erie county poverty committee
2017 Recommendations

Chair:  Kinzer M. Pointer, Jr., Agape Fellowship Baptist Church
Members:  Frank Cerny, PhD, Rural Outreach Center
           Anna Falicov, Esq., City of Buffalo
           Myron Glick, MD, Jericho Road Community Health Center
           Yvonne S. Minor-Ragan, PhD, YMRagan Consulting, LLC
           Henry Louis Taylor, PhD, Center for Urban Studies
           Marlies A. Wesolowski, Lt. Col. Matt Urban Human Services Center
In August 2015 Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz reconstituted the Erie County Poverty Commission. The Poverty Commission functions under the auspices of Erie County’s Charter. The charge of the Commission is to examine County government and its operations to determine if there are efficiencies that will improve the living conditions of our fellow citizens who are poor, extremely low income and low income.

The Commission members are capable residents who have dedicated their lives and careers to improving outcomes for the poor, extremely low income and low income persons with which we share this community. Those Commissioners are: the Reverend Frank Cerny, Ph.D.; Anna Falicov, Esquire; Myron Glick, M.D.; Yvonne Minor-Ragan, Ed.D.; the Reverend Kinzer M. Pointer, Henry Louis Taylor, Jr., Ph.D. and Marlies Wesolowski.

We are concerned that the conditions that are fellow citizens are living under are deteriorating and that we could, with minimal effort, improve those conditions. Thus we have published this report for three things:

To share our findings with you.
To highlight the recommendations that we have made to the County Executive.
To sound the alarm and inspire each citizen to action for a better Erie County community.

Thank you for investing your time with us! Let us resolve to work together and improve everyone’s outcomes.

Sincerely Yours,
Kinzer M. Pointer
Pastor, Agape Fellowship Baptist Church

“Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity, it is an act of justice.”

Nelson Mandela
2017 RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Introduction
II. Education/Early Childhood Education
III. Employment
IV. Housing & Neighborhood Environment
V. Public Health
VI. Conclusion
VII. References
Introduction

The Erie County Poverty Committee (“Committee”) is tasked with advising Erie County on matters related to poverty and financial hardship. Members of the Committee, with backgrounds in diverse areas such as academia, faith, law, and human services, have met monthly for more than a year to discuss how Erie County government can improve the ways in which it addresses poverty and financial hardship. While Erie County’s poverty rate is less than that of New York State, pockets of deep poverty exist in Erie County.

Although 15 percent of Erie County households are living in poverty, many individuals and families in Erie County do not earn enough to afford the five basic household necessities of housing, child care, food, transportation, and health care. The United Way of Buffalo & Erie County issued a report in November 2016, A Profile of Financial Hardship in Erie County, which showed that 41 percent of Erie County households experience financial hardship. In Erie County, a family of 2 adults, 1 infant and 1 preschooler require an annual income of $61,548.00 in order to afford the five basic household necessities. However, the federal poverty limit for such a family is $24,300. Since the suffering caused by poverty and low incomes is similar, the Committee is concerned with addressing both poverty and financial hardship.

Poverty and financial hardship are experienced by families across Erie County. In the City of Buffalo, 31 percent of households experience poverty while 60 percent experience financial hardship. Additionally, 21 percent of households in Clarence, 34 percent in Newstead, 36 percent in Tonawanda, 38 percent in Holland, 35 percent in Aurora, and 56 percent in Lackawanna experience financial hardship. Financial hardship is common across all races and ethnicities: 66 percent of Hispanic households, 64 percent of African-American households, 46 percent of Asian-American households and 35 percent of white households. These numbers provide a sobering look at the challenge facing many Erie County residents.

Over the last year, the Committee has heard from County Departments that work directly with residents in poverty or financial hardship. The Committee works especially closely with the Department of Social Services (ECDSS). In addition to working with County Departments, the Committee works with community organizations who are already addressing the issues of eradicating poverty. The Chair of the Committee is the Reverend Kinzer Pointer, pastor of Agape Fellowship Baptist Church. Other members include Dr. Henry Louis Taylor, founding director of the Center for Urban Studies at the University at Buffalo; Anna Falicov, Esq., Assistant Corporation Counsel for the City of Buffalo; Dr. Myron Glick, MD, chief medical officer of Jericho Road Community Health Center; Rev. Frank Cerny, board chair of the Rural Outreach Center in East Aurora; Dr. Yvonne S. Minor-Ragan, President & CEO at YMRagan Consulting, LLC; and Marlies A. Wesolowski, executive director of the Lt. Col. Matt Urban Human Services Center in Buffalo.

Erie County has allocated $500,000 for anti-poverty measures in its 2017 budget and has requested the Committee advise it on how to spend that appropriation. The Committee is recommending it apply those funds to enhance two existing programs. The first of these programs is to train contracted childcare providers to screen vulnerable children for developmental delays. The second is to provide year-round services to youth to improve their job training and work readiness skills through support services and employment.

The following goals and objectives are the initial recommendations of the Committee. The Committee recognizes that poverty and financial hardship are complex issues, and will require complex, sophisticated solutions that focus on institutions, the operations of systems, and conditions found in underdeveloped urban and rural communities. Nevertheless, these recommendations are meant to begin the work of identifying and dismantling the structures that support and sustain poverty and financial hardship in our community in concert with our local community partners and Erie County government. The proposals cluster under four headings: Education/Early Childhood, Employment, Housing & Environment, and Public Health.

Education/Early Childhood

Education

Despite 85 percent of brain development occurring before the age of five, fewer than 50 percent of children with developmental delays or disabilities are identified nationally before entering kindergarten. However, due to the extensive outreach of the Erie County Department of Health (ECDOH), there is reason to believe that Erie County has a significantly higher rate of identification. Nevertheless, it is critical to identify and address potential problems early so these children make the most of their abilities and skills. The need for early detection and support is even more critical among low-income children living in situations where risk is exponentially increased by exposure to stressors and traumatic experiences. These children are often not eligible for intensive Early Intervention services, but are still in need of resources to address extreme social-emotional and behavioral issues. Research shows that standardized screening tools, such as the Ages and Stages Question-
naire (ASQ), can detect 70-80 percent of delays and other early problems.

Help Me Grow WNY, a collaborative initiative with numerous partners dedicated to promoting the optimal development of young children, utilizes the ASQ to identify potential problems in young children. When concerns are noted, Help Me Grow WNY links families of young children to available community resources through the 2-1-1 WNY information and referral service. Ongoing care coordination is provided by Help Me Grow so that families have support to overcome barriers to service and can access subsequent screenings to track their children’s progress.

2-1-1 WNY, with a rich database of community resources for families, is currently underutilized due to lack of awareness within Erie County. One of the goals of the Help Me Grow WNY initiative is to increase knowledge and usage of 2-1-1 WNY as a source of information for families and community members working with children, including child care providers.

The Committee supports a partnership between ECDSS and Help Me Grow to implement developmental screening and service connection among Erie County-contracted child care providers. These providers are primary sources of contact for the families of an estimated 5,000 young Erie County children living in households experiencing poverty and financial hardship. The goal of this partnership is to identify children at risk of developmental delays while empowering child care providers and families to support the achievement of all children’s developmental milestones and connect with existing community services.

Child care providers will receive specialized trainings that teach them: To access and complete electronic and/or paper ASQ screenings; to interpret screening results and strengthen relationships with parents/guardians; to differentiate care and instruction practices to best meet children’s individual needs; and how to connect families with Help Me Grow and the larger 2-1-1 WNY service for information and support.

It is estimated that more than 200 child care providers contracted by ECDSS will be better able to meet the unique needs of thousands of children currently in their care by being trained to complete developmental screening. In addition, they will gain confidence and improve skills in dealing with challenging behaviors and difficult care situations, and will increase their knowledge about 2-1-1 WNY and the resources available to support them as well as the children and families they serve.

---

Employment

Youth Employment

For older youth, employment opportunities are a key feature of the movement out of poverty and financial hardship. The Center for Law and Social Policy concludes that “education alone is much less successful in raising employment and earnings prospects than education combined with a strategy of focused job training (with an eye on local demand), ‘soft skills,’ and holding out for quality jobs.”

Through contracted agencies and with funds received from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance, ECDSS administers the TANF Summer Youth Employment Program (SYEP). SYEP is an eight-week program serving youth between the ages of 14 and 20 years of age who come from households earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level. Youth work in the community at worksites known as SYEP providers and gain valuable work experience.

The Poverty Committee recommends leveraging the existing work of SYEP to provide youth with meaningful job training and work readiness skills year-round. The recommendation begins with assessing the current program to explore how work readiness and job training goals are being met. Next, the Committee recommends the development of an education and leadership curriculum that would create a train the trainer model to expand the program in the future. A further goal is to develop a life skill curriculum to help the children of Temporary Assistance to Needy
Families clients stay in their job placements and become adults who can seek and sustain employment. In the future, consideration will be given to developing a systematic approach to help young people in the SYEP deal with family mental health, substance abuse, and social issues.

**Living Wage Jobs**

Employment with a living wage is a key factor in escaping poverty and financial hardship among adults. The majority of households experiencing financial hardship in Erie County work, but are either underemployed or earn such low wages that they remain in poverty. Over the course of the year, the Committee determined that individuals who provide services supported by County tax dollars, often through contracted organizations, earn less than a living wage. The MIT Living Wage Calculator deduces that in Erie County a living wage for a household with single adult is $10.88, and a household with two adults and one child is $13.68. Low wages in the human services field also contribute to high turnover and burnout, which deteriorates critical services for households in poverty and financial hardship. The Committee therefore recommends that Erie County explore implementing a living wage standard within County contract, and that Erie County bargaining units work through the bargaining process to increase wages of entry-level positions in County government. With the recognition that this is an ambitious goal, the Committee urges the County to explore the current rates paid to County Employees and in County Contracts, and to examine the impact of moving to a living wage.

**Diversity**

Many individuals aspire to work in the civil service due to the stability of a government position, the numerous opportunities for advancement, and desire to do meaningful work to help their community. However, the civil service workforce often does not have the same level of diversity as the population it serves. The Committee recommends Erie County increase its recruitment efforts in minority communities, especially for client-facing positions, with the goal of increasing the diversity of its workforce. Having a workforce that resembles the population it serves has been shown to improve outcomes for an organization’s clients.

The Committee recognizes the limitations County officials have in hiring individuals for the competitive class because it can hire only individuals who scored among the top three on the civil service test. However, by increasing its recruitment efforts in the African American, Latino and refugee communities, the likelihood that individuals from those communities will score higher on civil service tests increases. The Committee is confident that staff diversity will increase cultural and racial sensitivity. While recruiting from minority, immigrant, and refugee groups is a large part of this recommendation, a focus on retention as well as hiring is necessary. Therefore, the Committee requests to receive a report of current cultural diversity levels among Erie County staff. Following this report, the Committee requests the creation of an outreach/recruitment program targeting minority, immigrant, and refugee communities.

**Housing and Neighborhood Environment**

The Buffalo Niagara Metropolitan Area, within which Erie County is located, is unique among major metropolitan areas in the age and condition of the housing stock. Long term economic distress in the region has made housing renovation rare, leaving the housing stock and those inhabiting it vulnerable to lead poisoning. The problem of housing and neighborhood underdevelopment is a very serious issue in the Buffalo Niagara Metropolitan Area. The problem stems from the large number of low-income groups living in rental housing units in Buffalo and the absence of strong system of regulating rental properties, which includes an enforcement mechanism that is rigorously employed. When this is combined a countywide strategy that is not anchored in targeted neighborhood assessment, the problem is magnified. Without a strong enforcement program, enforcing the highest penalties permitted under law, landlords do not have a strong incentive to improve their properties. Of course, when the property in need of renovation is the owner-occupied residence of a low-income individual, assistive (rather than punitive) remedies should be employed.

**Lead Paint Collaboration**

The majority of rental units in Erie County are rented by families in financial hardship. All houses built before 1978 are likely to contain some lead-based paint. Properties that are not adequately maintained increase the risk that lead-based paint is exposed due to peeling, chipping, chalking and cracking of fresher, safer paint. Lead exposure, especially when combined with poverty and poor diet, adversely impacts children’s development. Every year thousands of children under the age of six are diagnosed with elevated blood lead levels in Erie County. Lead poisoning causes learning disabilities, behavioral problems, and, at very high levels, seizures, coma, and even death. In 2016, 289 children ages 5 and younger who were tested in Erie County tested positive for lead poisoning at a level of 10 mg/dl.

The reasons for the high lead levels among Erie County
children are older housing stock and economic distress. Deteriorated lead paint is not abated because the homeowners and landlords do not have the necessary resources. Similarly, industry and manufacturing leaves lead in the soil, and our encircling highways blow lead into neighborhoods. The clapboard construction which is common to Erie County homes used to be routinely painted with lead. The full abatement of these properties is costly, and even interim measures must be constantly maintained in order to sustain their efficacy.

In addition to the routine lead inspections conducted by the ECDOH since 2004, the ECDOH has been working with City of Buffalo Housing Inspectors to identify lead paint risks to families in the City of Buffalo. In addition to the 1250 structures acted upon by the ECDOH in 2016, this partnership has completed visits on over 500 homes since December 2016. These numbers should be viewed as a percentage of the 422,414 housing units extant in Erie County in 2016. The inspections are followed up with assistance in securing funds for remediation when the household meets certain income requirements. The Committee recommends continuing and strengthening the partnership between the Erie County Department of Health and City of Buffalo Housing Inspectors. In addition, the Committee recommends that the City of Buffalo inspect single and double rental units in addition to multi-unit rental properties.

The Committee commends Erie County for accepting the CDC recommended lead level in children’s blood tests of 5 micrograms per deciliter as the threshold level requiring intervention. As well, the Committee commends the County Executive’s commitment of $3.75 million dollars over the next five years to increase lead inspections and remediation across Erie County. Recognizing the vital importance of lead abatement in reducing the level of lead introduced into children’s blood, as well as the financial challenges inherent in housing remediation, the Committee recommends that this pool of money be continued past the five year point to address lead issues. As well, the Committee urges ongoing communication between the Erie County Department of Health and the Erie County Department of Environment and Planning.

\section*{Expanded Receivership}

Deteriorating housing stock is also a challenge to both the financial lives and the environment of our residents. Older homes which have not been properly weatherized vent precious heated air in the winter and cooled air in the summer into the environment. Inefficient heating and cooling systems consume more resources that efficient systems in achieving a comfortable living environment. The long term distress in Erie County’s economy, although it is currently recovering, has meant that landlords do not view the maintenance and improvement of rental units as a viable or financially feasible practice. Often this neglect leads to units which violate the warrant of habitability. Nevertheless, offering a unit for rent carries with it a responsibility to upgrade and maintain the property at a safe and habitable level. Therefore, the Committee recommends the expanded use of receivership to improve Erie County housing stock. Under the receivership program all rents due the landlord are directed to a community agency where the rents are aggregated until sufficient to conduct the repairs to return the rental property to habitability. The community agency puts the renovation jobs out to bid, and when enough rent is collected, ensures that the construction and weatherization work is done. Once done, community agency reports back to the Housing Court to transfer future rents back to the landlord.

Outside the city, administrative hearings are held instead of a true housing court. It is logistically difficult for the Erie County Department of Health to bring proceedings administratively because ECDOH would be required to be the plaintiff. The County Attorney is now working on a program which would appoint Housing Court Judge Carney as a hearing officer, but this program has not been finalized. The Committee urges the 8th Judicial District to approve this novel approach, so that remediation under the Receivership program will be available to all Erie County residents. The Committee requests a report on the current state of the Housing Receivership program in Erie County, and a plan for improvement in the program. After those reports are received, the Committee anticipates working with the relevant agencies and County departments to develop a plan for improvement.

\section*{New Americans}

The Committee recognizes the special challenges and opportunities represented by the presence of immigrants and refugees in our community. Erie County leaders communicate with representatives from the main ethnic and geographic immigrant groups through the Erie County New Americans Committee. This Committee is made up of representatives from immigrant and refugee community organizations, and facilitates direct dialogue between the County and the immigrant and refugee populations.

ECDSS is in the process of developing a Language Access Plan to ensure that, regardless of native language, all County residents are equally able to access assistance.
through ECDSS. The Language Access Plan has as its goal to screen clients at first contact, and to turn no applicants away due to language. Ideally, the ECDSS Language Access Plan will serve as a model for similar programs within Erie County.

Erie County Child Protective Service case workers recently began co-locating in Erie County school systems to educate staff on child abuse prevention as well as to serve as a resource for the community in better understanding the need to report abuse and maltreatment. This strategy allows teachers and administrators to interact with CPS in a seamless way that provides for a qualified person to investigate the moment an issue is suspected, reducing the time spent investigating unfounded claims, and allowing earlier preventive intervention to help parents resolve resource issues or protect the child from abusive situations.

Programs within schools help to connect parents and children to needed services for basic needs, health care, mental health counseling, legal assistance, antiviolence mentoring programs and with some programs much more. Similarly, immigrants and refugees often have close connections with both refugee resettlement agencies and ethnic immigrant community organizations. In recognition of both the effectiveness of current collocation and collaboration efforts, as well as the unique relationship of immigrant/refugee communities to their community agencies, the Committee recommends that the Child Protective Service unit of ECDSS co-locate Child Protective Service case workers within the immigrant/refugee community.

Just as the employment of new County workers from the immigrant and refugee communities will foster greater understanding and cultural sensitivity throughout the departments in which they are placed, so will the placement of case workers external to the Department itself. The Committee asks for an assessment of current arrangements within 1-2 months and a plan for co-location of staff within the immigrant and refugee community agencies within 3-4 months, to be executed by January 2018.

Public Health

Erie County ranks 57th out 62 New York State counties with regard to the overall health of its population. The poor overall health of the people of Erie County is especially evident among the urban and rural poor and among minority communities. In 2016 more than 50 people died from gun violence and 299 people died from opioid overdoses in Erie County. Trends indicate that both these numbers will be considerably higher in 2017. We are facing an epidemic of gun violence and opioid addiction that is decimating our communities. In addition, our community has higher rates of childhood obesity; sexually transmitted diseases, such as chlamydia, gonorrhea and syphilis; diabetes; and heart disease compared to the rest of New York State. These diseases, with the notable exception of opioid addiction, especially target communities with more pronounced poverty and financial hardship.

In Erie County, there exist marked disparities in health outcomes by race and socioeconomic status, and even by neighborhood. In her Policy Link report on Health Equity in Buffalo, Tracey Ross puts it bluntly: In Buffalo, “...your zip code has more of an impact on your life expectancy than your genetic code.” Hispanics, Blacks, and low income individuals are more likely to be uninsured, lack access to care, and experience worse health outcomes. The Affordable Care Act worked to decrease health disparities by reducing the number of uninsured minorities and low income people, but the program is in severe jeopardy.

The Erie County Health Department should seek resources to address the root causes of poor health. More money and attention needs to be spent on health education, community planning, community health advocacy and legislative changes. Wherever practical, the ECDOH should provide only those direct health care services mandated by Public Health Law (STD clinics, Tuberculosis clinic, etc.) so it can focus on the macro issues it is in a unique position to address.

Gun violence is a public health emergency. The Committee recommends that the ECDOH work with the community to target those children and youth who are most at risk for participating in gun violence.

Opioid addiction and the resulting overdoses are a public health emergency. We recognize the leadership of County Executive Mark Poloncarz and Health Commissioner Gale Burstein in bringing the community together to provide the resources needed to educate, provide treatment and involve law enforcement to combat this emergency. ECDSS should continue to learn from innovative community based programs across the nation and world that are showing some success in fighting this epidemic.

The Committee believes that ECDOH should advocate for increased access to primary medical and dental care in underserved urban and rural communities in Erie County. The lack of this health care contributes to increased rates of ER and hospital admissions and increased morbidity and mortality from diabetes, heart disease and even cancers. The most vulnerable people of Erie County deserve access to health care in their communities. One successful ap-
proach to increasing medical and dental care is the Erie County Health Mall. Erie County owns the Health Mall in a neighborhood otherwise lacking adequate healthcare providers, and rents out offices to providers in the facility. The Committee urges the ECDOH to replicate the Health Mall model in other underserved areas of the County.

ECDOH should seek out more resources for health education that would specifically target childhood obesity, cigarette smoking in children and youth, STD prevention and pregnancy prevention. The Committee urges the ECDOH to continue to pursue federal and state funding and other grants to increase their advocacy in these areas.

Erie County has become home to more than 30,000 refugees who have fled war torn countries from all over the world. This influx of mostly poor and traumatized limited English proficient speakers is a challenge to our health care system. With a few notable exceptions, our health care system of medical clinics and hospitals has been slow to provide care that is language appropriate and culturally sensitive to these newcomers. Often, much is lost in translation and people are not served well. Therefore, the Committee recommends that the ECDOH take a leadership role on this issue and assist healthcare providers improve the delivery of services to Limited English proficient members of the immigrant and refugee communities.

Conclusion

Erie County, New York has maintained a 15 percent overall poverty rate for many years. According to the American FactFinder, 23 percent of Erie County children live in poverty. According to CAO of Erie County Poverty report, 90.9 percent of Erie County citizens have completed high school or above, but only 29 percent of Erie county residents in poverty have done so. Poverty and low income present complex issues, but with the support and assistance of Erie County in implementing the above recommendations in the areas of Education/Early Childhood Education, Employment, and Housing & Neighborhood Environment, and Public Health, the Committee hopes to begin to address the causes of and contributors to poverty in our community.

References

1. According to the 2011-2015 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, Erie County’s Poverty Rate is 15.0 percent and New York State is 15.7 percent.

2. Source: http://agesandstages.com


4. Source: http://livingwage.mit.edu/counties/36029

The opposite of poverty is not wealth, the opposite of poverty is justice.

Bryan Stevenson