

PROGRESS CHENANGO

AN EVENING SUN PUBLICATION • JANUARY 27, 2020 • NORWICH, NY

The Impact Project, connecting churches and “saving souls” one home at a time

By ZACHARY MESECK
The Evening Sun

CHENANGO COUNTY – The Impact Project has helped over 100 families stay in their homes since its inception, and continues to work on expanding its operations and doing more each year.

According to The Impact Project Founder and Executive Director James Willard III, The Impact Project completed twice as many projects this year as it did the year before, but they’ve reached a plateau.

The Impact Project is an independent, non-profit, Christian organization that does major home repairs for elderly, handicapped, and low income families. The organization received over 700 requests in the span of eight months.

“The need and demand has outweighed what we’re able to do right now, and our goal right now is to find ways to meet those demands,” said Willard. “Our major focus in 2020 is figuring out how to build an infrastructure to

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Volunteers from The Impact Project helped a family last year by pouring and shaping concrete into a handicap accessible ramp with the assistance of Sidney Federal Credit Union, Curtis Lumber, and the Trojan Deli. (Photos by Zachary Meseck)



The Impact Project Founder and Executive Director James Willard III (Photos by Zachary Meseck)

In Your Own Words



Shawn Sastri

Norwich community benefits from volunteers

The City of Norwich significantly benefits from the many committed volunteers in our community. Youth have opportunities to be involved in sports, scouts and the arts and music made possible by volunteers. We have community events like Blues Fest, Gus Macker, Colorscape, and the Turkey Trot all made possible by volunteers.

I have always been an avid volunteer and I encourage others to as well. I began volunteering at the local YMCA around 1985. I remember every Saturday night was family night and we set up for a movie, bingo, cooked food and organized games in the gym. As a youth in our community I also participated in Leader’s Club under the direction of Mark Howell. For someone who struggled with school and wasn’t sure about how college might fit into my future, volunteering was very satisfying for me. Seeing the smiles on the faces of the kids who enjoyed what I did, brought a smile to my face. I still get comments today from people who as kids knew me from the result of my volunteering. I’m not sure I recognized at the time how I had influenced their lives; enough that they recalled examples as they became adults.

As a family we try to volunteer as much as we can throughout the community, but it can be difficult for us at times. Not unlike many, I feel our lives are fast paced and not everyone is inspired to slow down in the rush and volunteer as much as they used to. At the same time there are a lot more events going on in the community that really require more people to volunteer. I am encouraged by the efforts that our community has given in the recent past with volunteer groups like I.N.N., the Bandera Family Christmas and most recently The Helping Hands event.

There are too many times that we can all hear about the troubles in our community, but I would like to see these positive things about our community flip the script on our story. We have a great community to call home and I hope that those that volunteer remain committed to the things that bring them joy and I also hope that the stories of these volunteers and what they can accomplish will inspire others to volunteer. I am hoping in my position I can lead by example and remain committed to volunteering and continuing to making Norwich a great place to live.

— City of Norwich Mayor
Shawn Sastri

Chenango United Way beats the odds to keep community united

By CATHERINE SASSO
The Evening Sun

Chenango United Way (CUW) overcame some difficult challenges in 2019. Not only did the organization meet their \$425,000 goal during their 2019 campaign, but they also coordinated one of the largest health care events in Chenango County.

“Greater Chenango Cares Innovative Readiness Training was what we spent the majority of our time on in 2019,” said Executive Director Elizabeth Monaco. About 187 Military personnel and 170 volunteers provided no-cost medical, dental, vision, and veterinary care.

This was the third year that CUW coordinated the event. Monaco stated that they found out that IRT was coming to Cortland, and they thought it would be a great opportunity to split

the event and provide services to Chenango County as well. However, this meant the event needed to be coordinated in half the time the organization was used to.

“We only had seven months to prepare, as opposed to 18 months. We didn’t have funding, staffing, or volunteers. It meant a lot of work to get it all together. We had to raise money outside of the campaign to make that happen,” said Monaco.

The event scheduled 1,100 appointments in ten days between the four categories of services. 6,000 services were provided back to the community which were valued at over \$340,000.

“It was because of the number of families who are uninsured or under-insured that we were able to bring that back. The need is really high for families who

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Executive Director Elizabeth Monaco represented the Chenango United Way at the Canasawacta Country Club during their golf tournament fundraiser in September. (Photo by Zach Meseck)

Chenango United Way, used to overcoming challenges —



It's My Bag is a community impact project through the Chenango United Way that benefits children transitioning through foster care. 60 children a year receive new backpacks, personal care items, and comfort items such as blankets and teddy bears to help ease their transition. (Photo by Catherine Sasso)

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need those services. Even though it was short planning it provided amazing results for the community. One of our biggest contributions to the community," said Monaco.

The Chenango United Way funds 27 local programs. The funded programs fall under four categories: education, financial stability, health, and other efforts. According to Monaco the programs being funded are the ones that will make the most impact.

When CUW discovered there was no dentist in Chenango County that accepted Medicaid, they found a way to bring that service to the area.

CUW teamed up with the Chenango Health Network and Lourdes to form the Dental Task Force. Lourdes agreed to bring their dental hygiene van to Norwich two times a month during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. They set up the van outside the Norwich YMCA and were able to provide dental services to Medicaid patients.

Not only have the women at CUW advocated and provided health care options for the Chenango County community, but they have also lobbied for better funding for community support programs.

CUW is the lead agency for the Emergency Food and Shelter Fund. The fund supports food banks, soup kitchens, and provides emergency funds for those at risk of having their heat shut off.

Monaco shares that when she started at CUW 20 years ago, they were receiving about \$35,000

a year in federal funding. But in the last seven years, funding was getting cut and not allowing for the programs to be properly funded.

"Several years ago the formula changed and it perceived that Chenango county was in a better state then it had been according to the formula. So we did quite a bit of lobbying. Not only did funding decrease but it went from federal funding to what's called State Set Aside funding. So we did a lot of lobbying at that point to try to get the formula changed and plead our case that Chenango County was still in need," said Monaco.

She then said they were able to get some funding reinstated for Chenango County but it was really minimal. It went from \$30,000 down to \$12,000 and then over the course of the last few years it's been continually decreased. In 2018 it got down to 9,500.

After more intensive lobbying by CUW, in the fall in 2019 they were informed that their funding would start coming from the Federal fund again, and they were allocated \$25,000 for 2019.

"So we've basically been reinstated for the regular funding at a much higher amount. I feel like that's a big win. Part of that is thanks to the work shown by ALICE. Their finally realizing at the federal level that our rural communities are seeing more families that are working hard to make ends meet and they're still using our food pantries and soup kitchens and they're struggling to make their heating and electricity bills so I think the ALICE work is starting to pay off in a lot of areas," said Monaco.

ALICE stands for

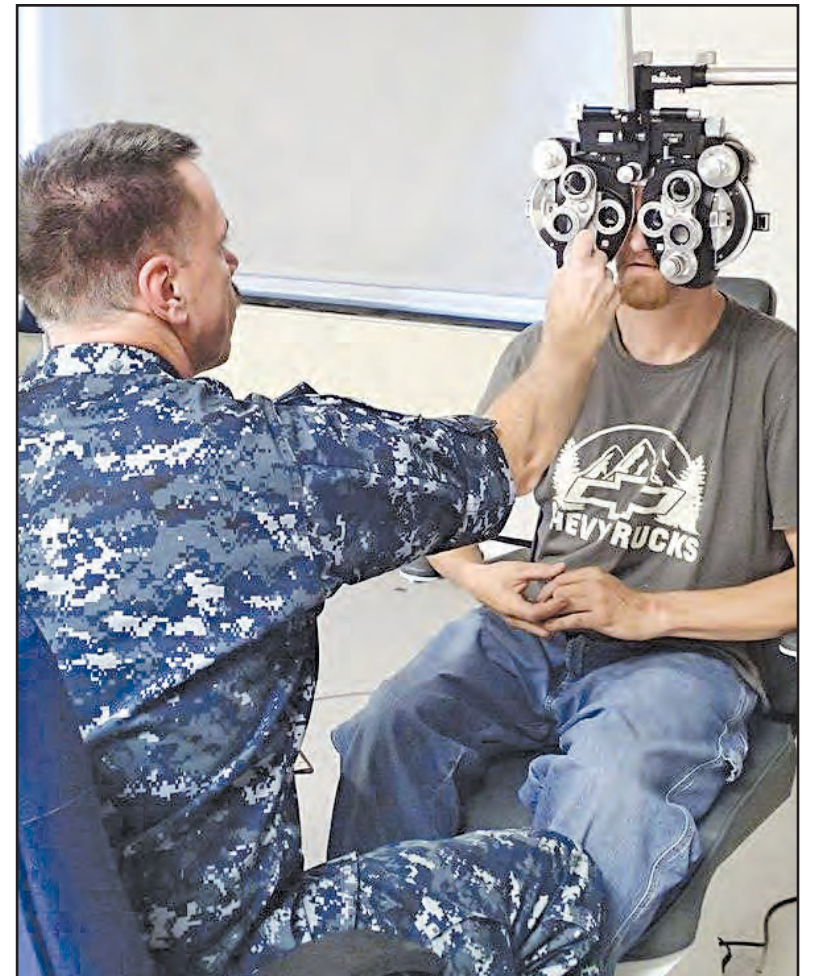
Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These are families who have incomes above the Federal Poverty Level but not enough to afford a bare-bones household budget.

"More and more families are working and struggling. Having to make decisions on what bills they are going to pay when, and working sometimes two or three jobs but not having adequate health insurance, not having adequate child

"Poverty in Chenango County is staying pretty flat, but the ALICE number keeps raising."

Business Manager Victoria Mitchell is optimistic that people are recognizing the issues surrounding ALICE and are finally ready to take action.

"Five years ago people had a tendency to turn a blind eye to the issues surrounding homelessness and drug use in the area. Now we have people at the very least recogniz-



During the Greater Chenango Cares Innovative Readiness Training, 187 Military personnel and 170 civilian volunteers came together to provide no-cost dental, medical, vision, and veterinary services to the Chenango County Area. (Submitted Photo)

care, struggling with transportation or just really having hard decisions to make every day," said Monaco.

In Chenango County, 48 percent of families are living at or below the ALICE threshold. 33 percent are classified as ALICE and 15 percent are classified as living in poverty. An updated ALICE report will be coming out in spring of 2020. Monaco said she's expecting numbers to be high.

ing those issues, and some even stepping up to help combat them."

She states there is a level of frustration in the community because people recognize that there's an issue but no quick answer.

"I think five years ago people were feeling fatigue that there wouldn't be change and did nothing about it. But now people are starting to feel antsy about making a real change

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The Chenango Dental Task Force encourages healthy dental hygiene practices starting with elementary school students. Last year 613 kids participated in the in-school tooth brushing program, where kids brush their teeth once a day while in school. (Photo by Catherine Sasso)

Success Story

Chenango County Historical Society

The Chenango County Historical Society (CCHS) celebrates the culture of Chenango County – its unique traditions, noteworthy residents, and unusual stories. Museum visitors are immersed in the county’s past through exhibits exploring the rich history of our local region.

First established in 1939, CCHS received an absolute charter in 1956. Ward School No. 2 was acquired in 1958 with renovations beginning immediately. Since reopening as a museum in 1962, Ward School No. 2 has been the home of the CCHS. The campus has expanded greatly since then, with the acquisition of the one-room Ross Schoolhouse (Preston), Loomis Barn (Tyner), a maple sugar house, and the Chenango Canal building, home to packet boat model the “Lillie.”

CCHS is the primary organization dedicated to celebrating the comprehensive history of Chenango County. Since our founding, we have collected a wide range of artifacts directly related to the preservation of local history. Our 2019 exhibits - Chenango County in Fifty Stories, Drawn to History: The Art of Danny McCarey, Towns of Chenango County, and Stitched In Time: The Creations of Beulah Hendrickson – featured many of these

objects.

Regular community events are hosted for guests to experience a wide-range of interactive educational programs, including our popular “Third Thursday” gatherings, which in 2019 highlighted topics such as: A Visit from Leatherstocking Folk, A History of the I.L. Richer Company, Give Us Water and We Conquer!, White Store Church, and The Mummy: Experience Egypt in Central NY.

Besides undergoing a complete redesign of our hallway lobby and main gallery spaces last spring, we embarked on a new approach to highlight local culture that has global influence. This included last fall’s gallery restructuring to highlight stories emphasizing how our regional heritage extends beyond county borders.

Following a year of dormancy, School Field Trip Experiences returned to CCHS. Second graders from nearly every Chenango County public school district became immersed in programs designed to enhance school curricula with hands-on activities. Interactive sessions feature pre-history, Native American culture, pioneer living and westward expansion, Victorian influences, the discovery of electricity and its impact, a lesson in our one-room school house, the role of



Chenango County Historical Society Director Jessica Moquin, with board members John Antonowicz and Bruce Webster in the “Chenango County in Fifty Stories,” gallery at the museum’s upper west gallery in Norwich. The vibrant history of Chenango County comes to life in this exhibit featuring unique anecdotes and artifacts of noteworthy people, places, and events of days gone by. (Photos by Tyler Murphy)

the Chenango Canal, and the influence of local agriculture including a tour of our Loomis Barn exhibits.

While much of our focus is local at the present time, CCHS plans to continue expanding exhibits and programming. We currently host approximately 1,250 annual visitors, and we’ve set our sights on widening our appeal and enhancing our site as an education and tourist destination. With a collection of over 40,000 artifacts, a campus of eight structures, and nearly 100 volunteers, we have the founda-

tion for growing in new ways that are just beginning to be explored.

It is essential for CCHS to secure funding from outside sources to ensure continuation of our mission. We rely on the generosity of private businesses, foundations, and individuals to sustain CCHS. Thanks to generous support in 2019, we have the opportunity to more fully realize our vision and build organizational capacity into the future.



A model of the Chenango County Courthouse in a tribute exhibit to former Chenango County Sheriff Joseph Benenati Jr.



An exhibit in the “Chenango County in Fifty Stories,” gallery showing newsreels from 1908 featuring Oxford resident Michael the Pathe Roostser.

Chenango United Way –

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in the community. It’s gonna be the people who are willing to keep their nose to the grindstone for awhile who are going to see the pay off,” said Mitchell.

Fundraising is going to be a major focus for 2020. The 2019 campaign ran later than usual this past year. So the women of CUW will be spending the first part of the year looking at last year’s campaign to see where they can improve fundraising

efforts.

Mitchell stated they want to focus on donor recognition and informing donors of their impact. Mitchell and Monaco agree that if they are able to inform the community of the impact their making, it will improve their donor retention.

“I didn’t do a ton of presentations this year, and I love presenting. I feel like that opportunity was a missed opportunity in some places. If we could have gotten the chance to show people our work, it makes the connection more solid for people,” said Monaco.

“I’d like to work more with corporations. We always partner with them on the fundraising side but I’d love to find more opportunities to work with them on problem-solving community issues I feel like they have resources, and I don’t mean financial resources, but like intellectual resources and volunteer resources and opportunities with things they could bring to the table that we don’t have already,” said Monaco.

To learn more about the Chenango United Way, and ways you can help, please visit their website at Chenangouw.org.

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The Impact Project, connecting churches and "saving souls" one home at a time —



President and CEO of Sidney Federal Credit Union Jim Reynolds and Sidney Federal Credit Union Greene Branch Manager Sharon Hayes passing a check to The Impact Project Founder and Executive Director Jim Willard III as a way of supporting their cause. (Zachary Meseck Photo)



The Impact Project volunteers help people with anything from new wheelchair ramps to new roofs at no cost to the beneficiary. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

Continued from Page 9 → meet increased demand, and our major challenge is determining how we can process the flood of applications we received."

Willard said there is a need for major home repairs to be completed in the majority of homes in Chenango County, but due to the overwhelming amount of families who are the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Restrained, Employed) population, and more that are in poverty that cannot afford basic necessities,

homes are rapidly falling apart.

According to a recent study released by Cornell, out of the approximately 24,742 homes in Chenango County, 17,295 percent of them are over 50 years old.

"69.9 percent of the homes in Chenango County are over 50 years old," he said. "Your roof doesn't last 50 years, your furnace doesn't last 50 years, your hot water tank doesn't last 50 years, things don't last 50 years

in your home."

"There's a cost to fix those things. Those costs are rising, and we know that almost 50 percent of the county doesn't have the money to put food on their plates, clothes on their backs, and a roof over their heads."

He said without the basic necessities people who are struggling to make ends meet have to decide if they're going to attempt to get some form of assisted living, and more often than not the

homes are sold for cheap and in disarray – lowering nearby property values.

This year The Impact Project performed 12 successful projects, with over 500 volunteers, and dozens of businesses, agencies and churches all coming together to provide a variety of services including: providing handicap ramps for three homeowners so they could enter and leave their homes safely for the first time, replacing roofs so that six homeowners no longer had water coming into their house, which would have led to them abandoning their property and leaving the area or having to be placed in taxpayer-funded housing, installing two furnaces so that homeowners had heat and did not have to rely on the expensive and dangerous options of multiple space heaters or using their ovens to heat their homes, and rehabilitating a zombie property, providing work to 13 businesses with over 50 employees in order to create a safe and affordable home for a local family to purchase.

"This is an intersec-

tion where a mass accident is starting to happen, and we're just one agency that has part of the solution to the big problem," he added. "If you're reading this article, and you are an owner of a business, or you are a pastor, a minister, clergy of your church, or director of a non-profit organization, or even an everyday person, we need your help for volunteering – we need more volunteers."

"We're not asking people for a week, month, or year of their time; we're asking people for one day. Give us a day."

According to Willard, the youngest volunteer The Impact Project has ever had was a four year old, and the oldest was an 87 year old.

"If you fall in that age range, you can make a difference," said Willard.

Willard said every single family his organization has helped through the projects has remained in their homes, with the only exception being when someone has passed away. Willard added that it's imperative we recognize the enormity of the problem.

"The fact that it is increasing exponentially because of the age of homes and the financial constraints of home owners and that the lack of safe and affordable housing is reaching a crisis level in our community," he said. "We need to provide the leadership to bring together all community partners to focus their resources on fixing the problem."

He said organizations like the Chenango United Way, RC Smith Foundation, Calvary Baptist Church, Bert Adams Disposal, Whitney Point Baptist Church, CV Free Methodist Church, Evening Sun, Blue Ox, RE Michel, Rentals To Go, Curtis Lumber, Hanson Concrete, NY Pizzeria, Sherburne UMC, Gutter Experts, SFCU, Hamilton Family Bible Church, Chenango County Code, Norwich Assembly of God, Trojan Deli & Catering helped make 2019 a success.

"I can't tell you how many times I've heard the people we've helped say, 'If you didn't do this, we were going to fold up and

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Taken during a ribbon cutting ceremony in Sherburne after The Impact Project completed its first ever full home remodel and sale. This project employed around 50 individuals, brought in over 30 volunteers, used local sources for building materials, and helped bring pride back to a neighborhood that was sick of seeing a rundown house on their street. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

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leave,' because the homeowner is at the end of the rope," he said. "They're backed into the corner and have nowhere to go, and they've tried the means they can, they've exhausted their resources, their knowledge, and physical ability."

"If something doesn't get done, we know that chances are they're going into some form of assisted living."

Willard said The Impact Project has saved the residents of Chenango County millions of dollars in assisted living costs, and has saved over a million dollars in labor thanks to the efforts of its volunteers.

"I have seen it, lived it, and personally breathed it, there is an innate characteristic in every single one of us that wants to help people, and the work of The Impact Project works as a triggering mechanism for that characteristic," said Willard. "You've got people, 3,802 people have donated their time, which would cost over a million dollars if it was in the real world of

charged services."

'You've got over 100 families that received home improvements, that have been able to stay in their homes and have saved Chenango County and New York State millions of dollars.'

He said to The Impact Project, the home improvements represent a helping hand to those in need.

"This is how I personally look at it, the homeowner, the person, the family is down, and we're reaching down with our hands and pulling them back up," said Willard. "We're getting them back on their feet, and we're giving them the hope to return to the normality of life, if there is such a thing."

The Impact Project already has their first project in 2020 planned for a family in Chenango County.

Those who are interested in learning more about The Impact Project may visit their website at theimpactprojectgreene.org for more information.



Above: The 107th project completed by The Impact Project, which helped the Goodrich family get in and out of their home using a handicap acceptable ramp. Volunteers worked for over an hour in the rain to ensure the project was completed in a single day. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

At right: The Lamphere family received a free handicap accessible ramp from The Impact Project in September of 2019. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

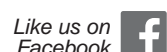


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