



The Diaper Bank of Connecticut

Creating Change From the Bottom Up

by **AMY J. BARRY** / photography by **TONY BACEWICZ**

When we think of diapers, we think of babies – cuddly, innocent, in need of protection.

We may not put diapers on the same hierarchy of basic needs as food, water, shelter, and safety from harm, even though they belong there.

We may not realize that many poor and low-income families struggle to afford a satisfactory supply of this basic requirement to keep their infants and toddlers clean, dry, and healthy because diapers are so expensive.

An adequate supply of diapers can cost more than \$100 a month and is not covered by such government

assistance as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (previously known as food stamps) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (known as WIC).

Luckily for New Haven, and the entire state of Connecticut, there's The Diaper Bank.

Founded in 2004 as The New Haven Diaper Bank by Joanne Goldblum, a social worker with the Yale Child Study Center, it began as a small grassroots organization that identified and tackled a huge problem for underserved families in the city.

While doing home visits, Goldblum was surprised to find that some families were reusing disposable diapers



Natasha Ray, core services manager for New Haven Healthy Start, a partner member of The Diaper Bank (left) with Janet Stolfi Alfano, The Diaper Bank's executive director. Photo by Tony Bacewicz

because they couldn't afford to purchase the amount they needed and still pay the rent and other critical expenses.

"She hadn't realized diapers weren't covered by food stamps, anything, the unfairness of it all, and had the realization that she could be a catalyst for someone having their child taken away because they didn't have the money to buy the things they needed to keep their families safe and healthy," says Janet Stolfi Alfano, the Diaper Bank's executive director. "It was a problem on so many levels."

"Goldblum got friends together to purchase diapers at the local BJ's in New Haven," Alfano continues, "and asked several local organizations if they would be willing and able to distribute them to the families they served. Once a month, five organizations would show up at Goldblum's house in New Haven and get the diapers they needed. It was as grassroots as it gets."

Alfano came on board as operations manager in 2007 and became executive director in 2011. Goldblum went on to become executive director of the National Diaper Bank Network.

Renamed The Diaper Bank of Connecticut, to date, the nonprofit (with a paid staff of just three, a board of directors and about 40 regular volunteers) has distributed more than 22 million diapers to Connecticut families through its nationally-recognized Diaper Distribution Network, working together with individuals, organizations, and agencies across the state.

THREEFOLD MISSION

Alfano stresses that providing diapers to families in need is about one-third of The Diaper Bank's threefold mission. It does this by receiving donations and dispensing them to its partner organizations from its North Haven distribution center, primarily by individuals in ACES vocational services program, as well as volunteers from high schools, church groups and other organizations.

The other two-thirds of its mission is to raise awareness that "basic human needs" include diapers and are not being met for children living in poverty, and to advocate for policy reform to include diapers in the definition of and provision for the "basic human needs" of families.

Along these lines, Alfano notes The Diaper Bank is proud to have led the effort that, in Connecticut, will exempt diapers from state sales tax, helping to reduce their cost.

Cloth and disposable diapers for both children and older adults were exempted from taxes under the clothing exemption for many years. But when clothing became taxable in 2011 adult diapers were moved under the medical



The Diaper Bank is tackling a huge problem for underserved families in the region. Check out Pat Lore's online video story by following Seasons Magazines on YouTube.

A member of ACES Vocational Services Program helps package diapers to be dispensed to The Diaper Bank's partner organizations at the North Haven distribution center. Photo by Tony Bacewicz

exemption, while baby diapers became taxable.

Although the medical needs and issues are different for babies than adults, Alfano points out, "The health issues of having an adequate supply of diapers are the same: to control disease and keep people healthy and dry. We advocated for both diapers and feminine hygiene products [to be tax-exempt] and the repeal is set to take effect July 1. We're holding our breath," she says.

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Another proud moment for The Diaper Bank was a report published in March by the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis at UCONN. The study, done in 2016, highlights the many positive social and economic impacts of The Diaper Bank – for both families and the state.

Natasha Ray is a Diaper Bank of Connecticut board



A series of posters on the wall in The Diaper Bank makes it very clear why it's so important to provide low-income families with an adequate supply of diapers. Photo by Tony Bacewicz

member and core services manager for New Haven Healthy Start, a nationwide initiative with a community-driven approach to infant mortality and racial disparity. The agency is one of 50 partner members of The Diaper Bank. Ray is very happy about the findings in the report.

“It’s part of our mission in terms of raising awareness,” Ray says. “It has a collective impact on so many levels: on an individual level, on the economy and state, and on families in their work. It also lends itself to the opportunity for additional funding. When you’re asking for money, for your work to be supported, funders want to know what is the issue, what have you done, and what are you doing now? All of that is encompassed in this report.”

She adds: “We’re targeting the most vulnerable population, ensuring that these babies start with a good chance at life by preventing health risks for them now. They’re our future.”

COVERING THE BOTTOM END

The Diaper Bank is able to reach so many families in need in a variety of ways that include two big annual events taking place in New Haven: the Shamrock ‘n’ Roll Road Race in March and the Rock Your Baby

fundraiser and celebration in September.

The Diaper Bank also receives federal funding through an Early Head Start partnership grant.

“We are the only diaper bank in the nation which is actually written in on that grant,” Alfano notes.

Large numbers of Huggies® diapers are also donated.

“[Huggies® parent company] Kimberly-Clark works with the National Diaper Bank Network to donate 20 million diapers a year to diaper banks across the country, including ours,” Alfano says. “It’s a significant and amazing partnership. We also have the ability to purchase Huggies diapers for a considerable discount, even less than we were paying when we were using diapers of lesser quality.”

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Faith Evans was born in New Haven and has lived in the city most of her life. She’s a security guard and mother of four, with children ranging in age from 4 to 16. She received diapers for her two youngest when they were babies, through The Diaper Bank, from the Family Resource Center at the Brennan-Rogers School in New Haven.

“It really helped me out,” she says. “I had a couple



situations when I just couldn't afford to buy diapers, I was out of a job, things like that. It was really important to me because sometimes you only have \$20 and diapers are \$20. It's outrageous how expensive they are."

Evans believes The Diaper Bank plays an important role in helping families in need.

"Programs like this help a lot of families out," she says. "Even with a good job, you may be choosing between a new pair of shoes or diapers. Plus, they're high-quality diapers, which is always a benefit. And if they don't have the size you need, they will call around and try to find it."

Evans also gives kudos to the Brennan Rogers Family Resource Center for making the diapers easy to access.

"You can go pick up the kids at school and pick up diapers at the same time. They're really flexible," she says. "Sometime you're dragging kids on city buses for some of these services."

In addition to providing diapers, Evans says, "The Diaper Bank gives a lot of advice and tips on potty training to get kids out of diapers and that helps all the way around. People don't realize these kids don't come with a handbook. It's

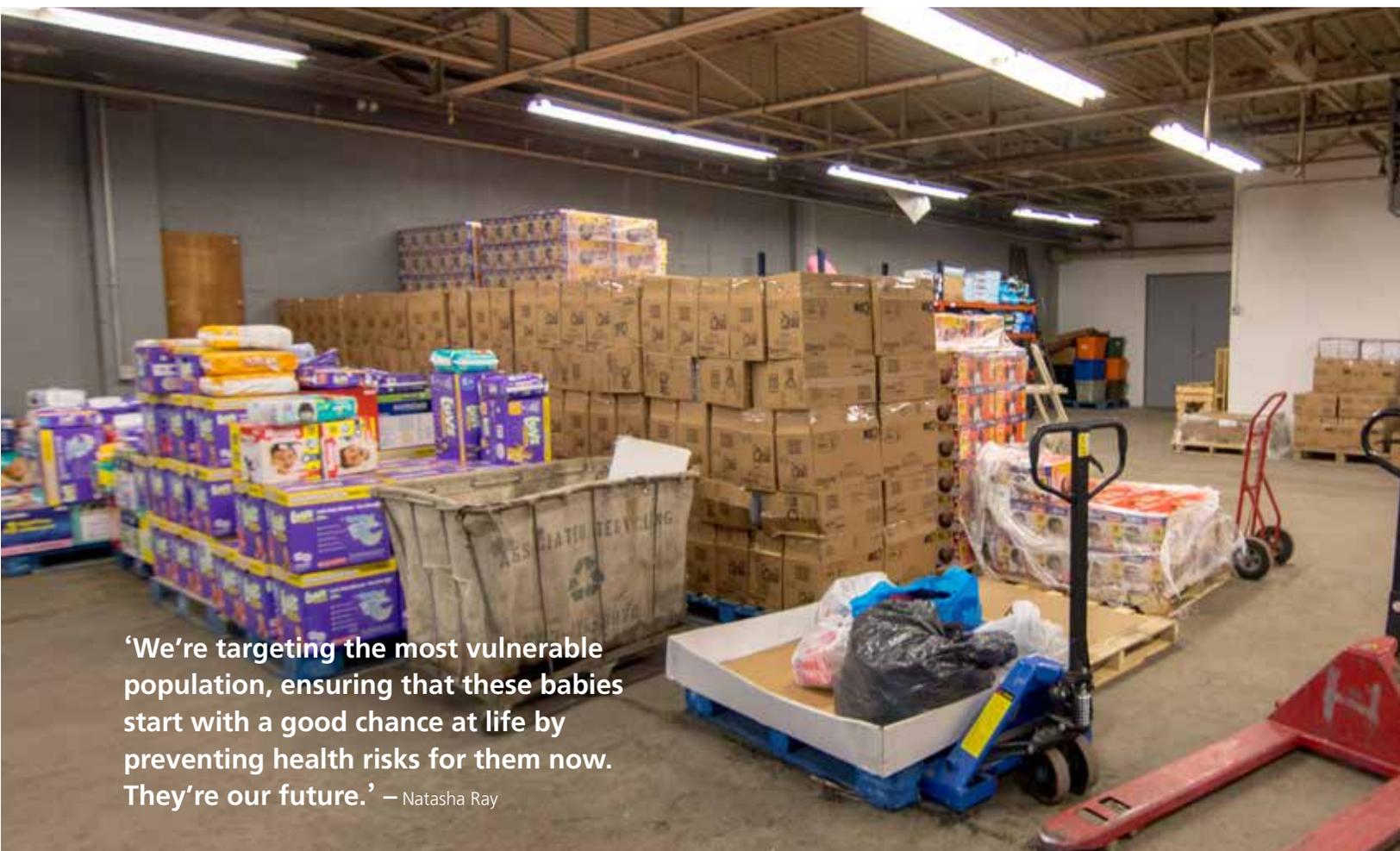
always good to have more information."

She continues: "It's amazing what [The Diaper Bank] is doing. There are just a lot of families in need. They're trying to make sure everyone has access to diapers and that's an overall great thing."

Asked how she copes with the many daily challenges of operating The Diaper Bank, Alfano says the mission makes it worthwhile.

"We're all going full-speed all the time and it can feel overwhelming. You obviously have to have a passion for this work, but I don't look at it as charity. I sort of find that offensive. This is a basic necessity and I'm just doing my job; I get paid," she says. "There is no reason an organization like this should have to exist in the first place. My wish is there's a day when this organization doesn't have to exist."

To make a donation, volunteer or host a diaper drive, visit The Diaper Bank website: www.diaperbank.org or call 203-934-7009. The Diaper Bank is located at 370 State St., North Haven. 



'We're targeting the most vulnerable population, ensuring that these babies start with a good chance at life by preventing health risks for them now. They're our future.' — Natasha Ray

The Diaper Bank's distribution center in North Haven where donations of diapers arrive, are packaged, and dispensed. Photo by Tony Bacewicz