

## Northeast Kingdom Community Action (NEKCA)

NEKCA is an anti-poverty agency that serves the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont. The Northeast Kingdom is the poorest part of Vermont. It has the highest unemployment rate, the lowest health outcomes in the state, and about one in four people who live here are on Food Stamps. Upwards of 60-70% of kids in the Kingdom qualify for free school lunch.

A livable wage to afford a two bedroom apartment in Orleans County is \$13.10 per hour; Caledonia County is \$ 14.67 and Essex County is \$15.87. The minimum wage is far below that. Many of the low income people that NEKCA serves are working but are having a very hard time making ends meet.

NEKCA works with other non-profits and the business community to fight poverty. It is primarily funded by grants from the federal and state government and donations and private sector sponsors. It serves low income people as its primary focus. It has prevention programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start that provides child care and school readiness skills to kids from age birth to five years old. It has two parent child centers to help mainly single parents get off of welfare through job coaching, training and education. NEKCA provides emergency fuel and housing assistance, youth services, court diversion services, tax return services, micro business services and transitional housing for those coming out of Vermont's correctional system to return home to the Kingdom. It provides emergency food from its food shelves for the hungry regardless of income.

NEKCA believes that the way out of poverty is to aspire to higher education regardless of whether it is college, certificate or vocational education. Higher education equals higher income equals better health outcomes equals out of poverty.

The following is NEKCA's vision statement.

Vermont strong can mean many things. Recently, it meant that we have come together as a community to support each other in the face of natural catastrophe. We became an 'us' community, not a 'me' community when we had each other's back in the face of Irene. Now we need to take the same meaning when it comes to building a community together that faces another catastrophe. That catastrophe is poverty and all of what it means and brings to our community. It isn't the same type of catastrophe as Irene. It is more insidious and long term and leads to suffering, crime, and degradation of our fellow Vermonters' human dignity who find themselves in it.

Poverty hurts everyone. Because we share the same streets, the same air, schools, stores, roads, dreams and hopes, we are all part of the same community. The quality of our community can be defined by the extent of poverty in it; if any individual or family is minimized by suffering from poverty, we are all.

So we must work very hard together to build an 'us community'. Every Vermonter has the right to food, warmth and shelter. We must take the leadership as individuals and community to help those in poverty, to treat them with respect, and work together to build a community that has no poverty, where people can thrive, children can grow without hunger and fear, and where Vermont is *that* strong in its vision and generosity.