



Vol. 1 Issue 2 | May 2013

Higher Ground
906 Main Street
Williamstown, MA 01267
413-458-5714
HGwilliamstown@gmail.com
Higher Ground is a 501(c)3 organization.

Our Board of Directors and Advisors

- Bilal Ansari, Muslim Chaplain, President
- David Mangun, Vice-President
- Carol Zingarelli, Clerk
- Catherine Yamamoto, Treasurer
- Van Ellet
- The Rev. Peter Elvin
- Kathy Kalker
- Mark Lincourt
- Sue Metzner
- Harry Montgomery
- Brian O’Grady
- Ron Turbin

Staff

- Susan Puddester,
Case Management Supervisor

Advisory Board

- Paul Austin
- Al Bashevkin
- Carol DeMayo
- Penny Devereux
- Beth Goodman
- James Kolesar
- Debbie Kushnet
- Stephen Pagnotta
- Thomas Sheldon

Thank you to our faithful Volunteer:

- Phyllis Alcombright

Re / Building for the Community

From the president:

Dear Friends,

Firstly, thanks go out to Rev. Carrie Bail for her wonderful leadership in the aftermath of the flood and over the course of our first year.

A warm welcome to our new board members, Kathy Kalker, Sue Metzner, and David Mangun. Almost six months ago, we barely escaped another disaster in Hurricane Sandy. Our neighbors to the south, including those in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, were devastated. That disaster helped punctuate the need for community leadership in disaster response and in fostering healing among those who suffer in our communities.

In response to the devastation we felt on our doorstep, Higher Ground Inc., was formed a year and a half ago. Gail Burns, Robin Lenz, Rev. Peter Elvin, and Pastor Carrie Bail organized, served and rallied community support to help our neighbors in The Spruces. Pastor Carrie led the charge for a year, along with Robin Lenz, as board president and coordinator respectively. Both have stepped down from leadership positions but still remain engaged with and concerned about our most vulnerable residents still in harm’s way and not on higher ground.

I supported Pastor Carrie as vice-president for a year and have now succeeded her as president of Higher Ground. We are excited at Higher Ground with several new board members with wonderful records of service and dedication to community engagement. We have a very strong advisory committee to our board of directors and we are well on our way to becoming a strong, viable, non-profit presence in North Berkshire.

We look to stay active in helping our community stay ready and prepared for any disaster.

Our sincerest thanks to all who responded and continue to be concerned for the welfare of those who lost so much. Your generosity has made and continues to make a very real difference for so many.

Bilal Ansari

A Message to Flood Survivors: Higher Ground Continues to Provide Assistance

February 28, 2013 marked the year and a half anniversary of Tropical Storm Irene. To some of you it may seem like a lifetime ago, but to many it may feel like yesterday. Rest assured that Higher Ground is still working both publicly and privately to help move all of you toward recovery. Recovery will mean different things to different people, but no matter what, Higher Ground continues to provide assistance to individuals who were affected by Tropical Storm Irene. If you have issues with FEMA, or have other unmet needs related to the disaster, please stop by or call the Higher Ground office. For the individuals who were forced to leave the Spruces mobile home park, and for those who remain there, life remains unsettled. Residents of the Spruces both current and

former, as well as the town of Williamstown at large, are being bombarded with information: some accurate and some inaccurate. Higher Ground is still here to help. If you have questions or concerns about what is happening, please feel free to contact Higher Ground and we will work to provide you with accurate information and if we do not have an answer, we can guide you to the right place. Over a year and a half after the flood, many of you are still working your way to recovery. We are here to help.

Contact: Susan Puddester
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Williams Students Join Community in Disaster Relief

Williams College students have adopted the Spruces as both a place to escape what is called the 'purple bubble' and as a place of learning and community engagement.

Immediately after Tropical Storm Irene, many sports teams, activist and religious clubs volunteered to remove tons of destroyed property alongside residents whose homes were destroyed by flooding. This relationship continued with several rounds of cleanup that inspired MCLA, Berkshire Community College and Mount Greylock students to join the collective efforts. Williams College last summer introduced over 120 first-year students to The Spruces. Higher Ground partnered with "Where Am I?", a First Days program at Williams. Higher Ground paid for dumpsters, at a cost of over two thousand dollars, while students removed loose trash and parts of destroyed mobile homes.

Higher Ground is here for our neighbors. Our mission is to support them in any way we can. Currently 67 of a total of 225 of those households have been allowed back into The Spruces. About 77 trailers have been removed, but some 80 trailers still remain that need to be demolished. The cost to thoroughly remove a trailer can run as high as \$5000. Those who could afford it, did. Those who couldn't tried other means, and others just abandoned their trailers altogether.

Williams students to return to the Spruces!!!

**Great Day of Service
Saturday, April 27, 2013**

Williams students will return –
with dumpsters paid for by Higher
Ground – to help you
with your Spring Cleaning.

Be ready with items
you would like disposed of.

Thankfulness Abounds

"Oh my goodness, Ralph!" were the first words out of the mouth of Rev. Carrie Bail, past President of Higher Ground, Inc., as she made way for the feet of a lovely coffee table brought into her office by her friend, Spruces resident Ralph Pitroff. Ralph delightedly presented his hand-made gift as thanks for all the help he had received from Higher Ground after the flood. Blinking back tears, Carrie recalled how she had admired Ralph's woodworking skills when she visited his home last year. "And now you've made me this lovely table with your own two hands!" she enthused. "It's nice and tall," she said, "for a tall person like me. I will treasure it!"



Ralph Pitroff is one of the troupers amongst the Sprucians. He's done a great job of filing the correct papers by the deadline and taking the right steps to get back into his home, and now he has hopes of being one of the first residents in a nice new location. What a refreshing story to hear of one man's gratitude translated back through the artistry of his hands. There's never enough joyful news in the world, so add this one to your repertoire of happy tales.

Housing that is affordable benefits everyone

By Andy McKeever, iBerkshires Staff (*Excerpted from article on March 22, 2013*)

PITTSFIELD, Mass. — Affordable housing projects are complicated and take a long time but reap many benefits, the executive director of Hilltown Community Development Corp. told county planners at a March meeting in Pittsfield. Dave Christopolis of Hilltown CDC was invited by the Berkshire Regional Planning Commission to talk about rural housing efforts.

Christopolis said there is a growing need for housing and that subsidized projects serve a big role in rehabilitating buildings, creating jobs, revitalizing downtowns and saving historic buildings as well as providing much needed affordable living arrangements.

The term affordable housing is often misconstrued. Simply put, affordable housing is designed so the residents do not pay more than 30 percent of their household income.

"A four-person household can make \$64,000. That's a reasonable salary to live on, but it still makes it difficult to pay the bills when you have a family of four and a mortgage or relatively high rents," Christopolis said, adding that often in the current market "a single earner can't afford the typical fair-market rent."

But the benefits are worth the effort. An affordable housing project not only creates construction jobs but it brings employers and possible employees together as well as saves historic buildings, he said. Christopolis has been involved in many types of projects, from the construction of condo-like villages to a few rental units around a town marketplace. He added that a few tools towns have are the state 40B law, which streamlines permitting for developers, and the Community Preservation Act, which is an optional tax towns can adopt with matching funds by the state to use toward affordable housing. Meanwhile, organizations like Hilltown CDC, which the Berkshires does not have in the same capacity, can help alleviate "soft costs" from developers in exchange for keeping the rents down.

Tropical Storm Irene Anniversary Ice Cream Social

On August 25, 2012, three days short of the actual anniversary of Tropical Storm Irene's unpleasant visit to the Berkshires, Higher Ground invited Spruces residents and former residents, first responders, officials and townspeople to gather and mark the occasion. It was a time to celebrate community and the spirit of survival. There was a bagpiper, some touching words from Rev. Peter Elvin, Robin Lenz, The Spruces Tenants Association, special guest Undersecretary for Housing and Community Development Aaron Gornstein ... and, of course, ice cream! (donated by Williams College and Soco Creamery). A bench, given by a very generous donor, was placed in the park and dedicated to "The resilient spirit of those affected by the flooding due to Irene in 2011". Gale Hose fire fighters assembled the bench and Williams College donated its installation. Thank you to our generous benefactors.

Announcement: The Women's Institute as our Development Consultant

Higher Ground has contracted the professional services of The Women's Institute for Housing and Economic Development to assess opportunities for replacement housing for those who lost their homes in the flood. This was made possible by a \$22,000 rural development grant by LISC/NEF after inviting The Women's Institute to visit The Spruces after Irene.

The Women's Institute's Mission Statement:

The Women's Institute is a mission-driven developer deeply committed to serving vulnerable populations through a service-enriched housing model - prioritizing the economic stability needs of the adults and children who live in our properties in addition to our bricks-and-mortar development of affordable housing units. Through our work, we seek to ensure that low-income people throughout our region have the opportunity to live in quality housing that is affordable within their household budgets, and also have access to services and support to achieve economic stability for their families.

Please visit the Women's Institute website: wihed.org.

What is Higher Ground's Position on The Lowry Property?

Higher Ground's mission is to serve those in our town affected by Tropical Storm Irene. All our work to date has been to assist those who lost their homes in the flood as they deal with their loss and in their efforts to relocate. Their greatest need is to find housing that is safe, suitable and affordable. Our position is in favor of whatever course of action best meets that need.

Update on the FEMA grant

On March 27, the Town announced that it had received notification that "the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) is announcing a Federal grant for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. This grant will fund the acquisition and demolition of 65 mobile homes and 2 common building structures in the Spruces Mobile Home Park that were more than 50% damaged by tropical storm Irene. Once acquired, all structures from the property will be demolished and removed. The area will be returned to open space. This award is pursuant to the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act, Section 404, and 44 CFR Part 206.434." The announcement included that amount of the grant as \$6,130,000. The money has not been disbursed and no time-clock has started reimplementing it.

Special Thanks to Robin Lenz



Margaret Harwood and Robin Lenz

Many thanks to Robin Lenz, who took on the position of Coordinator of Higher Ground before there actually was a Higher Ground. How many people would take on a challenge presented as, "We don't know what the job will be or how it will be paid for, but we need your help"? We are thankful that Robin did. She was a lifeline for many people suffering from the displacement and confusion following the flooding from Irene. Her ready smile, empathy and encouraging words helped lift their spirits and made it possible for them to face such a difficult time.

Robin organized relief efforts while allowing participation of all those willing to help. Churches, students, Gale Hose fire fighters, Rotary, Lions, banks all worked together because of her "Sure, let's do that," attitude. Robin did a great job of keeping the community informed, as the face of Higher Ground, through appearances on TV, talks to local organizations, and newspaper interviews. She also effectively stayed in touch with all sorts of disaster-related organizations and helped us to network with them.

A year has passed and now Robin has moved on to another job, but she will be remembered for her work with Higher Ground and the many lives she touched. Thank you, Robin.



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IMPORTANT DATES

Special Town Meeting – April 24
 with votes on the Lowry Property
 Wed., April 24, beginning at 7:25 PM
 Mt. Greylock Regional H.S. Gymnasium
 Arrive by 7 PM to sign in and get a seat

Annual Town Meeting – May 21
 Tuesday, May 21, beginning at 7 PM
 Elementary School gymnasium

Arrive by 6:30 PM to sign in and get a seat

Note different starting times and locations.

If you need transportation, please contact Marilyn Kirby.

Name
 Address1
 Address 2
 City, State, Zip

HIGHER GROUND TO SURVEY SPRUCES RESIDENTS

Dear Current and Former Spruces Residents:
 As we hope you all know, Higher Ground continues to be a source of assistance and advocacy for all of you. You are now 18 months past the event that changed all of your lives. Higher Ground will be reaching out to you to find out how you are doing.

Some of you have left the area and reported to us about a year ago that you were doing well and were content with your living arrangements. Others shared with us that they were in “temporary” homes and were seeking to return to Williamstown. Others were living in places that failed to accommodate their needs appropriately. Still others remained in the Spruces where the future is uncertain.

Higher Ground is seeking to determine what you need, so we will be sending you a survey within the next couple of weeks. Your responses are important to us. With a clear idea of what your needs are, Higher Ground will be better able to help you meet them. We need to hear back from you whether you need our help or not. We do not want to leave anyone out.

Some of you are still in need of permanent housing. As we work to replace some of the housing that was lost during Tropical Storm Irene, your wants and needs are so important. The rebuilding process will take time, several years perhaps, but with accurate information we can continue to move forward.

Thank you in advance for taking the time to respond to the survey that you will receive soon. When you have received your survey, if you know of any current or former Spruces resident who did not receive one, please call the Higher Ground office at 413.458.5714 to let us know. Thank you.

Flood Insurance Information for Sprucians

If you received money from FEMA for your mobile home after Tropical Storm Irene, part of your benefit was three years’ coverage for flood insurance. This policy covers the address of the mobile home. After that three-year period, each person is responsible for keeping up payment for this flood insurance. FEMA is not responsible for sending reminders. Each individual household should have received information from the insurance company that is providing this insurance.

If a flood occurs after flood insurance is in place, individuals should file a claim with the insurance company. If the flood insurance does not cover damages, individuals may apply to FEMA. There is no guarantee that they will receive funds from either the insurance company or FEMA.

If you let flood insurance lapse, it is unlikely that FEMA will pay for any damages. The primary payer would be the insurance company. If you choose not to pay for flood insurance after the initial three-year period, you are considered to be in “non-compliance.”

If you are unsure about whether you have flood insurance on your property you should contact FEMA for that information. Higher Ground may be able to assist with this if you run into problems.

NOTE: the flood insurance is for the “address” not the individual or the mobile home (in the rare event that it is moved). Individuals who have returned to the Spruces, but not to their original home, or new residents should be sure they have flood insurance for **that address.**