and disbursements to nonprofits in North Central Massachusetts and beyond.

“We help people establish charitable funds and make grants to improve the quality of life in the 33 communities across our region,” Adams said. “As a community foundation we help individuals, families, financial advisors and nonprofit organizations work together to make the region a better place to live today and into the future.”

The communities in the foundation’s key demographic include Leominster, Fitchburg, Lunenburg, Shirley, Devens and dozens more. The organization pursues its mission by providing donors a means to distribute grants to nonprofits. It also allocates grants directly through competitive grant programs in areas such as environmental preservation

and animal welfare, career readiness and educational access, community enrichment and organizational development, critical community needs, and community health care in the Nashoba Valley region.

During its first 18 years, CFNCM shared its president with United Way. Adams joined the organization as its first full-time president in August 2019.

“While I have been leading CFNCM for less than two years, the COVID-19 pandemic thrust us into emergency grant making and accelerated my learning curve exponentially,” he said.

Adams said the need in general across the region has certainly increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, presenting new and difficult challenges.

“The pandemic brought into focus problems already bubbling below the surface in North Central Massachusetts, in particular food insecurity and supporting homeless individuals,” he said. “The COVID-19 crisis thrust the Community Foundation deeply into emergency grant making in a way we had not been involved before. We became a conduit for the generosity of local residents as well as of statewide funds to help people affected by the pandemic.”

Adam said that because of the pandemic, they needed to swiftly institute a grant application and fund distribution system that was accessible online and easy to navigate.

“We had just adopted a new online program that was easy to use for us and grant applicants,” he said. “The foundation staff quickly learned how to use online document distribution and signing software and electronic funds transfer.”

As a result, the foundation has been able to distribute nearly \$2 million in funding through 134 grants to 75 nonprofits over the last year — five times its typical level of annual grant making.

“Food pantries and other food providers saw a 40-60% jump in the number of families coming to them to fill the gap in food created by job losses,” Adams said. “Homeless services became much harder to find as the pandemic forced service providers to close or sharply curtail services at the same time that the number of homeless residents was growing. The region had no low-threshold shelters even before the crisis. The crisis and onset of winter highlighted the need to find a solution.”

Early this year, CFNCM helped to spearhead a multi-community effort to meet the needs of the homeless population in North Central Massachusetts, in particular single individuals. A group of local nonprofit organizations and community leaders were brought together by Adams to launch a plan to address immediate needs including food, shelter, and more.

As president of the foundation, Adams also serves as chief executive officer. His various roles include leading the staff and volunteer board in growing the amount and impact of donated funds dedicated to philanthropy in the region; building and maintaining strong relationships with key stakeholders across the region; expanding awareness of the Community Foundation and its role in the region; enhancing its impact through effective grant making; and ensuring that the Community Foundation “is a trustworthy, responsive and effective partner to donors and nonprofits in the region.”

“There is so much to love about my job,” Adams said. “I serve a board of trustees comprised of the most caring and thoughtful people I have ever met. I have worked with several nonprofits, and the Community Foundation board is the most engaged and supportive board I have experienced, investing their considerable professional competencies, not to mention wealth, to the work of the foundation. I work with a small but mighty band of colleagues who, individually and collectively, care deeply about our work and are constantly finding ways to do it better. They are fun to work with and treat each other with respect. And we serve a growing group of generous donors who share our love of the region and a desire to make life better for everyone living here.

“Finally, the work of the foundation is a perfect match for my eclectic professional experiences,” he continued. “It allows me to apply my background in community and economic development, finance, communications and philanthropy to the needs and opportunities of a discrete geography. We get to play a meaningful role in helping address pressing issues and can see the impact of our work. It is tremendously rewarding.”

Adams said CFNCM is funded largely by administrative fee revenue.

“We charge a fee annually against the funds we manage,” he said. “This fee revenue supports the day-to-day operations of the Community Foundation. Our four grant programs were endowed by generous donors who created field of interest funds. Many of our residents like the idea that the fee is going directly back into the community versus a large financial institution. We also receive operating donations from trustees and sponsors

of our informational and outreach events.”

According to Adams, CFNCM offers four big advantages over private foundations and huge, national financial services firms when it comes to donations, grants, community outreach, and more.

“First, we have enormous flexibility in ways people can direct their giving,” he said. “They can set up a scholarship fund or a fund in remembrance of a loved one. They can create a designated fund to direct annual giving to a specific nonprofit or a donor-advised fund to send gifts to multiple causes. Donors can support existing funds or create a field of interest fund and allow the foundation to direct the dollars to nonprofits serving a specific issue area or geography.

“Second, the Community Foundation supports philanthropy at a wide range of fund levels. Our 200-plus funds range from \$10,000 to several million dollars. Third, unlike large, national financial firms, the Community Foundation staff have deep knowledge of the needs and opportunities in the region and of the nonprofits working to address them. So, we can be a valuable resource in effective giving. Fourth, we offer personalized service, helping donors shape their approach to giving in ways that best meets their financial and philanthropic goals.”

Adams said it is important to him and the other foundation staff and board members to continue helping people, businesses, and organizations in the local communities, especially during these trying and unprecedented times.

“The Community Foundation is unique in its focus on North Central Massachusetts and its ability to be flexible about where it focuses its grants,” he said. “Philanthropists can be confident that our expertise on the region will ensure that their charitable dollars will go to the greatest and most impactful need. We have relationships with local nonprofits, and we understand the opportunities and challenges that local nonprofits are working to address. So, we can tailor our giving to their approaches toward serving people in need. In addition, we can serve a valuable role bringing parties together to address region-wide issues. We are not a service provider and don’t have a tie to any particular city or town in North Central Massachusetts. Our responsibility is to all 33 communities.”

For more information, visit www.cfncm.org and follow Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts on Facebook.