ABOUT OUR TEAM

The Mobile Safety-Net Team is The John R. Oishei Foundation’s (JROF) most visible, direct link to communities in Erie & Niagara County.

After the economic downturn in 2008, The Oishei Foundation recognized that residents were struggling in communities throughout Western New York—including in suburban and rural communities not usually associated with poverty.

As a result, the Foundation created and funded the Mobile Safety-Net Team (MSNT) to enhance essential human services through a comprehensive approach, including:

- Assessing the issues in dozens of local communities
- Understanding the landscape of community-based human services providers and critical service gaps
- Building and supporting coalitions of community organizations
- Providing better access and education to residents who may have never had a need for these services before and may be hesitant to do so
- Addressing large-scale, systemic issues such as housing, workforce development, and transportation that contribute to poverty

MISSION

We use research-informed practices to support and cultivate collaborations to strengthen under-resourced communities.

VISION

We envision a thriving region that has the necessary resources to address community needs.

VALUES

- Relationship building
- Community-driven solutions
- Efficiency
- Collaboration
- Honesty
- Information
- Agility
- Consensus
- Transparency

Over the last 6 years, with limited capacity, the MSNT has helped organizations bring in over $16 Million in funding to address critical issues. Additionally, the impact of MSNT goes beyond grants brought into the region. Through our work we have hosted numerous trainings, resource events, networking opportunities, and fostered collaborative & responsive partnerships.
2017

- Using data from our 2014 Strengthening our Safety-Net Community reports, community organizations were able to raise 13.5 million dollars to address issues in their communities.
- Developed partnerships with 4 corner stores on the east side of Buffalo for the Healthy Corner store Initiative.
- Convened coalition partners from across the region to hold our Third Annual Regional Summit to discuss the sustainability of collective impact.
- Contracted with University at Buffalo Regional Institute for a Labor Market Assessment.

2018

- Conducted stakeholder focus groups to kick-off our work on a three year strategic plan for MSNT.
- Was awarded more than $202,000 to MSNT initiatives. Funders included General Mills Foundation, Tower Foundation, Independent Health Foundation, WNY Regional Resource Addiction Collaborative, United Healthcare, Fidelis Healthcare, Cheektowaga School District Association.
- Established a community resource hub task force for each hub community to collaborate and learn from one another.
2019

- Was awarded $340,000 to coalition-based initiatives from Blue Fund, Independent Health Foundation, and Cheektowaga CDBG funds.

- Started work on the 18-month project of updating the 2014 community reports and launching a new Numbers In Need website to share our work.

- Trained 23 students in the City of Tonawanda's school district through the grant-funded Peer-to-Peer Substance Use Prevention Program.

- Established a host organization for the MSNT-created Community Resource Hubs through Catholic Charities.

2020

- Conducted 5 virtual Coffee Hours to learn how organizations were handling issues brought on by the pandemic. Topics included:
  - Mental health
  - Access to information and resources
  - Access to technology
  - Safety and security for at-risk populations
  - Housing and utilities

- Assisted JROF in assessing impact of COVID-19 and tracking American Rescue Plan funding for use in distributing WNY COVID-19 Community Response Funds. Additionally, MSNT contributed to identifying organizations who were able to be responsive to community needs.

- Helped raise more than $620,000 for coalition initiatives such as the Springville Regional Coalition's Drug Free Communities grant.

2021

- Investigated new and worsening issues such as mental health and housing in communities exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- Acknowledged the workforce crisis exacerbated by the COVID-19 Pandemic in helping professions such as education, healthcare and social services.

- Hosted Racial Equity Impact Analysis Training that aimed to inform community leaders of persistent challenges related to systemic racism and to encourage them to be more race-informed and equity-focused.

- Convened Cheektowaga Summit to promote collaborative action to address challenges related to access to resources.
Workforce development has been a common issue across the region for years. Recently, coalitions in various communities have been discussing it as a workforce crisis, particularly in the helping professions such as education, social services and healthcare.

Regionwide, residents face barriers to accessing services due to a lack of resources in their immediate area and/or lack of transportation to the nearest location. Partnerships with other initiatives such as Good For The Neighborhood are helping to address this gap in various communities such as Cheektowaga, Akron/ Newstead and Lackawanna.

Much of the region is easily accessible to private automobile owners. For those relying on mass transit, accessibility lack is lacking and pedestrian-friendly infrastructure is inadequate. A new bus stop on Pine Ridge Road as a result of MSNT research in Cheektowaga has been an exemplary result of our work.

Municipalities across the region find themselves struggling with their lack of affordable housing. MSNT interns produced a report that highlights the supply of housing issues in North Tonawanda.

The region has been grappling with high rates of substance abuse and misuse, especially among the area’s youth population. With support from the MSNT, a Drug-Free Communities grant awarded by the Center for Disease Control is helping to guide research and programs in the Springville area.

Residents throughout the area are facing challenges related to mental health. The MSNT has established partnerships with several local school districts to conduct data collection pertaining to mental health and substance use.

Racial inequities persist across the region beyond the City of Buffalo. Lackawanna has been building partnerships with area leaders of color. The coalition is currently in finalization stage of receiving a 15-year grant from a company that is planning to establish a presence in Lackawanna.

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LESONS LEARNED

• Health care, education and social service professionals are struggling to recruit and retain staff due to the workforce shortage that has resulted from the pandemic. Providers cite burnout, low pay, difficult hours and the need for credentialed higher education as reasons for the mass exodus.

• Mental health is a growing concern not only for clients being served but also for agency staff who serve them.

• Access to safe affordable housing, physical & mental health care support, and transportation are being discussed across each coalition as they are regional issues and not specific to any one community.

• Communications and marketing is a struggle for a lot of organizations, including the MSNT.

• Coalition saturation and workforce shortages have resulted in dwindling participation in many coalitions across WNY.

LOOKING AHEAD

• Investigate ways to support organizations needs in a meaningful way.

• Explore gaps, barriers, and strengths at a more regional level.

• Continued support for more rural areas is essential in addressing regional equity.

• Regional organizations have expressed desire for updated Numbers in Need reports.

• Increased resources for MSNT will help strengthen regional safety-net.

• Concerns expressed by community partners are intersectional and need to be addressed with an intersectional approach.

2022 has presented a complicated set of challenges for communities, many of which had been ongoing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and have since been exacerbated. Furthermore, there are more layers of complexity to those already ongoing issues. With new light shined on these issues, the region's levels of awareness has increased and with that has come the challenging questions and tasks of how to address them.

It is important to note that these issues are not community specific, but rather challenges that are faced by residents across the entire region.

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