

# PROGRESS

# CHENANGO

# 2021

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## Commerce Chenango: The county's top business advocacy organization works to Move Chenango Forward



The staff of Commerce Chenango. From left, Joanna Cacciola, Economic Development and Grant Writing; Megan Brennan, Administrative Assistant and Program Aid; Kerri Green, President & CEO; Mary Miner, Director of Membership & Programs; and Audrey Robinson, Director of Communications and Tourism.

BY MELISSA STAGNARO  
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NORWICH

Commerce Chenango President and CEO Kerri Green had big plans for 2020. It would be Green's first full year as head of Chenango's largest business advocacy organization, and she had set lofty goals for herself and her growing team.

"I remember the Economic Outlook Breakfast, and talking with our attendees about all the wonderful things we were going to do and how excited we were to get started," she said, recalling the February 2020 event at Canasawacta Country Club in Norwich.

According to Green, those plans included initiatives around workforce

development, childcare, lodging and rural broadband. She was also keen to rebrand the organization; she'd taken the helm of her predecessor Steve Craig.

"Had we been 'business as usual' we would have hit the ground running that spring with event after event, networking, pro-

grams, visiting businesses and much more," she said.

Instead, barely two weeks later, she and her team were forced to shift their energy and focus as the public health crisis posed by the spread of COVID-19 took center stage. As a former small business owner herself, Green was keenly aware of the threat this posed to

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## Raymond: Investing in the future was the best way to overcome COVID

BY TYLER MURPHY  
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GREENE - Raymond certainly faced challenges in 2020, dealing with changes in production, supply and a handful of employees falling ill.

Overall, the company performed very well mostly due to the fact they have always invested in cutting edge technology in order to remain competitive in their international material handling market.

Before the pandemic one of Raymond's strengths was developing advanced fork trucks, including those powered by hydrogen fuel cells or lithium ion batteries, but just as significant are the computer programs they created that monitor, process and control the move-



Above a Raymond welder works on the factory assemblyline in Greene. The company performed very well mostly due to the fact they have always invested in cutting edge technology in order to remain competitive.

ment of goods through a company.

Speaking of the pandemic Raymond CEO and President Michael Field said, "It has really rein-

forced what's important to all of us, and how the small things in life are the most valuable to us. But from a corporate perspective, I think it really helps you

understand how important the contributions of your people are, and the level of leadership from people that you didn't necessarily

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Greater Opportunities, previously known as Opportunities for Chenango, has the same level of service for the residents of Chenango County with even more resources and options available for those in need. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

## Opportunities for Chenango transforms into Greater Opportunities during the pandemic

BY ZACHARY MESECK  
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CHENANGO COUNTY - Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated, previously known as Opportunities For Chenango (OFC) went through some major changes in 2020, most importantly their merger with the former Opportunities for Broome in July.

According to Greater Opportunities Deputy Director Kelly Robertson, "The former OFB and OFC were both community action agencies, and merged into Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated because we wanted to provide more comprehensive services to the people of both communities" said Robertson. "We wanted to make sure we were taking two strong agencies to make an even stronger one, and fortunately that's what we did."

Robertson said the merger has been in the works for approximately three years, and that the process was made even more difficult by the coronavirus.

"The merger was in the works far before COVID-19, and the fact that we were able to accomplish it even with COVID is great," she said. "We were able to keep our services going during the pandemic by transitioning everything to a virtual format."

"Unfortunately, we did have to temporarily close our Head Start Centers and Main Offices to the public for a period of time during the start of the pandemic, but we never closed for services as we were still able to provide services virtually. In May, we were able to re-open our offices to the public."

She added that the coronavirus forced Greater Opportunities to take on a unique perspective on education, and the creation of a new phone application was part of their plan to help feel the void.

"Starting this year, individuals can download

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# Commerce Chenango: How our county's top business advocacy organization is working to Move Chenango Forward —

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Chenango businesses. She was determined to ensure her organization was in a position to help — as an advocate and as a resource — for businesses and organizations across the county.

“Throughout the spring and summer, we hosted over 15 webinars, many in collaboration with our county officials and with state representation,” she said. Those events were open to not just Commerce Chenango members, but any business or community member that could benefit from the information shared.

She and her team also counseled individual business owners and non-profits on funding opportunities, evolving state guidelines, the re-opening certification process and more.

In addition, they used their role as an advocacy organization to ensure that the voice of Chenango's businesses was heard on the local, state, regional and federal levels.

“Commerce Chenango was uniquely poised to be a liaison between the state, the Chenango County legislature, Chenango County Department of Health and Emergency Services,” she explained. “We also served as the Chenango County representative in



Commerce Chenango President and CEO Kerri Green hosted New York Lt. Governor Kathy Hochul on a tour looking at downtown Norwich businesses in early December.

the Southern Tier Control Room and communicated daily with all Chenango County agencies on what was happening at the state.”

Ensuring Chenango's ability to meet both the public health and potential economic impact of the pandemic required the forging of new partnerships, increased communication and trust.

“Collaboration is key in times like these. I am extremely proud of how we came together as a county, region and state,” Green said.

Commerce Chenango

found other ways to be of service, as well. Perhaps the highest profile of those efforts was the Fueling the Frontline program. More than \$10,000 was raised through the Chenango Foundation to fund the initiative, which provided meals from local restaurants to health care workers and emergency responders across the county. It was coordinated by Commerce Chenango's Director of Membership & Programs Mary Miner, and helped both the struggling restaurant industry as well as showed appreciation for those working on the front

lines against COVID-19.

“Fueling the Frontline was an amazing and humbling opportunity to give back to Chenango County in a meaningful way,” Green said. “We felt like we were making a difference and showing our appreciation during a dark time.”

One piece of advice Green gave to business and non-profit leaders often in the spring and summer of 2020 was to use the opportunity presented by the pause in ‘business as usual’ to look at their business model, budget, staffing and marketing.

“I felt it was important for businesses to take a step back and take a look at their organization as a whole,” she said. “When will we ever have this opportunity again to slow down; really look at our

mission, operations and (business) model; and make changes?”

Green took her own advice and applied it to Commerce Chenango.

“It gave us time to think, as a team, about how we could do more for the businesses and overall economic future of Chenango County,” she said. “I had the opportunity to really look at our organization from the ground up to see where we did well and where we had gaps.”

One important result of that discovery process was a clearer sense of identity for Commerce Chenango, which serves as not just a chamber, but also an umbrella for Development Chenango Corporation, the Chenango County Industrial Development Agency, and the Chenango

Foundation.

“Commerce Chenango is more than a Chamber of Commerce. We are the economic development arm of Chenango County. We work with businesses, developers, and our county, state and federal partners to advocate for progress in Chenango County,” Green explained. “We are poised to face any challenge, advocate for the needs of the county and we are always looking for opportunities to add to the local economy.”

She is particularly proud of the new branding she and her team developed around the organization's purpose and mission.

“I love our new logo and website. Not only

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Development Chenango Corporation offers a number of loan programs and funding options for those looking to start or expand a business.

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does it show teamwork from my entire staff, but it really represents who we are," she said. "The logo really spells out who we are, what we do and how it connects: Chamber, Economic Development and Tourism."

While COVID-19 is not

continued outreach and collaboration with local, state and federal partners.

The biggest challenge, she said, will be helping businesses "get back to business." This is particularly true for the tourism properties, entertainment industry and the festivals and events that draw thousands of people to the

that will impact not only the events themselves but other businesses that rely on the visitors they draw – including lodging, restaurants, retail and more.

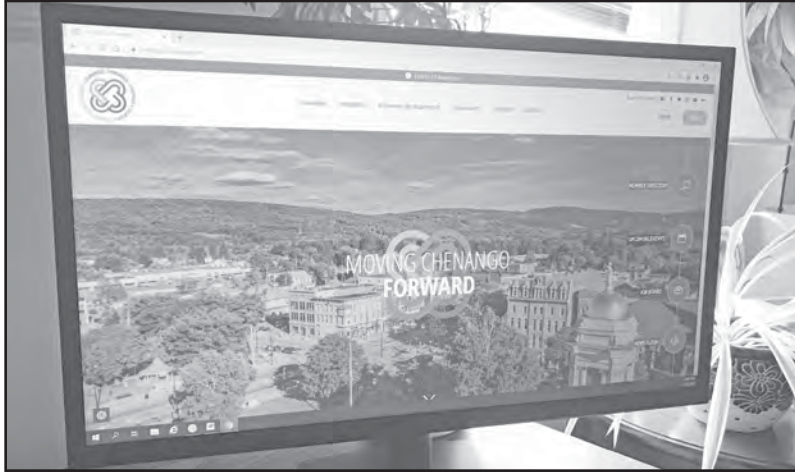
"A question that needs to be considered is, 'How can Chenango County position itself to have a successful, even if lighter, tourism season this spring, summer and fall?'"

While the lingering effects of COVID will no doubt present challenges across industries, it has also helped Green see new opportunity in what some might consider Chenango's oldest asset: the county's rural geography.

"We are uniquely positioned to take advantage of those people and businesses who no longer want to be in bigger cities," she said.

Commerce Chenango's new Economic Development Assistant and Grant Writer, Joanna Cacciola, has been tasked with updating Chenango County's property profile on an online system called StateBook, which is used by developers and investors considering locations for future investment.

"Having a large portfolio of these available spaces will entice these developers to visit our county," Green said. "Once we get them here, I know we can sell the area – which means jobs, opportunities and local investment in our economy."



Commerce Chenango re-evaluated aspects of the chamber's business model and branding and created a new website and logo, which more accurately reflects the organization as a whole and how it connects its three main functions: Chamber, Economic Development and Tourism.

yet in the rear-view mirror, Green and her team's eyes are firmly on the future. What does that mean for the organization they lead, and for Chenango County?

According to Green, their top priorities include broadband access for all of Chenango County; increasing lodging opportunities; increasing access to childcare; connecting businesses and organizations with grant and other funding opportunities; creating an attractive portfolio of Chenango County to attract industries; and

community each year.

"From the General Clinton Canoe Regatta, to the Antique Rollers, Colorscape Chenango, Music in the Park, the Chenango Blues Festival, Classic Car Cruise-ins and so many other outdoor festivals, events, street fairs and concerts, tourism is a huge part of what makes Chenango County special," Green said.

Many of these festivals and events are still in limbo for 2021, and she said she worries about how

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Talking about candies come browse through our large selection of bulk candies including sugar free.

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# Raymond: Investing in the future was the best way to overcome COVID—

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anticipate you would see it from.”

Field has worked for Raymond for 19 years, the company will celebrate its 100th anniversary in Greene in 2022.

“We’ve got leaders from all levels of the organization who stood up, took over initiatives and found ways to be successful. We just accomplished things that I didn’t believe were possible before in this last 10 months.”

Raymond was leading a technological race in the industry, creating ever more efficient trucks and programs. The demand for these automated systems became ever more crucial when COVID hit, especially in an essential industry that had no choice but to keep the supply lines functioning.

“The workforce has really just pulled together and has been flexible. The Raymond Corporation was declared an essential business by the State of New York because we’re responsible for supporting businesses and food distribution, obviously warehousing, medical supply, the overall supply chain.”

“COVID has probably sped up some of the changes that were taking place previously, particularly with our largest customers continuing to grow and us having stronger and stronger partnerships with them,” said Field.

Overall the indus-

try saw its markets contract roughly five percent, but Raymond bucked this trend and still managed to see growth. Raymond also continued to develop and launch new products and secure new customers during the pandemic.

“Our most critical operation is in manufacturing, but beyond manufacturing we have all of our corporate engineering functions. We have so much technology and innovation going on, you’ve got lab work and research happening, then you also have all of the corporate functions,” he said.

### Employees and business learn to adapt

“Quite frankly from my role, there’s never been a time when I’ve been more proud of our workforce in the way that they’ve truly gone above and beyond in responding not only to COVID challenges, but responding to taking care of our customers,” said Field.

“Our people were tremendous each day in recognizing that there was a new process in place, we were improving them all of the time, and they really worked with us to be able to continue to run, and run very efficiently.”

One of the effects of COVID was commercial customers realizing the critical importance of keeping goods on the shelves and the challenges facing supply chains, especially as shortages took effect.

“A lot of our customers who had substantial-

ly increased demand really relied on us to support them so they could take care of their customers,” he said.

Raymond elected to shut down initially for about eight days after New York State announced the health requirements for companies. The company decided to close its regular production during that time so it could form a response team and focus on implementing changes to their facility so work could resume safely.

“A lot of our engineering people, our HR people and our manufacturing leadership were there around the clock, making changes to the facility – putting up new barriers, spreading out positions, working on installing new entrances to the building where if your temperature ran high you wouldn’t be allowed in, it kind of locked you out of the system until it was responded to. So, we took that period of time to really ready ourselves and ready our processes.”

Like most major corporations, Raymond had a contingency in their emergency planning that also included what to do in case of a global pandemic.

The company’s risk management committee reviewed those plans along with a core group of long-time leaders, most have worked there more than fifteen years. Drawing on health experts’ advice and their own experience the group looked at tabletop exercises examining how

the company could respond to the pandemic. They took their preplans and updated them to better fit the specifics of the current crisis.

“When we decided that we were going to keep the factory running, the priority was that we were going to have the people who could work remotely do that, so we made the decision and within 48 hours we had 700 people working from home. Our IT organization set up a network, supported our employees, and we did this almost flawlessly. It was again, people standing up and figuring out how to do things that we had never considered before.”

Field also said it was hard to adapt to the unknown and the fast-changing expectations at the onset of the pandemic.

“In a short period of time – I think that our culture around continuous improvement and management practices helped drive this, particularly developing standard work – we had specific standard work that was structured for everything from cleaning inside the facility, to what density we would have in the building, how conference rooms would be structured, temperature taking at the doors, etc. Because we have a good infrastructure and strong manufacturing engineering team, we were able to put those in place very quickly.”

In putting these new processes in place Field explained he and the com-

pany were reminded of just how important investing in internal resources and employees really is. He said before Raymond began looking outward it took a long, hard look at its internal teams and systems to make sure they were the best they could be.

“Our people were exceptional. As I look back, it’s really is incredible to me how few problems we had. We really focused on communication, education, understanding and explaining why we were doing things, but the great majority of our workforce understood what we were doing was important, that we are important to the economy, and it kind of gave us something to fight for. And I think people have pride in that, and it made people go above and beyond their performance to get the job done,” he said.

Contrary to another trend, instead of laying-off workers during the pandemic Raymond has sought to fill needed positions.

“At this point, one of our biggest challenges has been the need to hire additional staffing to support our buyers. So, we did have hiring going on the entire year.”

The company had to get creative, holding drive-thru career fairs and other non-traditional and often virtual, recruiting programs. Raymond has more staff now than it did a year ago, adding about 75 more staff members to their manufacturing headquarters in the Village of Greene.

### Market demand for automation and efficiency grows

There was a significant increase in food distribution demands and e-commerce during the pandemic as most of us started purchasing items online more than ever before. Addressing both these demands were key parts of Raymond business model.

“Warehousing, lean management and logistic solutions is really the heart of our business. So as those organizations grew both in equipment usage,” said Field.

Raymond has increased manufacturing capacity during the pandemic and accelerated development and implementation of cutting-edge data tracking and warehouse management systems. The systems were used to increase Raymond productivity and were also products they sold to other commercial customers.

“We focus on the words: optimize, connect and automate. Step one is to optimize our customer’s present processes and tools. The second step is to connect, which is setting up the data piece so you have better information that you’re making decisions on. And then finally when those things are in place, the third piece is providing automating products that provide more value to our customers.”

“It’s really those three steps working together,”

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Field said.

The company worked towards making more connections, processing more data and information, and focused on increased automation, all of it accelerated and more profitable due to the pandemic.

"I do think that, post-pandemic, we will come out as we are now, a stronger organization, and I think that our larger customers are seeing us as more of a solutions and technology partner rather than just a truck provider."

Raymond worked to find opportunity in the crisis by providing solutions to other companies struggling with the fallout from the pandemic. They continued to launch new products as customers' demand for both fork trucks and technical support grew.

"Customers are looking for more technology because they recognize the environment that they're in with COVID being a risk to them and with shortage of labor. So, we brought some new automation products to market that we're very proud of," said Field.

Raymond Energy Essential Business was one of those offerings.

The company launched a new lithium ion set of batteries for fork trucks. Seen as the next generation of power, they provide a number of advantages over older sources. Field said customers were excited to see the new technology.

"We certainly think it's



**Raymond produced more than 2,500 face shields to support local communities and essential workers including health care and first responders.**

the future. And again, I'm so proud of the engineering team and supply base to be able to work in this environment and bring new products to market, maybe even faster than we would have because there's more of a sense of urgency."

Field said the next few months will depend greatly on the company's leaders and how the government responds next.

He said the leadership team at Raymond had a positive outlook.

"We reviewed what we thought about the next three to six months and it was a very optimistic assessment.

The pandemic has strengthened e-commerce, a part of the economy Raymond services very well. It has also generat-

ed closer partnerships with customers.

"So, the forecast for our business is very positive, both with orders that they're taking today and also business that we anticipate to gain in the next six months. They're indicating that their customers actually feel good about the future," he said.

"I think a part of that is the vaccine, they're optimistic, they're looking to spend money and they're looking to invest to be more efficient. And that's where our products and our expertise around lean management helps to support that."

**Help the community, help your families**

Field said Raymond is in regular contact with the Chenango Department of

Health and participates in a weekly call with local organizations and the hospitals.

"We've had a strong partnership with UHS where they are monitoring any Raymond associate who has any type of symptoms - we have a medical provider talk to the individual to make sure that they're getting whatever resources they need," he said.

"I don't think we can thank them enough for the level of support that they have provided to Raymond, and more importantly to the entire community. They're really the heroes in this whole process."

In a normal year Raymond and their employees support a number of community events and charities and the company remained committed to that. Since most fundraising events were canceled, Raymond decided to reach out and donate more.

"We continued to support all of the organizations that we did previously. Most of them couldn't have events or do those types of things, so we provided more financial support this past year," said Field.

When there was a shortage of protective equipment in the area Raymond tasked their engineers and staff to create their own and shared them with those in need.

"The most unique thing that we did I think, that in the midst of trying to prepare our facilities and take

care of our people, one of our engineers came up with the idea of producing face shields to help our medical providers."

The company produced 2,500 face shields and donated them to local frontline medical workers.

"They were very high quality and we were able to support everything from the local veterans' office, local hospitals - the impact was really brought home to me when we had a small local medical provider and they called looking for just three or five of these face shields.

"When Raymond responded by presenting far more than requested Field said health representative had tears in their eyes.

"They said that this was the difference between them having to close or being able to take care of people," he said.

Living in a small town, a number of Raymond employees have family members working as health-care professionals, as was the case for one engineer.

"One of our engineers had an expertise in 3-D printing, and his mother was a nurse so he was obviously concerned about the lack of PPE, so it was a personal mission. He started looking online and people were sharing drawings, so we took that initiative and his capabilities on our 3-D printer, put it together with our lead manufacturing and we were able to put together a small assembly line. So, it wasn't related to anything that we

already make, but we're good manufacturers and it proved out in this case," said Field.

The company also modified its traditional toy, clothing and food drives this year but still supported a version of the events.

Employee volunteers dropped off blankets and toys for their holiday campaign. The company also usually provides about 1,000 turkey dinners for Thanksgiving. This year the company provided the meals at a drive-thru pick up instead.

Field hopes a vaccine will begin a return to normalcy. "There's no way to accelerate getting through this. It does require a sense of patience, a bit of self-sacrifice and some compromise."

The company hopes to celebrate in 2022, as it marks their 100th anniversary, and hopefully a year free from the pandemic.

"I'm really looking forward to that opportunity. We're tremendously blessed with the quality of people and with the supply base that we have in the region. We have so much knowledge and expertise in our people and our factory," said Field.

"A part of us we always reinforce, is that we love the idea of the small company feel of being in Greene. But at the same time, we're part of this global organization, so we really try to take the best of both worlds and we feel fortunate to have that."

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# Opportunities for Chenango transforms into Greater Opportunities during the pandemic —

Continued from Page 29

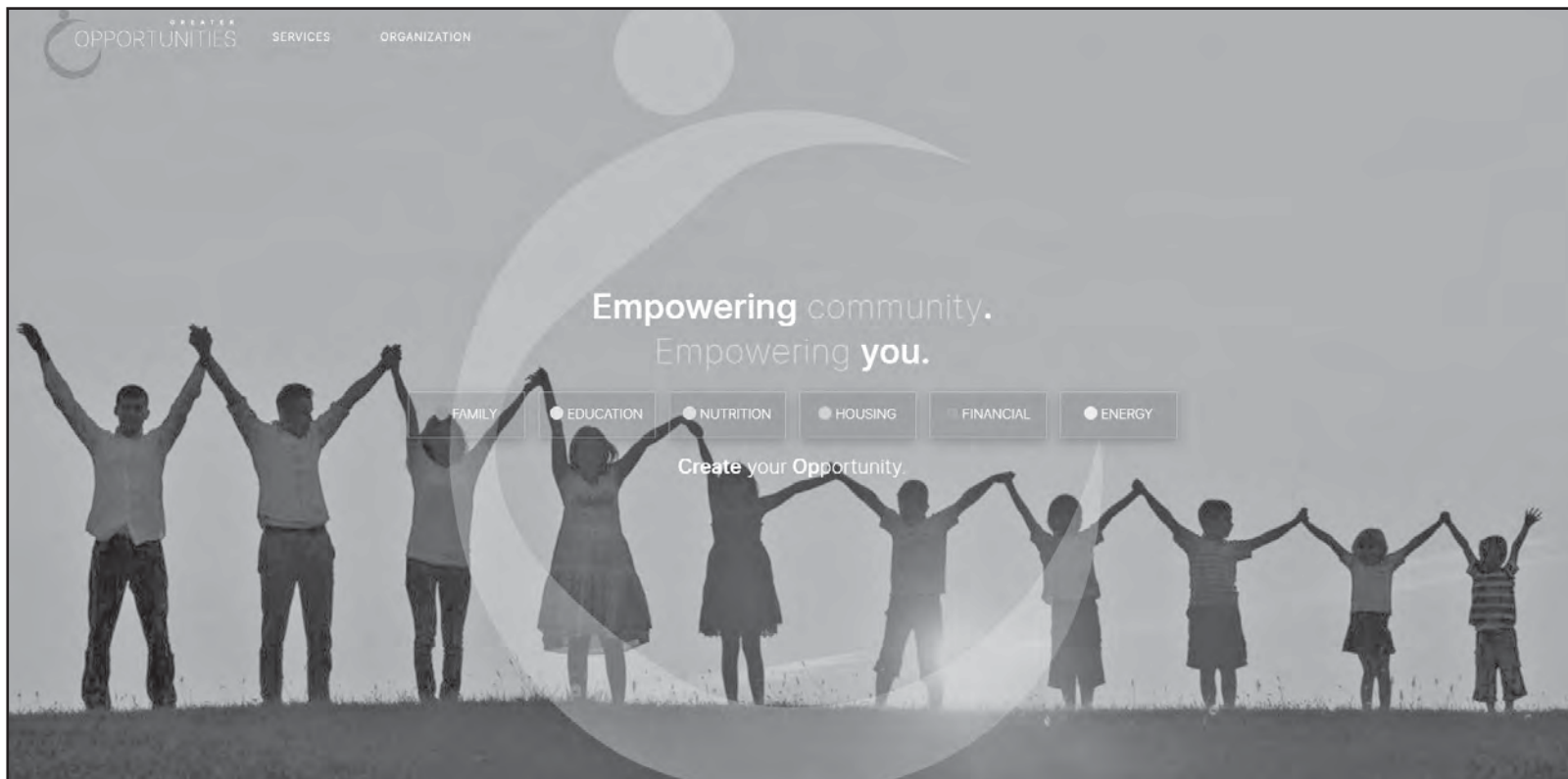
the Greater Opportunities app to see what services are available, receive notices from the agency, and apply for services,” said Robertson. “It’s another way for us to communicate with our clientele and our community.”

Robertson said the Greater Opportunities phone application took about six months to develop, and it will allow people to check on available programs along with a variety of other functions.

In addition to the phone application, the organization has also continued to write for grant funding and provide services, along with the total rebrand and new website.

“We wanted to make sure that both communities understood that the services we provide would continue, and that we would be able to expand on our services with the merger,” Robertson said. “We know people were worried about the merger, and we heard concerns that Greater Opportunities would not provide our current programs and services to both Broome and Chenango.”

“The combination of the two agencies increas-



After the development of a new website and mobile application, people can now keep track of their appointments and more at no cost. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

es our ability to provide services, and it also makes it so people have more options for where they receive services.”

She said for people living in Greene, it might be easier for them to go to the Broome County Office instead of the Norwich Office. She added that with their combined resources, Greater Opportunities can provide a continuum of services to their clientele.

“Within one agency, we can now take an individual from homelessness to homeownership through our variety of programming,” Robertson said.

“That’s one of the huge benefits of the merge, and we’re happy that it was able to happen despite the pandemic.”

Robertson added Greater Opportunities was very fortunate that it didn’t have to make staffing cuts, and it only had to close for a limited amount of time while still providing services remotely.

She said Opportunities for Chenango had grown a considerable amount in the past five years, expanding the services offered even before the merger.

“We’re fortunate to have been able to work

with our communities and identify their needs and what kinds of programs they’d like to see, before and during the pandemic,” she added. “For example in our Head Start programs, a lot of parents were having trouble with the children not falling asleep at night. So the Head Start staff developed the Pajama Program, which provided parents with resources and skills need to develop a healthy bedtime routine with their child.”

Listening to the needs for the community and responding to those needs

is at the core of Greater Opportunities’ mission.

“We’re definitely listening, we’re definitely trying to meet the community where it is, and we’re looking to expand our services in ways to help meet that need,” said Robertson. “We have a wonderful working relationship with local government and other community agencies. We work in conjunction with them to collaboratively serve the people in our community.”

Robertson said working collaboratively with other nonprofits, and knowing where to refer cli-

ents in need was also a huge part of helping others during the pandemic. She said looking at all of the needs of a person is vital when trying to help them through a crisis.

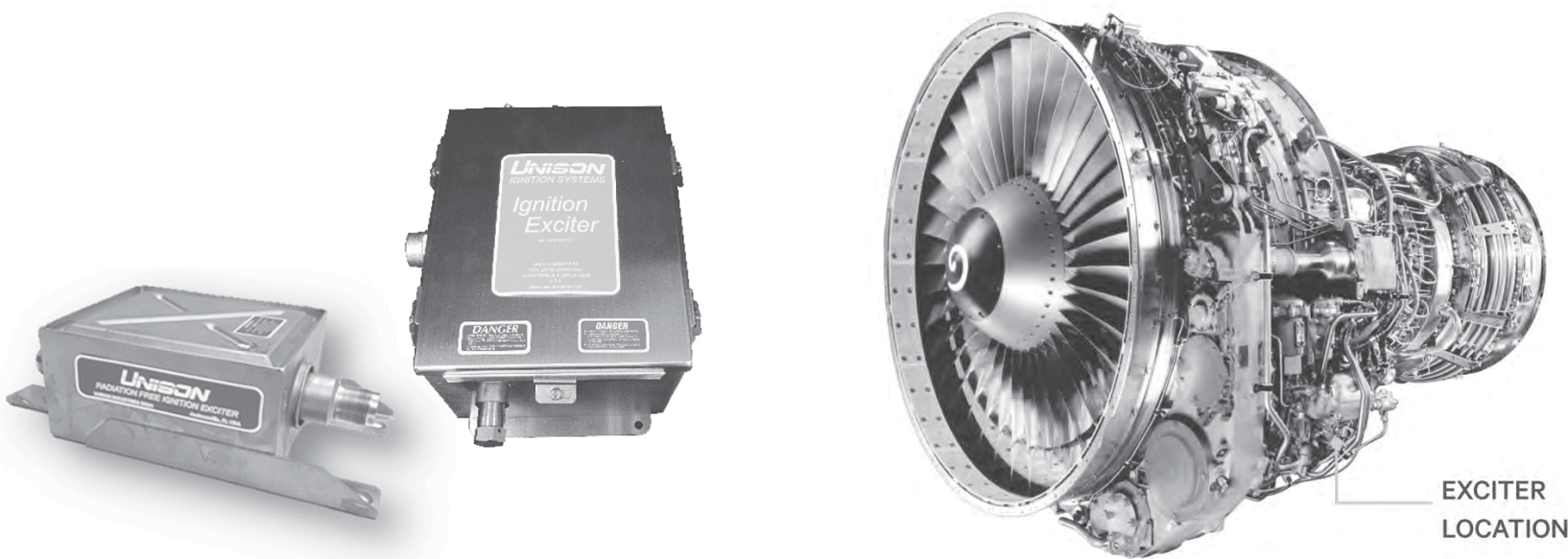
“Non-profit agencies have to work together in order to serve a client holistically and meet the client where they are,” she added. “For instance, we’re not experts in banking, so we’re not going to try and take on banking; so we’re going to refer them to local banks.”

“There’s no need to repeat what another group is already doing, it’s working collaboratively to make sure the client gets what they need.”

She said while the merger did have several benefits, the major challenge for staff was the considerable increase in size of the agency and working within a two-county region.

“I think in the beginning people worried that everything would change here or that we would move everything to Broome,” said Robertson. “We still have the same services in both counties, and all of our programs are going forward as usual.”

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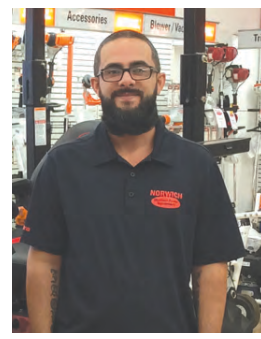


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