



THE BULLETIN

AUTUMN 2023

A Time to Listen

Maine Seacoast Mission

seacoastmission.org

OUR MISSION

Rooted in a history of compassionate service and mutual trust, the Mission seeks to strengthen coastal and island communities by educating youth, supporting families, and promoting good health.

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Administrative Office
6 Old Firehouse Lane
PO Box 600
Northeast Harbor, ME 04662
(207) 288-5097

Downeast Campus
6 Weald Bethel Lane
PO Box 428
Cherryfield, ME 04622
(207) 546-4466

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MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

It's a lot.

Someone recently told me that since Fall of 2022 we have conducted 17 listening sessions in our communities. I will be honest: it was a lot.

Do not get me wrong. Meeting with our communities is never, in itself, "a lot." But the combination of grief and hope, gratitude and concern, dedication and frustration that we heard was. The people in our communities are dealing with *a lot*.

Over the next few pages, you will get an inside look at what our communities are saying about their hopes, fears, and what Maine Seacoast Mission means to them. The headlines probably won't surprise you. They did not surprise us: changing economy, affordable housing, concern for young families, health care, and an abiding appreciation for the Mission. Always that.

The overriding theme, though, is *community*. People love where they live and are committed to making community work for the good of all. Kids on Swan's Island love the quarry and each other. Children in Milbridge love their EdGE teachers and peers. Just *love* them. Seniors in Cherryfield love the spirit of community they feel on the Downeast campus.



Everyone loves the feeling of community on the *Sunbeam*.

In the coming months, we will share our plans in response to what we have heard: how the Mission can get better as an organization, how we might be able to help more, and how you can be a bigger part of it. New volunteer opportunities, doubling down on core programs, and even deeper listening and partnering—they are all on the planning table. One thing will not ever change though: where the Mission is concerned, community comes first.

John Zavodny, President
Maine Seacoast Mission

Cover: Sunbeam Nurse Simone Babineaux and Director of Island Services Douglas Cornman chat with a lobsterman on Matinicus.



A Time to Listen

Frenchboro residents gather on the Sunbeam for a pizza night.

In early March, a crowd of 11 middle school students, their teacher, and a group of island residents gathered in the Swan's Island Library to talk with staff from the Mission. They spoke of their community, what they loved about it, what challenges they saw, and how the Mission could help.

The students enthusiastically shared the things that make up the backbone of their island life—favorite swimming spots, walking in nature, waving at passing neighbors. But they also want more: to play sports with kids from other islands, a gym and a swimming pool in their school, or maybe a larger store or a restaurant. As children often are, they were enthusiastic about what could happen in the future.

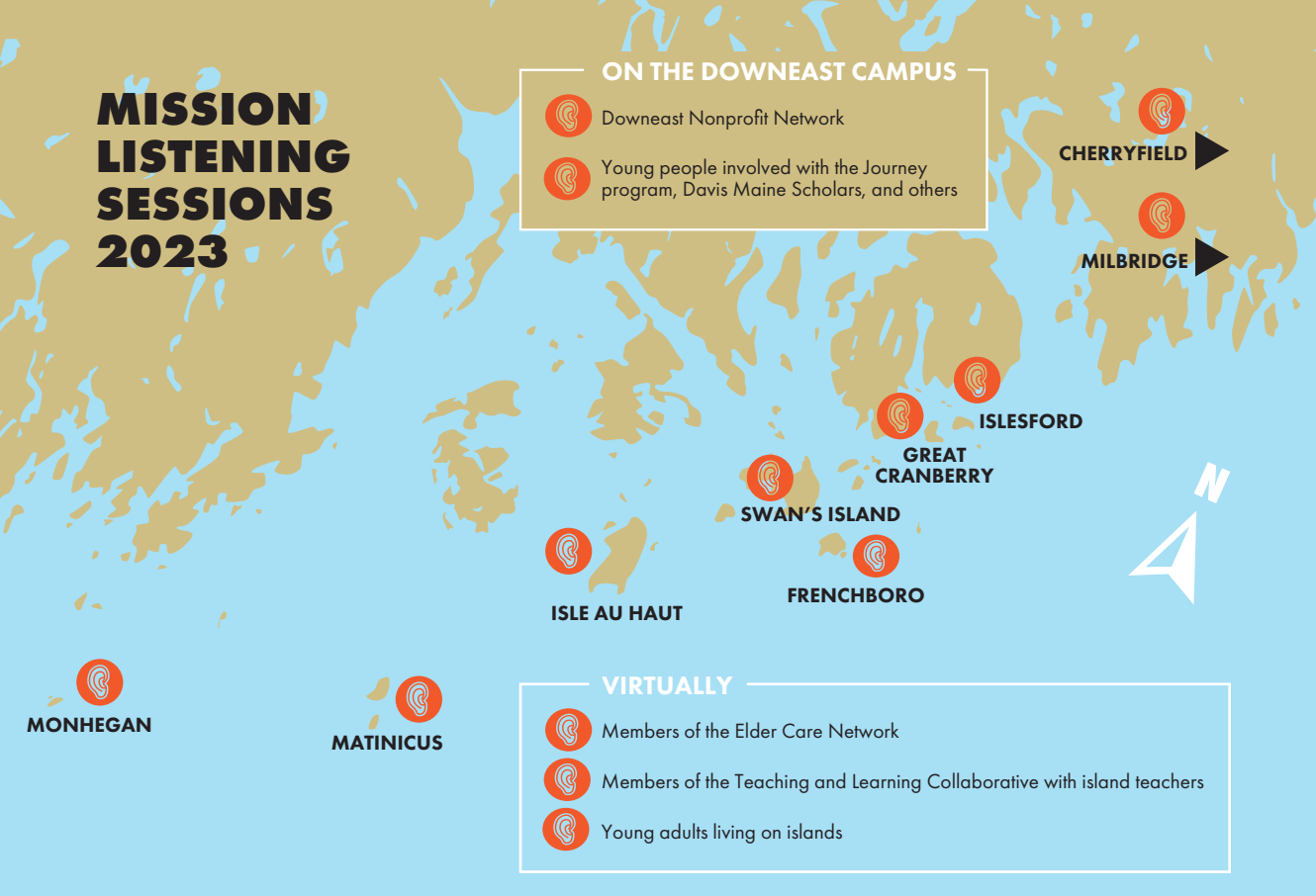
The gathered adults were a little more reserved and concerned; they worried about the challenges to the fishing community and the island's housing crisis. They have seen their year-round community slowly shrink over the years, "Walking on the empty roads, it's like zombie-land."

The event on Swan's Island was one of the 17 listening sessions hosted by the Mission since winter. During Covid, our communities experienced significant disruptions. Similarly, the Mission underwent a refresh with new staff and programs. Emerging from the pandemic, communities are eager to engage. Organizationally, the Mission is in a place of strength which provides an opportune time to work with those communities.

The Mission asked residents on islands and in the Downeast region to think deeply about their communities, any challenges they face, and their thoughts on the Mission's role now and moving forward. Then we listened.

While each community is unique, many answers were the same. People are passionate about their communities. They want to stay in them, especially as they age, but they recognize the challenges ahead. The past few years have changed the world in ways no one could have ever imagined and these rural towns and islands, even the most remote, were not spared. The concerns they had were

MISSION LISTENING SESSIONS 2023



Housing Improvement volunteers work on the stairs of a porch Downeast.

varied but broke down into five key categories: Economic Viability, Change in Community Dynamics, Individual Entrenchment, Affordable Housing, and Stress on Community Systems.

Economic Viability

Some Mission community members make seemingly impossible choices. With less income to work with, they feel the rising cost of goods acutely. Late 2022 and early 2023 saw the end of pandemic-era legislation—such as increased SNAP benefits and housing support—which left some to wonder how to make ends meet.

According to a report from the Maine Governor's Office, nearly one-third of Maine households earn below a living wage. Approximately half of Washington County households earn below the same threshold. Feeding America reports these same residents face the highest level of food insecurity in the state.

Some Mission pantry patrons spoke of choosing to pay a utility bill or purchase food and other necessities. With higher oil prices in winter, some residents opted

for electric heat and saw costly electricity bills and shut off notices come spring.

On islands, economic vitality remains deeply connected to the fishing industry. Traditionally a reliable career, fishing is now in flux. Fishermen face varying prices for their catch, legislation uncertainty, rising sea temperatures, and higher costs for fuel and bait. Attendees to the island-based listening sessions expressed concern for what large industry changes could mean for whole communities depending on a fishery. As one Swan's Island resident put it bluntly, "That's what we are: fishing families." It is clear islanders' personal identities can be tightly tied to the work they do.

Change in Community Dynamics

Many of the attendees of these listening sessions were older, retired or near retirement age. Which is in line with the population of the state as a whole. The average Mainer is 44.8 (the highest in the United States) according to the U.S. Census Bureau and 21.8% of the

population is over 65 (also the highest percentage in the United States). While Maine has had a population growth in the past few years, many communities, especially island communities, are faced with an aging and dwindling year-round population.

When a family or person moves, or someone passes away, it causes a large reverberation throughout a tightknit community, especially if they provided a vital skill. Residents realize they need to attract young people, especially families, to their communities. However, they know there are barriers keeping people from wanting to move into these often remote areas.

While, there is worry that year-round newcomers will change communities they know and love, there is greater concern for homes to sell to summer or seasonal residents who will not contribute fully to the community.

Individual Entrenchment

While Covid drove newcomers to Maine, people at the listening sessions said they

felt the pandemic really upended their sense of community. As one Downeast resident said, "People got in the groove of staying in during Covid. Now it is hard to get them out." Despite a return to something closer to normal, some observe that folks are not as social and are reluctant to engage like they used to. "There has been a real decline in the vitality of the community."

Affordable Housing

A large problem facing Mission communities is the challenge of finding affordable, quality housing. According to a Maine State Housing Authority report, the average house price is considered unaffordable in all Maine counties but Aroostook. Per the U.S. Census, only one-third of Maine homes were built after 1980, with nearly a quarter built before 1940. Older homes may be more affordable, but they are often harder to maintain with higher costs to heat and make improvements.

Maine State Housing Authority also found two-bedroom rentals are unaffordable



Students in EdGE after school in Milbridge smile for the camera.

for the average renter in all communities. This can prevent new or younger residents from being able to establish themselves in a community. As one attendee explained in a listening session, “There is no place to live. We have locked the door to young people.” Some worry if the communities they grew up in will still exist for their children or grandchildren because of this lack of housing.

Stress on Community Systems

Mainers are known for a strong sense of independence, but the pandemic showed our society that we are interconnected. As one long-term islander poignantly explained, “We islanders love to think of ourselves as independent. Are we really? Self-sufficiency is a myth.” Several of the small communities in the Mission’s service area have struggled to maintain the infrastructure required to remain a municipality.

Increased retirements and people moving away has left some organizations understaffed. A story from *The Maine*

Monitor reveals a shortage of mental health professionals has left people traveling long distances for care. Washington County has a single maternity unit after a second provider closed this year, and staffing shortages have left the region with little ambulance coverage. Island EMTs feel the impact too, with one person sometimes serving a whole island population.

Families are affected by these stresses as well. Schools are a key link in community systems and are sometimes struggling to remain vital or even keep the doors open. 20 of the 34 schools in Washington County have fewer than 100 students enrolled. On some islands the number of students enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade is in the single digits. Because of dwindling enrollment, some families now choose to live on the mainland during the school year so their children can develop a stronger peer network.



EdGE students at D.W. Merritt in Addison listen to EdGE Youth Development Coordinator Karen Bailey.

The Mission is There

Listening session attendees may be worried, but they are also hopeful and determined. They want their communities to survive and they know the Mission will offer support, no matter the circumstance. As one resident explained, “Just keep coming to visit us and keep showing up. Showing up means more than you think.” Many expressed their thanks that the Mission offers a neutral space, on both the *Sunbeam* and Mission Downeast campus.

Creating a place where all are welcome has always been a key part of the Mission’s work. By working with individuals and families, the Mission comes to know a community.

Many community members said they saw the Mission as a place where they can go for help and assistance. For island residents, who view the *Sunbeam* as a place they can visit for health care services, they often go to the boat to ask questions and advice before contacting a doctor. Downeast community members

often reach out for resources when they need assistance whether for a leaky roof or help getting food. The Mission often means support when they are struggling, “When hard things happen, the Mission is there.”

But session attendees also see the Mission as a place for hope, especially aboard the *Sunbeam* and through the EdGE program. For residents of islands, the Mission’s boat is a welcome respite, especially in the winter with smaller populations and visitors few and far between. As the *Sunbeam* approaches an island, some residents wait at the dock, ready to wander on to chat with the crew or just grab a cup of coffee. As one islander put it, “We know the Mission cares. It is a part of our community—physically, medically, and emotionally—and we look forward to the *Sunbeam*’s arrival.”

At Downeast listening sessions, attendees said EdGE has been an integral and consistent presence in the community for more than two decades. Tom Absalom and Alahna Roach were some of the first

educators who worked for EdGE and now their children participate in the program. "The Mission has had a profound impact on our lives," they say, "Sometimes it is hard to measure such things, but that is not the case for EdGE. Everyday there is an opportunity to see a young person try kayaking for the first time or learning to trust or even just cracking a smile. These are the things that transform communities, one small step at a time."

Because EdGE offers free programming, parents do not have to choose what to prioritize in the family budget. Caregivers can also work through the afternoon knowing their children have a safe space to grow and learn with classmates. "Being in their own school makes it comfortable for kids," one parent says. Another parent comments, "My kids will

not let me schedule appointments if it means missing EdGE." Through their connection with EdGE, families also learn more about community resources they might not have known about.

Because of its longstanding connections and commitments to these communities, the Mission is valued as an essential partner to the institutions, infrastructure, and people Downeast and on island communities. And the Mission plans to support communities as it always has. Looking to the future, the Mission is determined to remain an inclusive, welcoming place—a tradition since its inception—so long-term residents, newcomers, and the next generation continue to engage and ensure their communities thrive. 🌱

Welcome

NEW BOARD MEMBER



HENRY C. LEE

Henry is a retired banking executive, who most recently worked at BNP Paribas. His family has deep ties to the Sorrento area, and he now splits his time between Williamstown, MA and Sorrento. Henry says that "The Mission has a unique, thoughtful, and long-standing history of supporting Downeast Maine coastal communities. I am honored to be included in furthering the positive impact of its work."

A graduate of Williams College and the Wharton School of Business, Henry spent more than 40 years working with various investment and banking companies in both the United States and abroad. Henry previously served as Chairman of the Board of Trustees and Chairman of the Board of Deacons at the Community Congregational Church in Short Hills, NJ and served on the board of the Short Hills Club.

Update: MISSION DOWNEAST PROJECT



A student participating in the Marion Kane Leadership program on the Downeast campus pauses on the ropes course.

This past summer, Mission staff on the Downeast campus could be seen shuffling boxes and stacking furniture in storage pods. "We are preparing for the big build," said Downeast Director Jenny Jones. "Food pantry patrons and community members who frequent our campus are ready for the improved and expanded facilities."

The first phase of a larger set of planned improvements for the Mission Downeast campus will bring needed capital improvements and new features to the 63-acre property in the heart of Washington County. At the head of campus, a revamped administrative building will feature a welcome center that will act as a place where visitors can check-in and receive directions. This building will also include expanded storage and a new addition to house the Mission's food pantry as well as workshop space for Food Security programming.

"To date, the builder has prepped the site, laid a slab, and will begin framing the addition to the existing building in the next few weeks," shares Jenny. The

building is expected to be open to the public by summer 2024.

Other planned improvements to the Mission Downeast campus include a pavilion and new ropes course for EdGE, two new play areas, an upgrade to the property's trail system, a marked pedestrian path along Weald Bethel Lane, and retreat cabins for programming near the Weald Bethel Community Center. These improvements to the campus will allow the Mission to provide expanded services for Downeast residents.

President John Zavodny says, "The vision for a renewed Mission Downeast campus really began in pre-pandemic community planning sessions. These upgrades will help build community, support families, and foster growth in young people Downeast. We are excited to have ground broken and be making good progress." 🌱

For information about how you can support the Mission Downeast project, please contact Director of Development Erica Hutchinson at (207) 801-6009 or ehutchinson@seacoastmission.org.

Update: FOOD SECURITY

Every month, Food Security Program Coordinator Megan Smith sees more people coming through the pantry's doors. Everyone from families and single older adults to younger adults in their early 20s and couples without children, are signing up to use the pantry and are visiting more frequently. "We are hearing from patrons that with the continued elevation in food prices, they need more support in offsetting the cost of food," says Downeast Director Jenny Jones.

The pantry began this year by increasing its hours to Tuesday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Before it had been open just eight hours a week. If patrons cannot come during those hours, Megan works with them to set up alternative times. This along with the Mission's pantry being a choice pantry—meaning patrons can take what they want—gives people more agency to make the choices that work for them.

The other big change this year was the pantry's temporary move to the EdGE Center in June. With construction starting in the summer on the old food pantry and administrative building, the Mission wanted to ensure food security services were not interrupted. Community members like that they can still sit and chat with Megan and volunteers. They also appreciate the larger space that allows for easier browsing, something that the new pantry will have. Because the EdGE Center continues to be used for its normal education programming, the Mission's partner organizations are assisting with storage space solutions, as well as increasing need. Good Shepard Food Bank changed its delivery schedule to make weekly instead of biweekly deliveries and the Mission is continuing to find new ways to meet this increased need. 🌱

Learn more about the work of the Mission's Food Security program at seacoastmission.org/foodsecurity.



In 2022, the Mission's food pantry distributed

578,427 pounds of food to community members, which translates into roughly

192,809 meals, or

6 meals for each Washington County resident



A Sigma Kappa Sorority volunteer helps stock food in the pantry.

Welcome NEW STAFF MEMBERS



CHRISTY OLIVERI, ED.D

Christy joined the Mission this summer as the EdGE Secondary and Post-Secondary Program Director. This position manages high school and college programming, which includes Journey, Davis Maine Scholarship, and Mission Scholarships. Christy shares, "All of these programs are about increasing not only aspirations after high school, but also helping students access and succeed in higher education. They provide so many possibilities to youth in Downeast Maine. I grew up in Maine, and I wish I had access to some of these programs myself."

Christy was previously the Associate Dean of Student Success at Eastern Maine Community College where she led the college's accommodation and disability services, counseling and advising programs, as well as residence life. In addition, she managed the college's TRIO program, which provides services to students who are first-generation, income-eligible, or have a disability. The goal of TRIO is to increase collegiate retention and graduation rates of participants. Prior to moving back to Maine, Christy spent 15 years working at colleges on the West Coast.



SALLY CLINTON

As the new Chief People Officer, Sally oversees the Mission's human resources department focusing on professional development, planning, assessment, and volunteer and community relations. "The Mission's commitment to being a learning organization, supporting wellness for staff, and nurturing a positive, inclusive, and empowering culture in the organization and beyond is inspiring and exciting," Sally says. "It is an honor to join the Mission and I am excited to support the team."

With more than 20 years of experience working as a human resources and systems specialist in the nonprofit sector, Sally was a nonprofit consultant, owned a wellness studio, and was a Transformational Life and Health Coach on the Blue Hill peninsula. Through her business she offered coaching on time management, communication, leadership skills, self-care, wellness, and healthy living both online and in-person. Sally founded and ran a nonprofit in Pennsylvania for almost ten years, gaining wide-ranging experience in all aspects of human resources and nonprofit management.



No matter how hard times get,

the Mission will be there, helping sustain and strengthen families and communities. Please join us. Your donations bring warmth when it is cold, shed light where it is dark, and give strength when burdens grow heavy.

To learn more about supporting our work through donations, sponsorships, volunteerism, and more, please visit our website seacoastmission.org.

Donations may be made at seacoastmission.org/donate.



A knitter works on a piece for the Mission's Christmas Program.

Knitting and Crocheting with a Mission

Last year, knitters and crocheters sent more than 3,000 items to be included with each Christmas present given by the Mission. While it is not clear when the first knitted item was included with the Mission's iconic white parchment paper wrapped packages tied with red string, it has been a tradition for at least decades if not for more than a century.

This year, the Mission created an exhibition for the Great Harbor Maritime Museum featuring selections from our archives. Included in the show were a pair of knitted mittens made by Alice Carter. Alice spent the first six years of her life living on Mark Island, off Stonington, with her grandparents.

Her grandfather was the lighthouse keeper on the island from 1923 to 1935, and every year she received a gift from the Mission: an article of clothing, a toy, and an orange. Later in life, she would take up knitting, making sure to set aside a few items to go to the islands on Christmas.

Alice was one of the countless knitters and crocheters who send mittens, hats, and lap blankets to the Mission's "North Pole" in Cherryfield. Some include notes, like one from a knitter's family that shared she had passed away, but she wanted to make sure everything made it in time for Christmas. There are also notes that share the stories of generations of families making items for the Mission.

And while mittens might not be at the top of most kids' wish lists today, they often end up being an unexpected treasure. Douglas Cornman, Director of Island Services, says many times kids overlook the toys and go straight for their new hat and mittens. "It amazes me when they do this. They love their new hat and mittens and want to know how Santa knew their favorite color. Their wonder and amazement helps to keep the magic of Christmas alive." 🧶

Information adapted from Maine Seacoast Mission's Beacons of Hope exhibition at the Great Harbor Maritime Museum.



11,277
gifts were distributed
to **1,533**
individuals throughout
Washington County
as well as on outer,
unbridged islands



3,000+
knitted items were
donated by knitters
and crocheters from
across the country

Update: ISLAND HEALTH

After a little more than six months on the job, *Sunbeam* Nurse Simone Babineaux has found her sea legs. She has gotten to know the island communities, met with residents, and learned more about how she can best serve them.

Simone discovered residents wanted to know more about the resources available to them from mainland providers as well as adjacent services including hospice and support groups. Islanders also want the opportunity to see specialists and doctors without having to leave their island. To meet this need, together with Director of Island Services Douglas Cornman and Island Services Program Coordinator Margaret Snell, Simone is working to bring specialists to the island on the *Sunbeam* as well as scheduling informational programs both in-person and virtually on Zoom.

Earlier this year, the Mission hosted a community health fair on Isle au Haut. The event brought together ten organizations that offer support services to the area.

During the day, representatives met with island residents and learned more about the work the Mission does.

This fall, the *Sunbeam* will bring Ann Backus, Director of the Outreach Program at the Education and Research Center for Occupational Health and Safety at Harvard, out to three islands. She will be offering fishing and lobstering safety presentations. On previous *Sunbeam* visits, she has talked about second chance ladders, rope safety, bacterial infections, survival suits, and environmental exposures. Dr. Timothy Oh, a dentist from Caring Hands of Maine, will be traveling to Frenchboro and Isle au Haut to offer dental services. Caring Hands of Maine offers low-cost and no-cost services and has portable dentist chairs that will be brought out to each island.

In addition to in-person services, there will also be a six-part series of virtual talks starting this October about everything from well-water testing to legal services for Mainers residing on unbridged islands. 🌊



Sunbeam Nurse Simone Babineaux does a blood pressure check on the Sunbeam.

Thank you

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Through their generosity and the generosity of all of our donors, the Mission can help sustain and strengthen families and communities.

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We wish to thank each sponsor for believing in the thriving communities the Mission seeks to assist on Maine's islands and Downeast coastline. Become a sponsor for our organization and create a customized package to best fit your organization's goals.

To learn more about corporate sponsorship opportunities, please contact Development Operations Associate David Snyder at dsnyder@seacoastmission.org or by calling (207) 801-6010.



P.O. Box 600
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Save the date

THURSDAY, AUGUST 15, 2024

MAINE SEACOAST MISSION

Sunbeam Award Gala

5:00pm Cocktails **6:00pm** Program **7:00pm** Dinner

AT THE BAR HARBOR CLUB