

Charlie's Closet celebrates 20 years

Go-to place for used medical equipment more popular than ever

By Lisa Reisman 4/20/18

GUILFORD — A few months ago, a man came to the barn that houses Charlie's Closet in Guilford. He needed a pair of crutches. He'd been fishing at the dock in Stony Creek and knocked over his aluminum crutches, causing them to fall into the water and sink. A boy retrieved one of them. One was not enough.

"So he took two pairs, one wood and the other aluminum," said Sue Egan, the no-nonsense director of the medical supplies clearinghouse, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. "He was going to test the wooden ones in his pool to see if they floated."

It was part and parcel of the mission that has had Charlie's Closet taking donations of used medical equipment and cutting through red tape to get it to those in need for the last two decades.

And that means anyone. "It might be someone who's older or who's living with a disability, but also someone who's just temporarily laid up," Egan said, as she stood amid safety bars, disposable bed pads and canes in the breezeway that acts as a staging area for pick-ups and drop-offs after hours at the closet.

While Guilford residents get preference, it also means anyone, no matter their income, no matter where they live. "Last year people from 75 towns got equipment

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Phil Clorite, of Madison, with a tub transfer bench he purchased for his wife at Charlie's Closet in Guilford. In the background is volunteer Sue Egan.

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from us," said Egan. That doesn't count the arrangement with CT Quest for Peace to send equipment to Nicaragua or the shipments to Haiti, Tibet and Jamaica for other organizations.

The fee for any piece of equipment, from a hospital bed to a wheelchair to a walker, is \$1.

That has not changed since January 1998, when Charlie McGowan came by the office of the Guilford Interfaith Ministries in search of an electric stair lift for a neighbor diagnosed with ALS.

At the time, GIM, which had been founded in 1985 to address the needs of frail, elderly residents, included the Meals on Wheels and Friendly Visiting programs. (It has since added the Guilford Food Bank.) McGowan was president of its board.

When the staff found a stair lift in an auction house, it hit them, volunteer Gwen Fletcher said in 2010.

"If one person desperately needed equipment and didn't know where to go, how many more were there?"

By December, the newly minted Charlie's Closet was regularly providing equipment for loan. The first year there were about 70 calls for equipment and supplies, she said.

Since then, Charlie's Closet has seen an exponential rise in demand. In 2009, roughly 1,500 people received 2,100 pieces of equipment. Last year, the number increased to 3,900 people picking up 5,800 items.

The reason is simple.

As life expectancy increases, people want to remain in their homes with their families, but insurance policies do not always cover all equipment, "especially specialized rehabilitative items," Egan said. "Conditions often deteriorate more quickly than an insurance timeline allows."

Which is where Charlie's Closet comes in.

"If purchased new, the equipment we gave out last year would cost approxi-



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Volunteer Sue Egan unloads a commode donated by David Etzel, of Guilford, at Charlie's Closet in Guilford.

mately \$600,000," said Egan, who attributes her scrupulous record-keeping to her years in IT at AT&T before retiring in 2010.

On the bright side, people often give more money as their budgets allow. "Last year we averaged \$3.64 per piece," she said. "People are generous."

The same, it seems, is true of donations. There were 5,791 last year, from 68 towns, almost a three-fold increase from 2009-10, when Charlie's Closets started keeping stats.

As welcome as they are, the consistent uptick in donations means a few things, according to Egan.

"Word has gotten out," she said. "Our workload has tripled. That makes the work of our 12 volunteers all the more valuable."

This includes Dominick DiNapoli who gives his time to repair equipment. "I just show up and do what's needed," he said on a recent Monday, as Judy Sullivan, a Guilford resident, dropped off a walking boot that her mother no longer needed.

There's also Rich Gressley, whose sole responsibility is to take donations upstairs for sorting, and the women who input data and answer the phone. That day, Guilford's Linda Knudsen Westgard was organizing a collection of walkers and transport chairs that had accumulated over the weekend.

"There's no downtime," Westgard said. "People are constantly coming in to donate or pick up something's that's needed for themselves or a family

member."

The beehive of activity makes financial support essential. There's reliable funding from the town of Guilford and the Guilford Community Fund. The Guilford Rotary also chips in with its annual Lobsterfest.

Other towns, like Madison and Branford, have been "extraordinarily generous," as Egan put it, in helping support specific projects. In February, the Community Foundation of Middlesex County awarded Charlie's Closet a \$2,500 grant for spare parts like rollator brakes, armrests for wheelchairs and feet for canes.

Of course, like any enterprise operating on a shoestring budget, "donations are always welcome for both overhead expenses and specific projects," Egan said.

Not to say she's complaining. "Knowing you're making a positive difference in someone's life," she said, "you can't put into words how rewarding that is."

Charlie's Closet is at 310 State St., Unit 200, Guilford, and is open from 9 a.m. to noon Monday through Friday. Equipment pickups and donations do not need to be made during office hours. For information, visit GIVct/charlies-closet or call 203-453-8359. To make a monetary donation, mail a check to Charlie's Closet or visit GIVct.org.

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Lisa Reisman / For Hearst Connecticut Media

Branford VFW Post 12106 installs officers. 5/11/18

Branford VFW installs officers

BRANFORD — To uphold its mission to perform good works for veterans and their families in need, as well as the less fortunate in the larger community, Branford VFW Post 12106 conducted a ceremony for the installation of officers for the coming year last week at the Post's headquarters on Indian Neck Avenue.

VFW District 2 Cmdr. Stanley Borusiewicz, assisted by District 2 state quartermaster Melvin Hewston, swore in Elliott Hastings as the post's commander, along with Ed Masotta as senior vice commander and adjutant, Roy Dunn as quartermaster, Tim Lindblad as

chaplain, Gary Tercyak as judge advocate, Rich Dunn as surgeon and trustee, Mike Oliverio and Bob Russell as trustees, and Frank Stanowski as service officer.

Members have served in various conflicts, including World War II, Korea, Vietnam and Afghanistan.

"We're always looking for members, and membership is key to helping us continue the work we do in the community," said Hastings during the festivities that followed, noting that the Post meets on the first Thursday of each month at 99 Indian Neck Ave.

— Lisa Reisman