



**United Way  
of New York State**

**Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services  
Public Hearing To Examine the Progress of the Empire State Poverty Reduction  
Initiative (ESPRI)  
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Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony to the Assembly Standing Committee on Social Services to examine the progress of the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI). I am sorry that I am unable to be with you to discuss this important topic but know members of the United Way of New York State (UWNYS) will be testifying in person and will provide details about the innovative ways local communities are responding to local need.

Before I begin, I would like to thank you for your continued commitment to finding ways to overcome poverty and for making a pioneering investment to solve the pervasive issue of poverty through the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative. As a result of this investment, many progressive interventions are showing results in our most challenged communities across New York State.

UWNYS is the membership association of 36 Local United Ways in New York. Of the 16 cities selected for ESPRI, nine of the projects are led by United Ways. When ESPRI was first announced in 2016, UWNYS took a leadership role in facilitating conversations and also working with state government partners to ensure ESPRI would be successful. From early planning to implementation of concepts and ideas, UNWNYS has convened the United Ways that are leading the nine projects to accelerate lessons learned, share challenges, best practices and lessons learned and explore opportunities.



My testimony today will focus on lessons learned, an overview of the current projects, next steps, and other United Way initiatives that support ESPRI efforts.

Three Lessons Highlighted:

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Prior to assuming my role as President & CEO of the United Way of NYS in November of 2017, I was the President & CEO of United Way of the Valley and Greater Utica Area for six years. During that time, we were very focused on collaboration and working together to solve problems locally. Prior to the state formally rolling out ESPRI we partnered with then Assemblyman Brindisi to learn more about the poverty work being done in Rochester. We were fortunate to have then Assemblyman Morelle coordinate tours, dialogue and help us to learn first-hand the positive impact work being done in Rochester. Utica was eager to start a similar initiative and was thankful when selected to be the lead organization.

What is innovative about ESPRI, was the ability for local communities to plan and for individuals living in poverty to be part of the process. State funding rarely supports planning initiatives that bring the community together to work together to overcome barriers. During the planning period we gathered input from more than 1,100 people in poverty in the City of Utica. I will say that the outreach and engagement of people in poverty was critical to the understanding of barriers and opportunities. From the initial outreach of 1,100 people in poverty, we engaged 8 workgroups of 20 participants- with 10 participants in each group either living in or having lived in poverty. To facilitate their engagement and to ensure they would be able to participate- we offered transportation, on-site child care, meals during the session and a \$250 stipend to cover a potential loss of a day's wages.

**The first lesson learned and reinforced is- if you truly want to engage people in poverty in community transformation, an organization needs to act to eliminate the exact barriers we often speak of.** This allows the people impacted to truly participate in the creation of solutions designed to benefit them.

In my current role as President & CEO at UWNYS, I convene the nine United Way led ESPRI. The purpose of this convening is to share information, explore ideas in a trusted environment, help each other solve challenging problems, accelerate lessons learned, identify problems early-on, identify opportunities that can be replicated through other sites, assist each other with contracting issues and share resources. This regular communication has allowed the ESPRI site leaders involved to build trust among their peers, which strengthens collaboration of this rewarding, important and sometimes frustrating work. UWNYS is not compensated for this work, in any way. We provide this service because we know it is important to the success of our member United



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of New York State**

Way's ESPRI project and continued involvement also helps form and share our advocacy agenda.

**The second lesson learned is faster problem solving, rapid opportunity sharing and better coordination of efforts only happens through regular check-ins in a collaborative environment.** We are thrilled to lead this role.

While there was a lot of enthusiasm and energy related to ESPRI, at times there was also a lot of frustration with the state contracting process, disbursement of funding, and delays created in moving projects forward while waiting for the state to respond or provide clarity on project proposals. Numerous issues tied to state contracting caused many delays in the upstart of ESPRI sites and programs. Some sites raised their own start up funds, to avoid significant delays. Other sites were delayed a year or more due to the contracting process. The people involved in the contracting process were great. The system itself is broken.

**The third lesson learned is New York State needs to make significant improvements to the State Contracting process to simplify the process and to make it more user friendly.**

#### Overview of United Way Led ESPRI Projects

Of the 16 ESPRI cities, projects undertaken in Binghamton, Buffalo, Hempstead, Jamestown, Newburgh, Rochester, Syracuse, Utica, and Watertown are led by a local United Way. Each of the sites below are pioneering innovative work, with the goal of making the projects replicable across the state in the future. Most of these sites will submit their own testimony in person or in writing.

#### **Binghamton**

Based on their final Broome Binghamton Anti-Poverty Initiative (BBAPI) evaluation report transportation, unemployment, and quality affordable childcare were the top barriers for those surveyed throughout the initiative. 11 projects were funded that provided resources and supports to over 850 individuals impacted by poverty in Broome County. These supports included transportation to employment, gaining employment and certifications, entrepreneurial opportunities, mentorship and engagement opportunities, and increasing the overall awareness in the community of the challenges that individuals and families face living in poverty. It became clear through the BBAPI work that individuals impacted by poverty, do not present themselves with just one barrier to self – sufficiency and reducing poverty is complex issue that requires a holistic, collaborative, coordinated solution. No one person or organization can do it alone. BBAPI also learned that a multi-generational or whole-family strategy approach



**United Way  
of New York State**

that addresses challenges and issues of the parents and children simultaneously improves outcomes for the whole family. The 11 projects came together for several group meetings to discuss sustainability, challenges, and successes. The one key outcome of those meetings were the importance of sharing data across agencies to address the multiple needs of those impacted by poverty and this would be a catalyst for systemic change and cross-agency

collaboration.

### **Buffalo**

ESPRI/THRIVE Buffalo uses a person-centered approach to career counseling and case management, assists low income working adults in obtaining higher paying jobs, and removes barriers to employment by providing access to emergency dollars to meet the needs of THRIVE customers who are work ready, or require additional training and education. Unique aspects of the THRIVE Buffalo model include a financial wraparound component to overcome barriers to work, having THRIVE customers work with a financial coach, using a talent pipeline approach, convening working groups around community engagement and transportation. In addition, the THRIVE Buffalo project facilitates critical community conversations around disproportionate impact of poverty on communities of color, single women and disadvantaged populations in the community through a racial equity lens.

### **Hempstead**

For the 2020-2021 budget cycle, United Way of Long Island is supporting four local organizations to continue their ESPRI work in reducing poverty among Hempstead residents. Through November 30, 2019, through Hempstead ESPRI 1,169 residents have utilized and accessed services to create self-sufficiency including job and career readiness, mental health support, financial education training, and a fully supported resource center. The next investment in Hempstead ESPRI will support the next 1,000 people seeking support.

### **Jamestown**

Jamestown's ESPRI project has seen demonstrated results by bringing together service providers for more efficient provision of services, and through assisting individuals in obtaining securing and retaining employment and/or enrolling in educational/certification programs. They have engaged more than 300 households to date, primarily through effective collaboration, including a shared database for referral and information sharing. More than 250 individuals have engaged with a coach or mentor—of which 98 have met their employment goals and 63 have been enrolled in educational programs.



More than 294 barriers to self-sufficiency have been overcome, particularly in the areas of childcare, transportation and housing.

### **Newburgh**

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ESPRI Newburgh has successfully empowered 78 families to find pathways out of poverty and on the path to financial

stability. This impactful peer mentorship program supports residents who face barriers such as substance abuse, homelessness, food insecurity, unemployment, financial hardship, limited access to transportation, and mental and physical health challenges. Families have made significant strides in creating positive and substantial financial change in their daily lives: 12 families have paid down debts, 15 families have secured safer and more affordable housing, 7 families have acquired consistent transportation, 19 families have enrolled in workforce development training and collectively families have saved over \$35k to ensure financial crises can be successfully overcome in the future. According to one participant Alma, who has experienced long-term homelessness, "words cannot express how much ESPRI has helped me; thanks to the program, I'm doing the right thing by myself and by my family."

### **Rochester**

Rochester Monroe Anti-Poverty Initiative (RMAPI) is a pioneer in this work. Their engagement in the convenings with our other ESPRI site leads has been invaluable. Website: [www.endingpoverty.org](http://www.endingpoverty.org)

RMAPI seeks to identify and implement systemic changes that target the root causes of poverty and barriers to economic mobility. This includes enhanced community connections, transformed attitudes and behaviors, cross-sector coordination and data sharing, and policy and practice changes. Three guiding principles – address structural racism, address trauma, and build community – inform RMAPI's work. Everything RMAPI does has to be endorsed and approved by people impacted by poverty. RMAPI is a leader in a community-wide goal of reducing poverty by 50% in 15 years, through a focus on increased income, increased affordability and accessibility of basic needs, and deconcentrating poverty. Target populations include single female-headed households (2/3 of all poor households, including 80% of children in poverty) and the labor force (people looking for work or working in low-wage and/or part-time jobs).

Several key RMAPI initiatives and five (5) working groups are active: Employment Working Group (which brings together employers and workforce development/job training), Social Service Provision Working Group (working to connect and coordinate service provision), Data & Evaluation Working Group (how to use data to drive action and learning); Policy Working Group (with specific focus areas of housing, transportation, child care, and justice), and a Funding Alignment Council (working towards coherent funding of programs and services). RMAPI is also working directly



with the City of Rochester and Monroe County on specific initiatives including child care subsidies and financial empowerment.

### **Syracuse**

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Many community partners are engaged in the ESPRI work. Primary areas of focus include: Middle school drop-out

prevention pilot with Syracuse City School District and Onondaga County. Engaging 150 middle schoolers and their families in a pilot to create continuity of care when students change physical buildings during certain grade transitions as well as offer trauma-informed care to those students. Onondaga County is funding two-thirds of the cost of the project. Support for Financial Empowerment Center - assisting low-income individuals, including refugees and New Americans, in achieving specific goals to become financially stable and then thrive, including debt reduction and creation of savings. Apprenticeship program in partnership with organized labor in the skilled trades, CenterState CEO, and employers, to help people living in poverty acquire skills and become members of skilled trades. Transportation pilot to provide transportation to jobs not on bus routes and/or during second and third shifts.

### **Utica**

The Utica ESPRI project is funding the creation of an Extended Day Childcare Center. This is the first licensed center in the Mohawk Valley that will be open during non-traditional hours, including in the evenings and on weekends when working families need access to safe, affordable childcare. Academics First will be licensed to care for children ages 6 weeks – 12 years and will create 30 new jobs.

### **Watertown**

Watertown ESPRI has focused on 4 primary pilot projects which addressed home ownership, transportation, workforce development and poverty eradication. The greatest success has been through the Getting Ahead program, where volunteer participants attend a 16-week program focused on dramatically changing the course of their lives to escape poverty, substance abuse and other challenges. Nearly 100% of the graduates have gone on to steadily hold jobs, maintain sobriety, and become mentors to those who follow in their footsteps. Watertown's biggest challenge remains the home ownership program, which intended to rehabilitate homes through local nonprofits, mentor and establish "bankable" potential owners, and sell the house to the potential owner at an affordable price. The chokepoint in this endeavor has been financially qualifying applicants to hold a mortgage. Watertown ESPRI leaders are aggressively pursuing solutions to improve our success rate in the housing program through March 2021.



PBS did a feature story, watch it here:  
<https://watch.wpbstv.org/video/espri-esnhej/>

## United Way of New York State

### Next Steps

While ESPRI was created as an innovative pilot project, more time is needed for projects to have an impact and to see if the potential to break down barriers to poverty are realized. From the very first conversations around ESPRI, UWNYS advocated for a centralized system to evaluate outcomes and for additional time to provide programs and services. We were thankful for additional funding provided in last year's budget to continue projects. While funding was allocated last year, contracts are still being amended and funds have not been drawn down in many communities.

We are requesting an **additional \$5 million** for SFY 2020-21 to support the critically important work of the nine United Way-led ESPRI sites. Attached to my testimony is our formal request that has been submitted to the Governor. We hope he will include funding in his Executive budget to continue this work and look forward to working with you during the budget process to ensure the funding is included in the Final SFY 2020-21 budget.

### Other United Way of New York State Initiatives

In addition to facilitation of convenings among our United Way organizations, UWNYS leads two other statewide initiatives: ALICE® and 2-1-1 New York that support the work of ESPRI.

### **ALICE® New York: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed**

In 2016 and again in 2018, UWNYS commissioned a report that studied the number of employed individuals and families across the State who were above the poverty level, but still struggled to make ends meet - a population that the report refers to as "ALICE" (Asset, Limited, Income Constrained, Employed). In 2018, UWNYS released an updated ALICE Report that shows New Yorkers still face financial hardship despite increases in employment and median income. ALICE is the single mother who needs assistance with child care. ALICE is the father who is facing eviction. ALICE is the veteran who is facing legal problems as a result of active duty or having difficulty re-assimilating into the community. ALICE is the maintainer in every community, primarily working in retail, home health service and many of New York's most common jobs.

The 2018 report shows that over the last few years, the economy has rebounded and the state has made investments to assist those living in poverty. However, there is still a large number of New Yorkers, **3.2 million, or 45% of the overall population**, that cannot afford the basic needs and lack sufficient income and resources to pay for housing, food, child care, transportation, and health care. The report continues to show



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of New York State**

that ALICE lives in every part of the state, from our biggest cities to our most rural areas. You can see the data on the state level, county level, regional level and municipal level here: <https://www.unitedforalice.org/new-york>. We are happy to provide a presentation on ALICE at some future point, if the committee is interested.

An updated report is scheduled to be released in July 2020. Many of our ESPRI led organizations are utilizing the ALICE Threshold as their ESPRI goal- knowing that simply moving people above the Federal Poverty Level is not a sufficient measure of financial stability.

### **2-1-1 New York**

Thanks in large part to support provided by the Legislature over the last several years, 2-1-1 is a phone number and website that anyone across the state can access 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, to talk to a specialist for help related to every day needs or in times of a disaster. 2-1-1 is completely confidential and available in 180 languages. In 2018, 2-1-1 received 1.7 million phone calls, 21.3 million web visits and just under 25,000 text-based contacts. 2-1-1 maintains the largest directory of health and human services available in every community of the state of New York and is available across 94% of the United States. 2-1-1 provides critical infrastructure for helping all members of the state- including those living in poverty- to find help when they need it. Visit <https://211nys.org/> for more information.

### Conclusion:

Poverty reduction in New York State requires a sustained commitment over many years and at least a generation or two in order to address the structural barriers that make it so difficult for far too many to get ahead. Initial ESPRI efforts are bearing fruit, for which continued investment would increase the numbers of individuals and families that can be assisted in making their way out of poverty and above the ALICE Threshold to financial stability. We thank you for your support.