The beginning of the new year 2016 also marked the beginning of the West Haven Community House’s 75th anniversary year, and many Community Connections clients and staff were in attendance at the 75th anniversary kick-off event held on Jan. 25 at the Elm Street auditorium. Our mayor, former mayors, state legislators, past executive staff and many other notables and special guests were on hand to mark the occasion.

Among the special guest speakers was Janice Fuentes, a high-achieving client in our Day program who told the audience about her three jobs including serving as a house-keeper at Olive Garden restaurant and the Community House, and as well as serving as a Client Advocate in the Community Connections program. After telling the audience what she does at each job, she added that she could not have done it without the support and services she receives from the WHCH staff. Janice is currently working with clients and families on the continuing threat to services that potential funding cuts may have. At her next Client Advocacy Meeting in March, Janice will be discussing how to write letters to local legislators so that the individuals who need services will continue to receive them with proper funding.

In what has become an annual holiday season event, both DSO and SMILE program participants spent December 15 visiting the hallowed halls of the governor’s mansion in Hartford. Each holiday season the mansion is colorfully decorated, and accepts visitors to share tea and cookies with Mrs. Claus.

The Governor’s residence is the official home of the governor of Connecticut and is located at 990 Prospect Avenue in Hartford. It was built in 1909, and was altered substantially in 1916 with the addition of north and south wings.

The 19-room, 15,000-sf home sits on four acres and was acquired by the state in 1943.
The holidays are a time for sharing and giving

SMILE participants and staff celebrated its first annual winter holiday party on December 22 at Lorenzo’s restaurant in West Haven. Staff and clients were treated to a 3-course sit-down meal with coffee and dessert included. Even the very heavy rain of the day could not dampen the spirit and fun of the occasion. Individuals could not contain their smiles as gifts were exchanged, with everyone being thrilled with the surprises, which included old-time favorite TV game shows such as The Price is Right, along with other 70s television favorites including such classics as Emergency, Bonanza and even Mork & Mindy. A great time was had by all.

On Dec. 21, the Residential program held its holiday gathering at the Greek Olive in New Haven. The sit-down dinner event was a huge success with residents, who were able to participate in a gift exchange, socialize with their peers and enjoy the holiday celebration with staff.

Day program cruises into winter break with day of fun

What better way to head into the winter break than with a day-long celebration on December 23. Participants at our Campbell Avenue location spent the day watching their favorite holiday classics, completing homemade gifts, such as ready-to-bake cookie jars and ornaments, and just plain enjoying the spirit of the season. A luncheon of ziti and meatballs was featured, and included salad & bread, as well as everyone’s favorite ice cream for dessert. A fun-filled holiday themed Jeopardy game followed lunch, and the rest of the afternoon was spent socializing and having fun.
What better way to learn about the mysteries of our forests, various animals, even Smokey the Bear and fire prevention than to host an official state Forest Ranger from the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (DEEP). The Ranger visited our Community Connections Day program in November 2015.

In his presentation, the Forest Ranger answered several questions about the forest and what a Forest Ranger does for the environment and the community. He answered questions about the many animals that are local to the area and also how members of the general public can assist in maintaining their natural forest habitat while also enjoying the great parks and hiking paths open to the public in Connecticut, an activity that Community Connections staff and clients avidly pursue, weather permitting.

One area of interest was that of forest fires and how one can prevent them. Connecticut traditionally experiences high forest fire danger in the Spring from mid-March through May, the Forest Ranger noted. DEEP’s Division of Forestry constantly monitors the danger of forest fire to help protect Connecticut’s 1.8 million acres of forested land.

Throughout the Spring forest fire season, DEEP sends daily advisories on forest fire danger levels to DEEP’s state park forest field staff, municipalities, fire departments and the media. Forest fire danger levels are classified at low, moderate, high, very high or extreme. In an average year approximately 500 acres of Connecticut woodland are burned by forest fires.

Our DSO program participants, including Carlos, Jamie and Theresa, enjoyed this interactive question-and-answer visit with SMILE program participants Virginia, Tallance, Sandy, Joyce and Robert.

As the new year – 2016 – began, we also welcomed Jonathan St. John to our program. John spent his initial days getting use to his new environment and soon thereafter staff was pleased to report that he is progressing well. Everyone looks forward to continuing to foster John’s level of independence within the Day services environment.

The Community Connections program continues to grow with three additional clients, Matthew Conlan, Lawrence Petroski and Jill Bree, receiving services beginning in February 2016.

Mark is also fond of testing the waters. He enjoys music and talking out loud and Mark has been entertaining his peers with his wit and charm. Programmatically, Mark is being challenged to achieve a higher level of independence both in and out of his wheelchair, and staff is proud to report that Mark is making progress. The Community Connections program is happy to have Mark part of the family, and look forward to his many achievements.

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Annual Halloween Party

Who doesn’t like to dress up at Halloween, not to mention enjoy some good food and dancing? All hands would be raised in agreement from among the Day and Residential program participants, plus friends, who gathered together in October 2015 to celebrate this fun and spooky holiday. This annual event is celebrated each year at the agency’s auditorium on Elm Street and includes DJ, catered dinner and of course a variety of desserts. Several participants, including staff, paired off to dance, while others performed solo on the floor to the music. A good time was had by all.

In the two pictures at left, Tim, far left, and Devan, middle left, practice new skills under the watchful eyes of staff. At right, Mark receives sensory training.