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## Group formed to coordinate local nonprofit services

By BRIAN BREHM The Winchester Star

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A new group has formed in Winchester to collaborate services, improve communications and provide a stronger, unified voice for local nonprofit agencies.

The [Nonprofit Collaborative](#) is an extension of the Nonprofit Advocacy Task Force that assembled in February of last year to seek solutions to the federal funding cuts that originated from President Donald Trump's so-called [Big Beautiful Bill](#).

"I think what we're doing is innovative and it's going to have a profound impact here," said Faith Power, executive director of [The Laurel Center](#) and a member of the collaborative's steering committee.

The 15-member steering committee includes representatives from [The Laurel Center](#), [Concern Hotline](#), the [Congregational Community Action Project \(CCAP\)](#), [AIDS Response Effort \(ARE\)](#), the [Blue Ridge Area Food Bank](#), [I'm Just Me Movement](#), [Literacy Volunteers Winchester Area](#), the [Northern Shenandoah Valley Substance Abuse Coalition](#), [NW Works](#), [Our Health](#), [Sinclair Health Clinic](#), [United Way of Northern Shenandoah Valley](#), [Valley Health](#) and the [Winchester Area Temporary Transitional Shelter \(WATTS\)](#). It also includes Shannon Ganoë, who provides input from the perspective of a frequent volunteer.

On Wednesday morning, members of the steering committee sat down in the Eagle Conference Room on the Our Health campus to discuss the Nonprofit Collaborative's purpose and goals.

"A little over a year ago ... we called some meetings of nonprofit leaders because the climate was changing, federally and on a statewide basis, and there were some challenges that were coming down the road that we were trying to figure out how we would respond to," said steering committee member Rusty Holland, executive director of Concern Hotline in Winchester. "I think there was a lot of mistrust in what was happening around us, so the best thing we could do as community nonprofit leaders was to get together and develop trust and communication between ourselves, and determine how we can best address the needs of the citizens that we serve on a daily basis."

Through the course of those meetings, participants realized that some members of the public believed that the dozens of nonprofits in Winchester were offering overlapping services and were reluctant to work together.

"We felt very strongly that we could dissuade those arguments by being honest and open and transparent about our services, about our programs and about our direction," Holland said. "In order to do that, we came up with a mission, a vision and some values about how we would best address those issues."

According to a media release announcing the collaborative's formation, its mission is "to foster communication, collaboration, thought leadership and shared understanding among nonprofit organizations and community stakeholders in ways that strengthen communities and support a healthy nonprofit ecosystem."

While the Nonprofit Collaborative acknowledges that, in some cases, two or more agencies provide similar services to the community, they say that's necessary because different groups serve different people in different areas of the city. When there are duplicate services from two or more organizations, that indicates there is a high level of need in Winchester.

For example, CCAP Executive Director Andrea Cosans said there are several food pantries in and around Winchester, but that's because 19% of Winchester's population and 17% of Frederick County's struggle to put food on their tables. A single box of groceries that a family of four could pick up from one pantry once a month is not enough to ensure they have sufficient food for a 30-day period, so they need to visit other pantries as well.

"None of us can do it alone," Cosans said about Winchester's nonprofits. "Citizens have needs that are bigger than any one agency can meet, so by collaborating, you end up having a better outcome for each citizen."

Holland said the Nonprofit Collaborative wants to "align and coordinate services in Winchester to create a very effective nonprofit ecosystem." To help with that, members of the organization plan on having regular meetings with City Council members so they'll better understand the need for local nonprofits and the human services they provide.

"We're getting ready to meet with them for the first time in July," Holland said. "Hopefully we can advise the city how best to interface with the nonprofit community. ... It's the first time I've seen a nonprofit group come together like this and meet with the city to help direct them on nonprofits and how we do our business."

"We are going to be honest and transparent and make a good faith effort to build a relationship not just with local government, but with the entirety of the nonprofit community," Power said. "This really is about trying to garner recognition that we are subject matter experts in what we do and we're here to support the local government and the community at large."

Funding and the ability to continue providing services to the community remain major concerns for many of Winchester's nonprofits who have lost federal support, and for organizations like the Sinclair Health Clinic in Winchester, things could get worse. That's because on Jan. 1, anyone aged 19 to 64 who receives Medicaid must spend at least 80 hours a month working, performing community service, receiving job training or attending school. Otherwise, their medical benefits will be cut off.

Mercedes Abbet, executive director of the clinic that provides free and reduced-cost medical services for people with limited incomes, said her organization will continue seeing patients after Jan. 1 but may have to find new funding sources if its Medicaid reimbursements drop.

"Of the 2,700 active patients we have, 80% of them are uninsured as of today," Abbet said.

By participating in the Nonprofit Collaborative, local organizations will be able to easily stay informed about the activities, services and issues affecting Sinclair Health Clinic and Winchester's other nonprofits.

"We work very well and strongly to maintain our missions independently," Holland said, "but there has not been an opportunity that I've seen where the leaders of all of these communities have come together to say, 'You know what? We've got shelter here, we've got food here, we've got clothing here, we've got medical care here, we've got special needs here and we've got mental health here.'"

The Nonprofit Collaborative is open to any nonprofit group in Winchester and representatives from local organizations are invited to attend the collaborative's quarterly meetings, the next of which will be held at 9 a.m. June 17 at [Shenandoah University's Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy](#), on the campus of [Winchester Medical Center](#).

"We just want to serve the people who best need to be served," Holland said.

To learn more about the Nonprofit Collaborative of Winchester and its member organizations, as well as ways to get involved with the group, visit [winchesternonprofitcollaborative.org](http://winchesternonprofitcollaborative.org).

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