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## WOMEN HELPING WOMEN



A number of Cape organizations are not only helping to empower women with workforce training, educational opportunities and mentoring programs, but they are also offering support for those who want to be more civically involved or run for local office.

By Marina Davalos

**S**everal years ago, Penelope Duby experienced a life-changing event. A car pulled up in front of her house and a woman got out and came to her door. She was out delivering pizzas, and she was lost. After talking with Duby about the street addresses, the woman said, "I better get going. I'm afraid I'll lose my job."

"That experience stuck with me," says Duby, "that this gray-haired woman should be scared of losing her job as a pizza delivery person. I thought, there's got to be something we can do."

*Penelope Duby, sitting in the front seat at right, rides a bus to Boston with local activists to the women's march in January 2017. Photo from [Cape Cod Women For Change](#).*

This chance encounter inspired Duby to start [SWIFT](#), which stands for Supporting Women in Financial Transition. SWIFT's mission is to raise awareness of the needs of women age 45 and older for information, educational opportunities, workforce training, housing and human services.

Recent SWIFT workshops have included Medicare, budgeting, banking and salary negotiation. "We can help women identify their personal value, what a woman's target salary can and should be," says Duby. "Massachusetts is one of the best states as far as the wage gap is concerned—women make 80 percent of what men make," she says. But there is still work to be done, adds Duby. The organization is one of many groups on the Cape assisting and advocating for women.

Communities are being challenged to find realistic, sustainable solutions that help women and their families thrive on the Cape. According to Housing Assistance Corporation's (HAC) chief executive officer, Alisa Magnotta Galazzi, 85 percent of HAC's clients are women. "That's because they've suddenly become head of household, without the financial means," says Galazzi, adding that the No. 1 cause of homelessness on the Cape is domestic violence.

"It's OK to say, 'I need help,'" says Duby, who in 2017 was presented the Cornerstone Award from the Barnstable County Human Rights Commission for her work with SWIFT and [Cape Cod Women for Change](#). There are several local organizations that work with women in immediate crises, including [WE CAN](#) and [Independence House](#).

Supporting women in transition is the cornerstone of WE CAN, which stands for Women's Empowerment through Cape Area Networking. No matter what the transition, WE CAN's volunteers provide services from work support to legal counseling. "Our focus is on empowering women to advocate for themselves," says

Pamela Kukla, president of WE CAN's board of directors. Programs at WE CAN include the 10-month PathMaker mentoring program and a six-month GROW group that meets once a month focusing on professional development. One-on-one support is offered in areas such as debt consolidation, subsidized housing and finding work.

*WE CAN, which stands for Women's Empowerment through Cape Area Networking, organizes a bicycle team every year to ride in the Last Gasp fundraiser. Photo from WE CAN's [Facebook page](#).*

"We want to stress that WE CAN is here for everyone," says executive director Andi Genser. "We all need help going through change at some point in our lives."

Women helping women is how Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director of Independence House in Hyannis, describes that organization's founding in the 1980s. "Independence House started as two women and a phone in a basement," she says. "A hotline was the first service. Really that's all it was—just women helping women. It wasn't even thought of as a 'service.'" Independence House has developed many programs since its inception, including a safe home network for women who need to flee their homes. "Not everyone has family here they can go to," says Hurge-Putnam, adding that even leaving a dangerous environment doesn't necessarily guarantee freedom. "So we offer ongoing support. We have a court advocacy staff that will help women through the often-intimidating court process."

*Lysetta Hurge-Putnam, executive director  
of Independence House. Photo by Kim  
Roderiques.*

While individual help is necessary in times of a crisis, there are also opportunities for women to make bigger changes in their communities. Issues range from housing, income equality, healthcare and childcare. These are not exclusively "women's

issues," but are now being more focused with respect to a woman's point of view, and how policy positively or negatively affects women and children, according to Liz Rabideau, chair of the [Cape Women's Coalition](#).

Like SWIFT, the Cape Women's Coalition offers support for women who want to be involved in public policy, whether it is as simple as writing to elected officials or testifying at a local commission, being appointed to a town committee or running for office. Founded in 2012, the goal of the Cape Women's Coalition is to increase the number of women in civic engagement and leadership positions in local, regional and statewide public office. The coalition hosts monthly roundtable breakfasts at the Optimist Cafe in Yarmouth Port, which seek to engage women through discussions on everything from understanding county government to writing effective letters to the editor.

"We wanted to demonstrate that it's not hard to be involved," says Rabideau. Every year on International Women's Day in March, the organization holds an International Women's Day breakfast, open to the public, to raise women's awareness of their power to affect positive change in their communities. "Our sole interest is if a woman wants to run for local office, be appointed to a town committee, or just be more civically involved, we support her," says Rabideau. "We know that having more women at the table can change the conversation."