



RECORDER STAFF/PAUL FRANZ

Rabbi Andrea Cohen-Kiener of Temple Israel and Susan Weeks, a Deacon at the 2nd Congregational Church in Greenfield, check out a pile of collected aid for Syria at the 2nd Congregational Church.

Local faith groups sending aid to Syria

By **RICHIE DAVIS**
Recorder Staff

As the death toll continues to mount in the 6½-year-old Syrian war, the Interfaith Council of Franklin County, together with Second Congregational Church of Greenfield and Temple Israel, have joined forces to help women and children in the country.

The project, "Sending Love, Hope and Relief to Women and Children in Syria," aims to fill the equivalent of one large shipping container with goods and supplies and raise \$5,800 to pay to send it to help those trapped in the war-torn country, with help from the nonprofit aid organization, NuDay Syria.

The effort, launched last month began with weekly collection of non-perishable food, hygiene products, new blankets, medical supplies and equipment, clothing, cash, sewing machines and other items, in addition to "letters of love and hope," according to information distributed by the group.

Organizer Charlene Golonka, a member of the interfaith council Second Congregational Church, was inspired to act in response to the "really strong anti-Muslim hatred that seemed to be everywhere" in the aftermath of last year's presidential election.

After meeting Nadia Alawa, NuDay Syria's founding director, at a panel discussion in Northampton in March sponsored by the Valley Syrian Relief Committee, "That kind of started an idea, and we put it together," said Golonka, who approached the council with the project in May.

Alawa, a New Hampshire mother of eight who set up NuDay Syria in 2013 to

alleviate the humanitarian suffering that has taken place since protests against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria were met with a military crackdown, beginning an armed conflict that has caused more than half-million Syrian deaths, with more than 11 million displaced.

The organization, which has sent more than 60 40-foot shipping containers to Syria, is "especially concerned with the plight and vulnerability of displaced Syrian women and girls, whose needs are often overlooked and voices not heard," according to its website. "NuDay Syria advocates for girls and women who now find themselves with no male breadwinners and often have little skills and experience earning and providing for their families."

Alawa will be the speaker at an informational meeting at Second Congregational Church on Oct. 22 at 3 p.m. The event, sponsored by the Interfaith Council, is intended to raise awareness about the war in Syria as well as to answer questions about the humanitarian effort.

Council members and other religious and civic groups will be organizing independently, choosing a time frame, approach and campaign leaders to run their own collection through next May, according to Golonka.

Second Congregational Church, where there was a showing of the Syria-relief documentary, "The White Helmets" in March, hopes to involve a youth group packing the donated goods — including stuffed animals, backpacks, winter coats and more — at the end of this month.

Temple Israel has donated \$600 raised in a recent rummage sale, she said.

The Episcopal Church of Saints James and Andrew plans to collect clothing for

babies during lent, and St. Paul's Lutheran Church plans to collect blankets in February.

"I liked the idea of bringing us all together, working on a common goal," she said. "Imagine Christians, Muslims, Jews and Buddhists working together. It works as a community project."

"With all of the other horrible tragedies that have happened since putting together this project, how do you choose?" Golonka said. "For me, personally, you choose one thing at a time, you put your heart into it and go onto something else."

With a series of airstrikes this week, the International Committee of the Red Cross says 10 hospitals in Syria have been damaged over the past 10 days cutting hundreds of thousands of people from health care. It said Syria is witnessing the worst wave of fighting since government forces captured rebel-held east Aleppo in December, according to the Associated Press.

ICRC said it is alarmed by reports of hundreds of civilian casualties and the destruction of hospitals and schools.

"While recent months had provided some reasons to be hopeful, the return to violence is once again bringing intolerable levels of suffering to wide areas of the country," said ICRC's head of delegation in Syria, Marianne Gasser. "My colleagues report harrowing stories, like a family of 13 who fled Deir al-Zour only to lose 10 of its members to air strikes and explosive devices along the way."

Taken together, these are the worst levels of violence since the battle for Aleppo in 2016, ICRC's statement on Thursday said.

On the Web: www.nudaysyria.net