

## **Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative - Buffalo**

### **Phase 1 Report**

#### **Introduction:**

More than one third of Buffalo's residents live in poverty, a significant increase in the poverty rate over the last ten years. Despite the City and the region's recent economic resurgence, national trends in the economy and systemic challenges facing those living in financial hardship have prevented widespread benefits from accruing to all of the community's residents.

Those living in poverty in the City and County 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 City and County, they represent 56% of those living in poverty.

Those living below the Federal poverty level, however, are not the only residents facing hardship. The United Way of Buffalo and Erie County's 2016 Community Report Card on Financial Hardship outlines the challenges that working families face in achieving self-sufficiency, and places the threshold for financial stability for a family of four in Erie County at \$61,548, far above the federal poverty level of \$23,850. According to the Report, 60% of households in the City of Buffalo live in financial hardship.

Since financial hardship affects families disproportionately in our community where 66% of Hispanics, 64% of African Americans, and 46% Asian Americans live in hardship compared to 36% of Whites, ESPRI Buffalo will be distinguished by an embedded commitment to racial equity and inclusion across all aspects of the initiative.

The United Way of Buffalo & Erie County (UWBEC) was selected as Convener of ESPRI Buffalo because of its 100-year history of service to Erie County's most vulnerable citizens, its experience building partnerships and coalitions involving the public, private and nonprofit sectors, and its focus on our community's most pressing needs.

#### **Formation of the Task Force:**

ESPRI Buffalo is overseen by a Steering Committee that includes Mayor Byron Brown, NYS Senator Tim Kennedy, NYS Assemblywoman Crystal Peoples-Stokes, Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz, UWBEC President and CEO Michael Weiner, and Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo President Clotilde Dedecker. The Steering Committee identified the Task Force membership, which included 3 individuals experiencing financial hardship. The Steering Committee set the agenda for and guided the work of the Task Force and approved the Phase 2 Implementation Plan submitted to OTDA.

The 28-member Task Force comprised community leaders, nonprofits, persons living in financial hardship, and representatives from various government, educational, health and business sectors within the community, including a representative of the Empire State Development Council and the active involvement of Ms. Bhargava, NYS Deputy Commissioner of Labor. The Task Force had regularly

scheduled monthly meetings, and minutes are available for review by any member of the public wishing to do so. The Task Force helped to identify key issues in combatting financial hardship by reviewing community and individual level data, assessing current community efforts to combat financial hardship, and participating in two workgroups to identify opportunities for systems change in Workforce Development and Public Policy. The Task Force actively participated in refining the Phase 2 Implementation Plan.

### **Planning Process:**

The ESPRI Buffalo planning process consisted of a review of community-level data; a series of community conversations on financial hardship; a community survey that collected data from more than 900 individuals experiencing financial hardship; a review of local efforts to reduce financial hardship; and a review of successful best practice systems change initiatives in other communities.

Two work groups were formed to explore key issues relating to the planning process: Workforce Development and Public Policy. The Workforce Development work group reviewed national best practices in workforce development, and representatives of this group were instrumental in the writing of the Phase 2 Implementation Plan. The Public Policy work group discussed a number of policy issues critical to improving financial stability, and will continue to be engaged in conversations with other ESPRI communities to identify strategies to address these issues.

Grant funds were used to support the work of the Project Director and Assistant in managing the Steering Committee and Task Force, to hold a series of community forums, and to engage a consultant to produce a report outlining community-level data and survey results that guided the Task Force's planning. In addition, a Vista was assigned to the administrative team and two Americorp members have been supported by the grant and deployed to community nonprofits engaged with families living in financial hardship.

### **Area of Focus:**

The Task Force selected Workforce Development as the priority for Phase 2 as a result of its review of community level data, responses to community surveys, and existing and emerging Workforce Development efforts including the public workforce system, the Northland Training Center, and the employer-led workforce development talent pipeline being led collaboratively by the Buffalo Niagara Partnership and UWBEC.

Key findings from community surveys and data analytics that influenced the selection of Workforce Development as a priority for Phase 2 included some of the following:

- More than 40% of respondents listed financial hardship (45%) and/or jobs and employment (43%) as the two most pressing challenges for people in their community;
- Housing (27%) and education and training (20%) were listed by 20% or more of respondents;
- When asked to identify root causes of financial hardship, respondents named training and education (151 responses), jobs and employment (105) and money and financial issues (101) as the top three;

- In naming barriers to work, 26% of respondents in households with incomes of \$0-\$14,999 and 33% earning \$15,000-\$24,999, ranked transportation as a barrier to work more frequently than any other factor.

The Workforce Development initiative proposed in the Implementation Plan is predicated on the notion that securing and maintaining employment reduces financial hardship and leads to long-term financial stability. Establishing an employer-led workforce development pipeline with multiple entry points and coordinated wraparound and financial stability services/supports will reduce financial hardship by providing individuals and families with opportunities to:

- improve their education, training, and skills;
- address barriers to completing training and sustaining employment (including but not limited to transportation, child care, elder care, loss of benefits or other income supports before regular paychecks begin); and
- enable individuals to secure jobs with family-sustaining wages and career growth potential.

**Best Practices and Challenges:**

One challenge encountered during Phase 1 related to the implementation of the AmeriCorp program by NYS Department of State. This resource was poorly communicated and the timeline for rollout was unrealistic and challenging detracting from the primary work envisioned in Phase 1. We are hopeful that this important community outreach resource will be better managed in Phase 2.

In terms of community conditions, as we moved through the planning process, it became increasingly evident that our focus had to be expanded beyond those living below the Federal poverty level to include individuals employed but living in financial hardship, as defined earlier in this report. The community survey results revealed that these individuals experience not only financial challenges, but also substantial barriers to successful sustained employment including access to On the Job Training opportunities, affordable child care and adequate/accessible transportation. We believe our Phase 2 Implementation Plan addresses the key challenges identified through these community surveys on both an individual and systemic level, and that it will have a substantial impact on improving financial stability in our community over time.