

The logo features a large, light blue circle containing a dark blue silhouette of the Buffalo Empire State. The text is overlaid on the state silhouette. A vertical orange bar is on the right side of the page.

BUFFALO EMPIRE STATE POVERTY REDUCTION INITIATIVE

Community Outreach and Engagement
Executive Summary

SUMMER 2017

The Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI)

was launched by New York State Governor Andrew Cuomo as an effort to reduce financial hardship in 16 high poverty communities across the state.

As part of this effort in Buffalo, the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County was named convener of the ESPRI steering committee and task force, while the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo was named co-convener. In addition to the CEO of each organization, Mr. Michael Weiner from the United Way and Ms. Clotilde Perez-Dedecker at the Community Foundation, the Steering Committee is comprised of City of Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, NYS Senator Tim Kennedy, and NYS Assembly Member Crystal People-Stokes. The project is also guided by a 28 member Task Force comprised of community leaders, consumers, not for profit organizations, persons living in financial hardship and representatives of various educational, health and business sectors within the community.

Phase I of ESPRI runs from April 2017 to November 2017 and is focused on assembling a plan for reducing financial hardship in the community. A major portion of this planning phase has been robust community outreach. This outreach effort intentionally and strategically sought the voices of community members who have experienced or are experiencing financial hardship as well as those living in high poverty neighborhoods.

Through a series of community forums, community based events, community pop ups, in person and on-line survey collection, more than 900 individuals submitted feedback, totaling roughly 250 hours of time dedicated to providing feedback from the community. This report would not have been possible if not for the generosity of this time and the commitment to improving the city and region on the part of these community members.

What emerged from this feedback is both a complex picture of financial hardship, and a nuanced view of the causes of — and opportunities to address — these interwoven challenges.

By taking a multi-pronged approach, the project team and its consultants sought community input on three primary questions:

What is the current state of the challenges and obstacles that individuals, families and communities face to financial stability?

What are the underlying causes of the financial hardship faced by community members?

What changes need to be made in order to alleviate financial hardship within the community?

Context

More than one third of Buffalo's residents — and one in six of those who live in Erie County — live in poverty, a significant increase in the poverty rate over the last ten years.¹

Despite the city and the region's recent economic resurgence, national trends in the economy and systemic challenges facing those living with financial hardship have prevented widespread benefits from accruing to all of the community's residents.

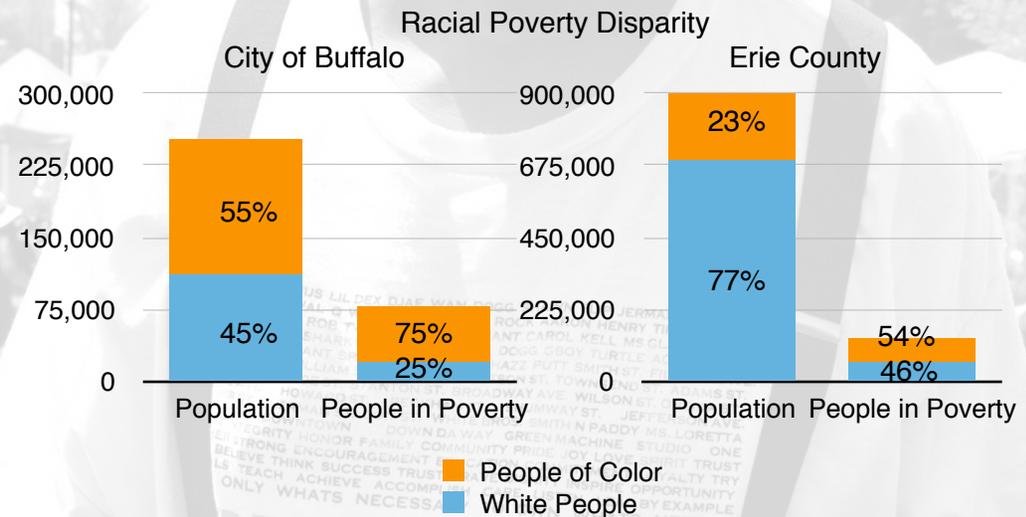
Those living in poverty in the county and in the city are disproportionately women, children and people of color. People of color comprise 55% of the population in the city of Buffalo (23% in the county), but because of the impacts of segregation and systemic disparities, they represent 75% of people in poverty (54% in the county). And though women comprise 52% of the population of the county and the city, they represent 56% of those living in poverty.²

Those living below the official poverty level, however, are not the only residents facing financial hardship. The United Way of Buffalo and Erie County's 2016 Community Report Card on Financial Hardship outlines the challenges that families face in making ends meet, and places the threshold for financial stability (meeting the "household survival budget") for a family of four in Erie County at \$61,548, far above the federal poverty level of \$23,850.

While the outreach component of this initiative was structured to reach community members with experience confronting financial hardship, it was also the goal of this process and this report — by including these voices in the decision making construct — to suggest strategies that are appropriate and applicable to these populations. In attempting to do so, this report also acknowledges the need to set aside normative assumptions about structures, systems and existing responses to poverty that have, to this point, not had their intended or desired impacts of reducing financial hardship and achieving equity for those disproportionately impacted by these challenges.

Finally, it is also the goal of this input summary to open and expand the dialogue with community members about ongoing struggles and potential solutions to poverty and financial hardship. However, this report is a starting point, not an end point. The implementation phase for ESPRI will continue to benefit — and ultimately only be successful — if it continues to pursue ongoing input and engagement from populations who understand these challenges best.

"Those living in poverty in the county and in the city are disproportionately women, children and people of color..."



1 - 33.1% of Buffalo residents live in poverty according to the Census Bureau's 2015 American Community Survey (ACS) 1-year estimates, 2005 ACS estimates placed the city's poverty rate at 26.9%. 2015 ACS 1-year estimates placed the county-wide poverty rate at 15.6% and 2005 ACS placed it at 13.1%.
2 - 2015 ACS 1-year estimates.

Community Input Summary and Themes

Community members provided valuable and varied input through community forums, pop up placards, and surveys.

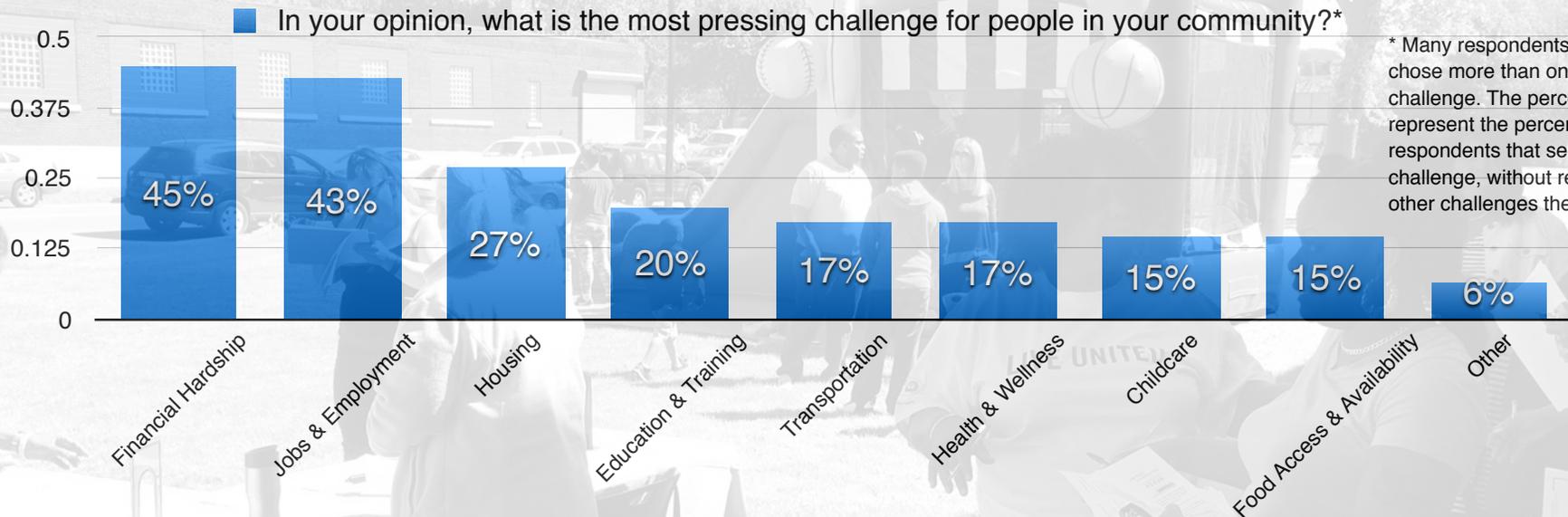
The availability of jobs, the need for more education and training, and the need for higher wages were continual and frequent themes both in the current challenges named by residents and in those items they named as opportunities for change.

Though there were broad variations in the responses within each format, in the aggregate, these factors remained relatively consistent throughout. Taken together, these can be seen as the trifecta of financial opportunity cited by participants. In scale, these factors far outweighed others when participants cited both root causes *and* changes needed for financial opportunity. Though housing was frequently cited as a pressing challenge, far fewer participants viewed this as a root cause of financial hardship.

In this way, themes of education, jobs and wages operate within a context that creates challenges for steady work and career development. Respondents lifted up the increased barriers that exist across a spectrum of food, shelter, health and family care, discrimination and social supports.

Higher percentages of survey respondents in households making less than \$35,000 per year reported barriers to employment within their household in every category or challenge listed in the survey (from formal education to health problems / disabilities to lack of web access; see chart on page 6) than those respondents in households making \$50,000 or more annually. These barriers, then, must be tackled along side strictly economic issues to create opportunities for community members to advance beyond financial hardship.

Overlapping challenges suggest that reducing poverty will take a systemic and multi-faceted effort that considers education and training, job development, wage increases, affordable housing, reducing segregation and discrimination, rethinking land use and transportation frameworks, additional family supports, social service reform and more.



* Many respondents to the paper survey chose more than one pressing challenge. The percentages shown here represent the percentages of respondents that selected the named challenge, without regard to how many other challenges they cited.

Barriers to Opportunity

According to participants, there are notable barriers to be overcome to achieve equitable opportunity for education, job access and advancement.

Housing

More respondents flagged housing as a pressing challenge in their community than education and training. More than one in four respondents cited housing as a pressing challenge, though only 2% cited it as a root cause of financial hardship. Rising rents and housing prices were among the major concerns, with many participants (64% of those in households earning less than \$25,000 annually) expressing worries about paying rent and utility bills (68% of the same cohort which were seen as increasingly burdensome). Rising demand and rising real estate speculation in many neighborhoods is exacerbating housing challenges, as is a perceived lack of accountability for landlords.

Transportation

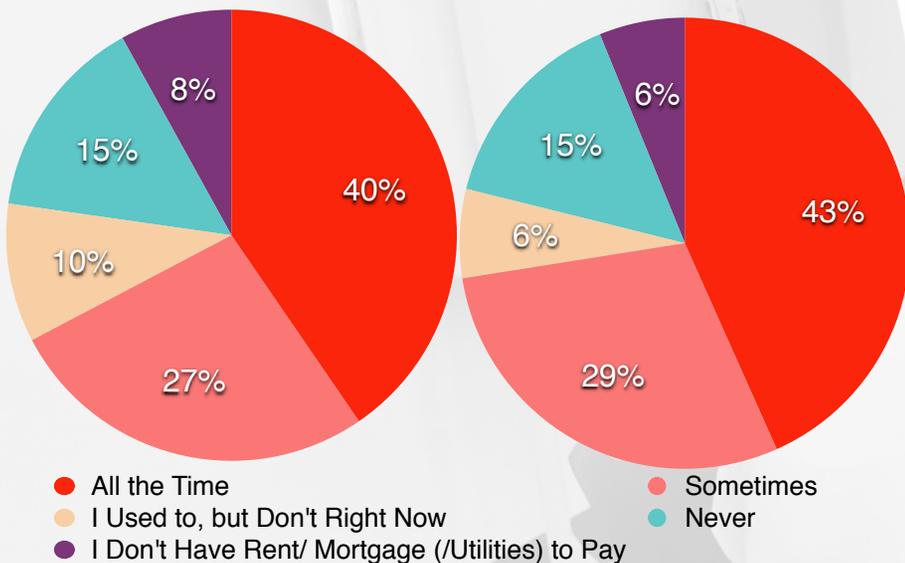
Transportation was seen as only the 5th most pressing challenge by survey respondents for their communities and was cited by only 2% of respondents as a root cause of poverty and inequity, yet: 32% of survey respondents from households earning less than \$25,000 annually reported that lack of transportation at some point prevented them from applying for, accepting or maintaining a job; however, this challenge dropped to 4% for households making \$50,000. 16% of respondents in households earning less than \$25,000 said lack of transportation had prevented them from getting a child in their care to school; however, this dropped to 1% for households making \$50,000+.

Survey Respondents in Households with Incomes <\$25,000 (n=382):

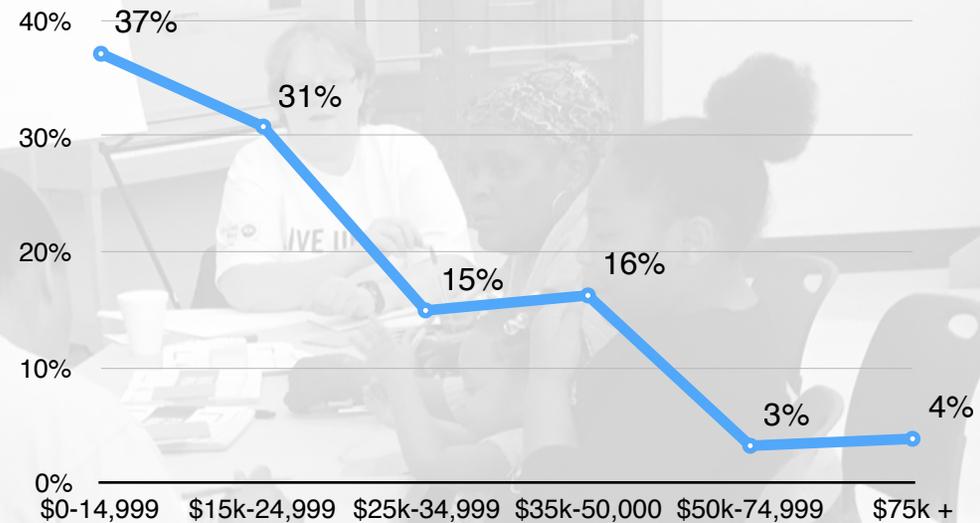
Do you worry about being able to afford:

Rent or Mortgage

Gas, Electric or Water Bills



Percent of Survey Respondents Reporting That Lack of Transportation Has Prevented Them from Applying For, Accepting, or Maintaining a Job by Income Strata

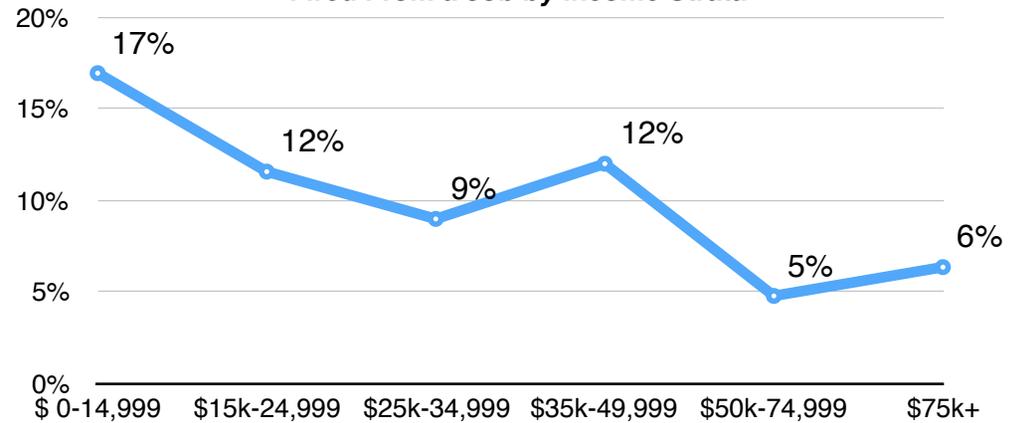


Barriers to Opportunity (continued)

Childcare

Childcare was tied for the 7th most pressing challenge faced by communities (15% of survey respondents) and had the most parity as a challenge across income levels, yet it was cited by less than 2% of respondents as a root cause of poverty and inequity. Still, 13% of survey respondents indicated turning down, quitting or being fired from a job because of not having regular childcare or being unable to afford childcare. Broken down by income, for those in households earning under \$15,000 per year 17% indicated this challenge, while for those over \$50,000 per year it was just 6%.

Percent of Survey Respondents Reporting That Lack of Childcare Caused them to Turn Down, Quit, or Be Fired From a Job by Income Strata



Survey respondents by reported household income and barriers to employment.

Reported Household Income	No barriers to work	Not enough formal education	Lack of training / credentials	Not enough work experience	Don't know where to find job opportunities	Lack of jobs available	Transportation challenges	Incarceration / criminal record	Child care issues	Health problems / disability	Lack of language skills	No e-mail / internet / computer	did not answer	Response Count
\$0 - \$14,999	19.8%	18.0%	18.7%	17.3%	14.8%	21.2%	25.9%	9.4%	15.8%	25.2%	5.0%	9.4%	1.8%	278
\$15,000 - \$24,999	24.0%	22.1%	25.0%	23.1%	14.4%	24.0%	32.7%	9.6%	21.2%	22.1%	7.7%	6.7%	1.9%	104
\$25,000 - \$34,999	38.8%	20.2%	18.7%	14.9%	10.5%	22.4%	15.7%	5.2%	13.4%	14.9%	5.2%	6.7%	1.5%	134
\$35,000 - \$49,999	46.2%	9.4%	14.5%	15.4%	8.6%	18.0%	11.1%	8.6%	19.7%	12.0%	4.3%	5.1%	1.7%	117
\$50,000 - \$74,999	55.6%	11.1%	9.5%	11.1%	6.4%	12.7%	4.8%	4.8%	11.1%	11.1%	1.6%	1.6%	4.8%	63
\$75,000 +	68.4%	7.6%	8.9%	5.1%	3.8%	7.6%	1.3%	0.0%	12.7%	3.8%	0.0%	1.3%	3.8%	79
did not answer income question	31.9%	15.3%	13.9%	8.3%	13.9%	15.3%	9.7%	4.2%	13.9%	22.2%	5.6%	4.2%	2.8%	72

*Respondents could select more than one answer.

Additional Barriers to Opportunity

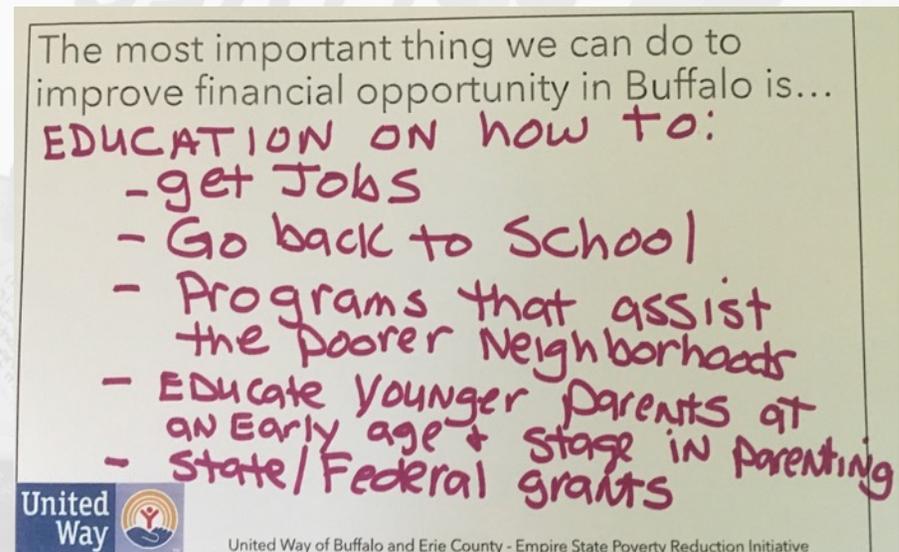
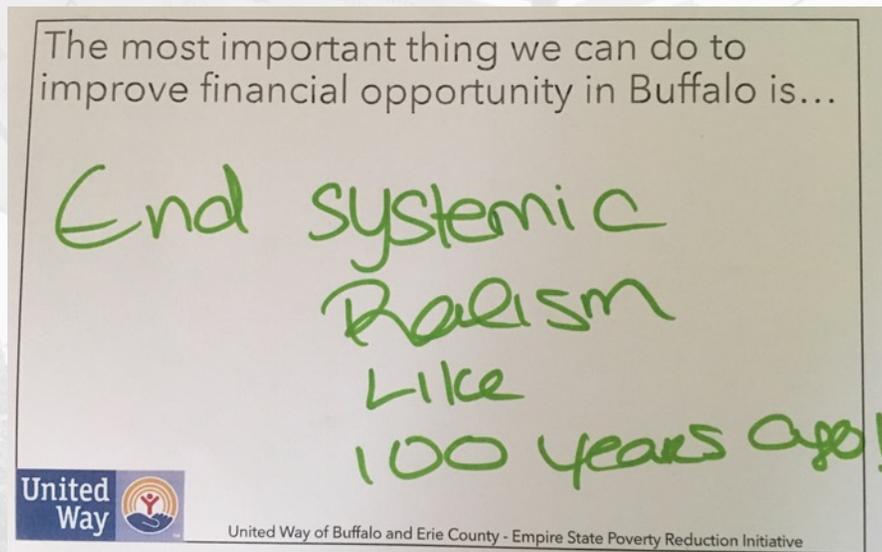
In addition to the challenges listed to work in the survey questions, two major themes arose from survey respondents as additional barriers to opportunity.

Racism, Discrimination and Segregation

In addition, racism, discrimination, and segregation were seen as significant contributors to poverty in the region — in equal measure by people of color and by white respondents. In the survey, 7% of all respondents listed these as underlying causes, and the subjects emerged across forums and in the pop up placards as well. 5% of survey respondents also cited long standing community disinvestment — a condition that has historically been closely linked to racially biased policies — as a limiting factor to opportunity. Direct attention to these issues — within community investment and in reducing bias in hiring, for example — were seen as necessary next steps to reducing poverty.

The Social Support System

The existing social support and safety net system is misaligned with need and a barrier to financial advancement according to 4% of survey respondents who cited this as a root cause of continuing financial hardship. As a frequent topic in community forums, many community members indicated the system was ill equipped to move people into jobs and wages where they would be able to independently support their families. Participants cited, for instance, a “benefit cliff” that has the effect of discouraging higher earnings or savings through the possibility of losing benefits if a family were to pass an asset or income threshold. Even marginal increases can actually produce a net negative change in household income because of swift reductions in various forms of assistance. Respondents suggested these programs and services be better aligned to serve as supports for — and not detriments to — helping people obtain self-sufficiency.





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Conclusion

In total, while the community input gathered for Buffalo ESPRI Phase I does not create a straight line path nor a consensus approach for reducing poverty, the community solutions and changes cited do both touch on existing efforts and point to new avenues for systemic changes to reduce financial hardship.

Ultimately, as a new Buffalo emerges from the old, it is creating uncertainty and new challenges along with opportunity and new possibilities. The ongoing insight and lessons learned through lived experiences of its residents will continue to be a critical component to ensuring this turning point in the city's history is also a turning point for reducing the financial hardships and additional burdens that have been faced by segments of the community for far too long.

ESPRI Steering Committee:

- Michael Weiner, CEO, United Way of Buffalo and Erie County
- Clotilde Perez-Dedecker, President & CEO, Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo
- Byron Brown, Mayor, City of Buffalo
- Tim Kennedy, New York State Senator
- Crystal People-Stokes, New York State Assembly Member
- Mark Poloncarz, Erie County Executive

Convened By:



United Way
of Buffalo & Erie County

Co-Convened By:



Community Foundation
for Greater Buffalo

Funded By:



Summaries of the various types of community input (forums, survey and pop up placards) are included in the full Buffalo ESPRI Community Outreach and Engagement Report where more in-depth and nuanced responses can be found. Demographic information, outreach methodology, and a stratification of many response factors by income is also available.



Prepared By:



September 2017, Buffalo, NY