MOBILE SAFETY-NET TEAM

The Mobile Safety Net Team was born in response to the 2008-2009 economic downturn. As an initiative of the Oishei Foundation (and not a competing 501c3), our team was able to provide backbone support to the organizations that serve our community in ways not seen before. In the years since, the MSNT has continued to organize and respond to socio-economic crises through the collection and analysis of data in our Numbers In Need reports, and through our solution-focused coalition building. Using both a reactive and a proactive approach, the region and the organizations we serve were better prepared and equipped to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

"MSNT has been the driving force behind the Cheektowaga Coalition, ensuring that the coalition is focused on the issues at the forefront. Coalition members are for the most part Directors or leaders within their own agency and with the events of the past 2 years, not one of us would have had time to take the lead and keep us on track. I honestly believe that without our Community Impact Coordinator and the MSNT having our “back”, the coalition would have fallen apart as each focused on our own pressing needs".

-Kim Reynolds, Food Pantry Director, Resurrection Life

SHARING THE MSNT MODEL

Towards the end of 2021, the Adirondack Foundation reached out to us to learn more about our work, specifically our approach as a backbone organization to our coalitions. They have started to develop programing related to coalition building and are looking to us for best practices. We plan to continue our conversations with them into this coming year.

LESSONS LEARNED DURING THE PANDEMIC

- Organizations need mental health supports for staff as well as clients.
- The labor shortage is also affecting the capacity of nonprofits.
- Identifying placement sites for student interns have been challenging and limited, but MSNT has proven to be an ideal site for virtual internships.
- Communities and organizations are changing from the way they talk about the pandemic from "returning to normal" to "this is the new normal."
The Lackawanna community has faced challenges as a result of systemic racism, specifically in the First Ward neighborhood, a historically redlined part of the city. In response, The Lackawanna Stakeholders Coalition hosted a Racial Equity Impact Analysis Tool (REIAT) training session. This session aimed to make individuals and teams more aware of persistent issues and challenges in the community pertaining to racial equity and a history of systemic racism. The training was conducted by Race Matters Institute, a national institute that helps governmental agencies, nonprofits, community-based and regional organizations, philanthropies, and state and national networks to become more race-informed and equity-focused in their work. The workshop was sponsored by The Mobile Safety-Net Team and the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

REIAT attendees:
- Office of New York State Senator Tim Kennedy
- Office of New York State Assemblymember Jonathan Rivera
- Office of Erie County Clerk Michael Kearns
- Erie County Department of Social Services
- Lackawanna City Council
- Lackawanna City Schools
- Lackawanna Police Department
- Access WNY
- Catholic Charities of WNY
- Mt. Olive Baptist Church

LEARNING FROM OUR PARTNERS

During summer 2021, the Mobile Safety-Net Team reached out to ten organizations that had received unsolicited Basic Human Needs grants from The Oishei Foundation in order to gauge the impact of the funding and to better understand the level of need that they are seeing. Key takeaways include:

- There is a severe lack of safe, affordable housing throughout the region.
- There has been difficulty in recruiting & retaining staff members. Possible explanations are inadequate benefits or hesitancy to join the workforce due to health risks associated with COVID-19.
- There is a noticeable increase in mental health problems as a result of the pandemic, particularly in children. Providers and staff also are experiencing mental health struggles as a result of burnout.
- Outdated and at times nonexistent public transportation and infrastructure adds to isolation of clients in rural areas.
- COVID-19 continues to make it difficult to recruit and retain volunteers.

EXPANDED PARTNERSHIP WITH THE UNIVERSITY AT BUFFALO

In addition to our nine year partnership with the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, The MSNT has established new partnerships with the School of Architecture and Planning: Department of Urban and Regional Planning and the School of Public Health and Health Professions. Beginning in Fall 2021, MSNT on-boarded one Master of Urban Planning intern and three Master of Public Health interns, creating an interdisciplinary learning experience and a total of seven internships across all three schools.
GRANT-FUNDED PUBLIC ART CORPS YOUTH PROGRAM

The Public Art Corps was forged through a partnership between the Springville Regional Service Coalition (SRC) and Springville Center for the Arts, funded through the Coalition’s Drug Free Communities Grant. The goal of this grant is to create connections in the community that encourage the reduction of youth substance abuse. The program resulted in the creation of a corps of high school-aged artists that deployed temporary and permanent art installations in the Village of Springville in the summer of 2021. The program employed out-of-work youth to facilitate community improvement. Led by staff and two visual arts interns skilled in mural painting and design, The Public Art Corps, through direct participation, gave a group of students a unique and valuable experience while impacting the physical world and community in a positive way.

“\nThe Village of Springville is extremely fortunate that the Drug Free Communities Grant was awarded to Springville Regional Service Coalition. The Coalition, working with The John R. Oishei Foundation and other regional groups, has identified local drug problems, and now funded a program to target these problems in our Village. This is a good example of how partnership improves a Village. On behalf of the Village, I extend our thanks to Community Coordinator Annie Todd and the entire Springville Regional Service Coalition."

- Bill Krebs, Mayor of Springville

SPRINGVILLE COALITION ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Awarded $600,000 in 2021 for five years for substance use prevention from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention
- Hired a director
- Awarded an additional $750 for a town hall meeting from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Communities Talk grant
- Planned and implemented a summer youth program
- Updated youth data
- Created year two action plan
- Grew coalition capacity by 12 coalition members
- Created policy statements on marijuana as it pertains to retail zoning and growing
- Designed a coalition logo
YOUTH DATA UPDATED ON MENTAL HEALTH AND SUBSTANCE USE

The Springville Regional Coalition (SRC) updated their youth data this past year with the Community-Level Youth Development Evaluation (CLYDE). The CLYDE includes several questions about respondents’ mental health. SRC examined the results of these questions as they relate to alcohol, marijuana, and e-cigarette use. In all cases, mental health struggles were correlated with higher substance use prevalence among youth. This data is helping to guide the coalition as they develop plans to address substance use among youth.

VIRTUAL COFFEE HOUR EXPLORES MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

With concerns shared from all coalitions, MSNT convened a two-day long “Virtual Coffee Hour” to explore the impact of the ongoing pandemic on mental health needs across the Buffalo-Niagara region. The key findings included:

GAPS AND BARRIERS
- **Stigma** - there remains community wide stigma against receiving mental health treatment
- **Language** - lack of information & services in other languages
- **Affordability** - services may be difficult to afford, even with insurance
- **Service navigation** - difficulty navigating the mental health service system, especially for first time service seekers
- **Staffing** - staff in mental health adjacent sectors (such as schools) lack access to adequate training to recognize mental health symptoms & to refer appropriately
- **Systems & Policies** - existing policies make it difficult and at times unaffordable for individuals to gain insurance coverage for mental health services

STRATEGIES
- **Improve marketing & outreach** - normalize services through messaging & ensure information is both relevant to & representative of the community it serves
- **Increasing telehealth access** - by narrowing the digital divide that exists in rural communities
- **Implement mental health training in all sectors** in fields such as education
- **Eliminate negative consequences of receiving mental health services** - in professions such as law enforcement, there can be negative job related consequences for receiving mental health services
- **Invite everyone into conversations about mental health and wellbeing** - Teachers, nurses, police officers, and others outside the mental health field should be included in conversations about mental health

NAVIGATING THE LANDSCAPE OF MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Two of our three MPH interns have been researching and analyzing the landscape of mental health in the region to understand the impact of the pandemic on the mental health care system. In addition they will be completing a process map to help us breakdown and assess systemic issues that create barriers to accessing mental health services.
OUR MASTER OF URBAN PLANNING INTERN, Alexis Duwe has been working to develop a comprehensive directory of all housing agencies, organizations, and resources in Erie and Niagara counties. After collecting data, she developed a series of brochures categorizing services related to legal, weatherization, energy assistance, and emergency housing services. This partnership and the information produced has helped maintain an up-to-date understanding of the housing services landscape in Erie and Niagara counties. Next steps include the development of a report on housing and its conditions, impact the state of one’s overall health.

HOUSING RESOURCE DIRECTORY UNDER DEVELOPMENT

Our Master of Urban Planning intern, Alexis Duwe has been working to develop a comprehensive directory of all housing agencies, organizations, and resources in Erie and Niagara counties. After collecting data, she developed a series of brochures categorizing services related to legal, weatherization, energy assistance, and emergency housing services. This partnership and the information produced has helped maintain an up-to-date understanding of the housing services landscape in Erie and Niagara counties. Next steps include the development of a report on housing and its conditions, impact the state of one’s overall health.

HOUSING ISSUES IN BUFFALO-NIAGARA REGION

The State of Housing in WNY

In 2021, 3 out of 10 households in Erie and Niagara counties were housing cost-burdened. This is mainly due to low wages, not necessarily housing costs. Without intervention, these numbers are expected to worsen. Our persistent challenges are a lack of affordable housing units and current development strategies that limit opportunity and mobility for low- and middle-income households.

COVID-19 and Housing

Lead, mold, and poor insulation are prevalent in older housing in the Buffalo Niagara region. These conditions cause long-term respiratory ailments and increase the severity of a COVID-19 infection. During the pandemic, communities of color have faced higher rates of discrimination, eviction, homelessness, and are more housing cost-burdened than the overall population.

Housing Providers and Programs

Organizations are working at capacity and have adapted to the circumstances. Still, there is a great need for collaboration among providers in order to efficiently deliver programs. Providers help to connect residents with housing programs. At times, this is an inefficient process due to a disconnect in the accuracy and accessibility of critical information.
CHEEKTOWAGA SUMMIT OFFERS NEW TOOLS & RESOURCES

The Cheektowaga Community Collaborative hosted a community-wide summit to present new tools and resources that have been implemented in response to the challenges produced by the pandemic. The summit was sponsored by the Oishei Foundation and Highmark Blue Cross Blue Shield of WNY. Many of the strategies and tools discussed pertained to Erie County, but also featured innovative approaches being used across the nation as well. Presenting representatives were from Erie County, Highmark, the Town of Cheektowaga, and more. With over 80 attendees ranging from town officials to school guidance counselors and more, the Cheektowaga Community Collaborative offered solution to better deal with challenges and issues facing the community. The Summit aimed to train community leaders on the new tools and resources who could then deploy them to teach their staff members, co-workers, or clients at their place of work. These strategic tools are designed to provide individuals with improved access to healthcare resources, housing, food, and more.

DIGITAL DIVIDE

In early 2021, the MSNT joined an ongoing partnership with the Oishei Foundation, University at Buffalo, Mission Ignite, Community Tech NY and Kaleida Health to secure and begin to implement a national grant to build a sustainable broadband network in Buffalo's Fruit Belt neighborhood capable of providing quality internet connectivity in an area with few internet resources. MSNT's familiarity with critical organizations and entities across the region helped to assist the partners in community engagement effort.

RESOURCE HUBS ADAPT AMID COVID

Hubs, originally designed to be in-person resource events to connect residents with needed services information, were forced to adapt due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to do so, MSNT in collaboration with Catholic Charities of WNY had to come up with innovative ways to continue serving residents of the Lackawanna, Cheektowaga, and North Tonawanda communities. This was done through a two-pronged approach of creating virtual tools and outdoor table events/drive-thru connections. Virtual Hubs came in the form of Padlet accounts that help to provide information, resources, and updates relevant to the organization who formerly tabled Hub events.
The Rural Niagara Community Coalition (RNCC) has been working to meet mental health and substance misuse needs throughout the more rural parts of eastern Niagara County by partnering with local school districts to implement data collection and strategies to address youth substance use. Recently they have expanded their partnerships to include the Wilson Central School District & will work with them alongside Royalton Hartland and Newfane Central Schools to implement the Community Level Youth Development Survey (CLYDE) to assess the level of substance abuse among youth.

In addition to expanding their partnerships, the RNCC has also broadened their scope to address mental health challenges for the community at large, and created the Wellness Niagara Subcommittee. The subcommittee worked together to create a virtual wellness resource guide on the web-based platform, Padlet, and is now working on identifying potential host sites to bring Independent Health Foundation’s Good for the Neighborhood program into eastern Niagara. The subcommittee will also be working with Royalton Hartland to support their implementation of a Rural Community Schools Model.

AKRON-NEWSTEAD ALLIANCE ADDRESSES FOOD NEEDS

The Akron-Newstead Alliance has partnered with the Independent Health Foundation for several years to implement the Good for the Neighborhood program. Despite challenges presented during the pandemic, the coalition continued to prioritize meeting food needs and important resource information was shared with community members through drive up events.

The MSNT continues to be a resource for programs like Good for the Neighborhood to tap into as they look to expand into new communities. Recent conversations with Independent Health Foundation show signs of expansion of the program into communities like Lockport and Springville.
NIAGARA FALLS
Daybreak Leadership Committee

MSNT has played a supportive role in the Daybreak Leadership Committee. The committee has met intermittently throughout the year and has recently reconvened to address the growing concerns regarding access to safe, affordable housing throughout Niagara County.

Niagara Falls Health Equity Taskforce

MSNT attended several Niagara Falls Health Equity Taskforce meetings to support connecting the surrounding Niagara County communities with needed health information related to COVID-19.

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN ACT REPORT

MSNT has been working to contribute to The John R. Oishei Foundation’s report that aims to better understand the local impact of the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act. This report identifies the specific funding streams by government body and key issue areas for use by nonprofits, funders, and others with an interest in the distribution and potential impact of funding. MSNT was able to tap into their network of stakeholders to help inform the report. MSW/MPH intern, Ashley Wimble plays a key support role in maintaining this document.

MSNT BUILDS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH TRAININGS

Facilitative Leadership for Social Change Training

Over the course of several weeks in the spring of 2021, Community Impact Coordinator, Allison Geddes, attended the Facilitative Leadership for Social Change training hosted by Interaction Institute for Social Change. By attending this training MSNT was able to develop practical collaborative skills and tools to hold creative and intentional space for groups to explore meeting challenges. The skills learned during this training will help to support best practice in coalition facilitation.

Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America- Drug Free Communities Trainings

As a part of the Drug Free Communities grant, the Springville Regional Coalition was required to participate in a four-week training spread throughout the year. Participants were trained on building up coalition capacity through membership, completing a community assessment and logic models for each substance we were focusing on and evaluation strategies for our action plans.

National Planning Conference

Beginning in Spring 2021, MSNT’s staff established a presence at the American Planning Association’s National Planning Conference. Brandon Redmond, a Community Impact Coordinator with MSNT virtually attended the conference. He attended a series of sessions that aim to help urban planners explore critical issues facing communities such as housing, transportation, inclusion, equity, and more. By attending this conference, MSNT was able to build knowledge about pressing issues such as those previously mentioned and take lessons learned from the conference to better serve the communities of Lackawanna and Cheektowaga.