2023 PROGRESS

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The Earlville Opera House aims to provide educational opportunities surrounding the arts. Pictured are participants in Jenni's Music Musical Theater Class, held in the EOH's historic 1892 theater. (Photo from EOH)

50 years later EOH continues to support **Chenango County arts**

Sarah Genter

Evening Sun Writer

EARLVILLE - For 50 years, the Earlville Opera House (EOH) has served as a pillar of local arts, culture, history, and education.

Located at 18 East Main Street and armed with three

full-time staff members, a ing for future generations." dedicated board of trustees, and approximately 200 volunteers annually, the EOH has been upholding their mission "to enrich the Central New York community through the visual and performing arts while preserving our historic build-

The EOH does this by promoting the arts through musical performances, art galleries, visual and performing arts programs, arts workshops, education opportunities, and managing the Broome, Chenango and Otsego State

Community Regrant (SCR) Program.

"We love bringing arts to Chenango County which is often an underserved area for the visual and performing arts," said EOH Director Michelle Connelly.

Continued on Page 10 →

Another year of growth for I.N.N., add program to help single mothers



Throughout 2022 Fostering Futures Volunteer Teams provided emotional support, helped with practical household tasks, and even assisted with life skills training including budgeting, job seeking, and cooking. (Submitted photo)

Zachary Meseck

Evening Sun Contributor

NORWICH - Improve Norwich Now had groundbreaking year with a huge push for services for mothers and foster children through the founding of Aunt Mary's House, and the continued growth of Fostering Futures.

Throughout 2022, Improve Norwich Now (INN) led several initiatives and programs designed to increase literacy, help foster families, and support young mothers.

According to Improve Norwich Now President Jen Westervelt, while much of everyday life has gone online or become automated - there is still a great

Continued on Page 12 →

IN YOUR OWN WORDS

Positive creativity supports growth at **Chenango County Historical Society**

Jessica Moquin

CCHS Executive Director

NORWICH - When communities took measures to decrease the COVID-19 spread, we started calling this period "The Great Pause," since pause has a more positive connotation than "shut down." We made an effort to embrace "The Great Pause" and everything that followed. Creativity has been key in maintaining a positive attitude throughout, inspiring us to host opportunities outside of typical museum activities.

"The Great Pause" removed distractions, allowing us to fully embrace the implementation of our current strategic plan. Shifting our focus from not simply just a curator of local history but as a community partner, an educational resource, and a regional destination, this included reaffirming our mission: to lead and support the advancement of research, education, and enjoyment of Chenango County history.

A positive and creative approach allowed us to enhance content and activities which highlight the unique cultural heritage of Chenango County. Programs included seasonal exhibit openings, Educational Field Trip Experiences, Specialty Programs, "Path Through History" activities, community festival engagement, and interactive presentations. We also launched pilot episodes of "Chenango" Stories" based on the virtual "OurStoryBridge" oral history model.

Featured exhibits in 2022 included "Alice's Wonderlands: The Art of Alice Hudson" in our Community Gallery, a refresh of Ward School No. 2's "Stitched In Time: Beulah Hendrickson" display, "Celebrating 175 Years of Summer Traditions: A Tribute to the Chenango County Agricultural Society" in the Loomis Barn, and the collaborative "Routes & Roadblocks" exhibit curated in partnership with the Cooperstown Graduate Program of SUNY Oneonta.

The "Alice's Wonderlands: The Art of Alice Hudson" exhibition was a dynamic retrospective on the life and art of a celebrated local artist whose work is now among the permanent collections of the Mingei International Museum and the Museum of the City of New York. This was the first comprehensive show encompassing all of Hudson's distinctive styles, to include her inspirations and her influence as an arts educator, community member, and inno-

"Stitched In Time: Beulah Hendrickson" featured select pieces from the Beulah Avers Barrett Hendrickson collection. This charming display was a highlight of folk art being curated to preserve Chenango County's cultural heritage. While Hendrickson made a living at various times as a teacher, a farmer, and a country store owner, it was her unique ability to hand-craft distinctive dolls and figures that have ensured her legacy.

Along with vintage artifacts, the "Celebrating 175 Years of Summer Traditions: A Tribute to the Chenango County Agricultural Society" exhibit included a commemorative piece of interactive artwork designed by Lynn Morris of Sherburne as

Continued on Page 13 →

50 years later EOH continues to support Chenango County arts -

Continued from Page 9 →

"We strive to provide access to the arts at low or no cost to make them accessible to those who may otherwise not be exposed to art or have easy access to the arts."

The past year was full of exciting developments for the facility, but perhaps most notable to the EOH was its 50th anniversary as a nonprofit. The organization spent the year celebrating and highlighting the Opera House's rich and vibrant history.

Rich history

The Earlville Opera House has been a part of the Earlville community since 1892, when the building was first constructed. Connelly said the opera house has always served as a gathering place that promoted the arts.

"Back in the day there used to be vaudeville acts, an occasional snake oil salesman, and silent movies. You know, just different kinds of old vaudeville stuff," she explained. "And then at one point in time it was closed for a couple of decades because the real movies, you know, Hollywood, kind of came in and people were not interested in the silent movies and stuff. But it did transform into a theater, a movie theater, that did show that type of film."



Part of the mission of the Earlville Opera House is to maintain the historic 1892 building.Volunteers Bruce Ward, Architect and Roger Baumann (pictured) directed the renovation of two Victorian storefronts that are part of the EOH. (Photos from EOH)

been abandoned and was slated to be torn down. A political activist named Joey Skaags came to the opera house's rescue and purchased the building. From there, Connelly said he took proposals from various local groups on what they would do with the building.

Ultimately, Skaags selected a group of volunteers and sold them the building for just one dollar. The group got the Earlville Opera House incorporated as a nonprofit in 1972,

In 1970, the facility had on the National Register of Historic Places.

> Since its incorporation 50 years ago, the EOH has been going strong providing visual and performing arts to the community through gallery showings in the East and West Galleries and Arts Cafe, musical performances in the 1892 theater, and even unique experiences like their annual paranor-

Celebrating 50 years

Marking 50 years as an incorporated nonprofit multi-arts center, 2022 served as a way for the and in 1974 it was placed Earlville Opera House to

celebrate their vibrant his-

To kick things off, the organization held a contest for local artists to design their 50th anniversary logo. Norwich-based artist Ann Coe won the contest, and her logo design was put on EOH merchandise, their letterhead, and marketing materials, and it was placed in the EOH archive.

To plan performances and gallery exhibits for their 50th year, EOH staff looked to the past to find musicians and artists who have been a part of the opera house's



Children participating in Afternoon Art at the Earlville Opera House. In addition to hosting gallery exhibits and musical performances, the EOH provides educational opportunities surrounding the arts for all ages. (Photo from EOH)

"We surveyed patrons over the previous year to vote on favorite performers for our 50th anniversary season from our online Hall of Fame that goes back to 1984," said Connelly. "We hosted a 50th Anniversary Gallery Retrospective Exhibition featuring past artists who have shown in EOH's three galleries. This event featured artist Timothy Walsh, Ph. D., who was the first exhibiting artist at EOH in 1972."

Celebratory included a 50th anniversary Golden Summer Jamboree, which featured several regional musicians. But, the main event of the year was the EOH's Open House Reunion in September.

"The public enjoyed cake, punch, and the favorite ice cream flavor of 1972: mint chocolate chip," said Connelly. "We had a 'Story Area' to share past EOH memories where attendees also viewed archival scrapbooks and historical documents. We had a special 50th membership campaign as well as a special \$50 for 50 years annual appeal."

Savior of the opera house Joey Skaags was in attendance, and he showed a short film about how the building was saved from demolition.

Also during the Open House Reunion, relevant items were collected from what Connelly calls "our

Continued on Page 11 →



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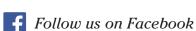
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Continued from Page 10 →

era at the EOH," and were placed in a time capsule to be opened in 25 years.

The EOH isn't the only organization that celebrated their 50th anniversary, either. The Chenango County Board of Supervisors presented the organization with a proclamation naming July 18, 2022 as the Earlville Opera House's 50th Anniversary Day. The proclamation was framed by Sherburne's own Heartwood Frames and hung in the lobby of the EOH, which was revealed at the Open House Reunion.

The New York State Council on the Arts congratulated the EOH as well for their 50 years of cultural service to the Earlville and surrounding communities.

Most importantly, though, Connelly said, "we celebrated the role of the arts in providing a platform for shared experiences and community building."

Years to come

Looking ahead to 2023 and beyond, the Earlville Opera House is striving to continue to serve the Chenango County and surrounding communities by providing "diverse and robust performing and visual arts series in addition to several arts education opportunities," said Connelly.

The EOH provides something for everyone, be it musical performances, art galleries, or programs for individuals to explore the arts in a hands-on way.

In 2022, the center hosted songwriting workshops with singer/songwriter Reyna Stagnaro, which they plan to continue in 2023.

Participants of all experience levels learned tips and techniques to crafting their very own original song, and had the chance to showcase their piece at a songwriter showcase on the Earlville Opera House main stage.

The organization even dabbled in the supernatural in 2022 with their annual paranormal tours lead by seasoned Paranormal Investigator Kenny Harris. The tours are set in the historic theater, and Reyna Stagnaro was invited to perform on the main stage, with the hopes of eliciting some ghostly activity.

"Kenny [Harris] requested that she play a song by Frank Sinatra," said Connelly. "He's a professor at Alfred University, and he's had students come with them on one of the recent ghost hunting tours that they did, and they started singing Frank Sinatra and they had such a great response. He was really shocked by that. So this being a music venue he's like, yeah, get your performer to play some Frank Sinatra, we'll see what happens."

The EOH has hosted paranormal tours for four years, utilizing Harris' expertise and "ghost hunt-



Attendees at the Earlville Opera House's 50th Anniversary Retrospective Gallery Exhibit. The gallery featured past artists who have showcased their work at the opera house as part of their celebration of the EOH's 50th anniversary as a nonprofit multi-arts center. (Photo from EOH)

ing" equipment such as EMF detectors, spirit boxes, ghost balls, and more to gather evidence of life on the other side.

Connelly believes many of the spirits that make an appearance are former performers of the EOH.

"I talked to a drummer named Daniel from 1940 through the spirit box, and we were having an intelligent, back and forth conversation," she said. "It's pretty wild because when I sit in the back of the theater during shows I take a few video clips, and a lot of times, not to the naked eye but through my camera, there is an orb that is always above the drums. And it makes me feel like it

was Daniel."

The tours have been a huge hit every October, and the EOH plans to continue hosting them every year.

In addition to fun and creative programming, the opera house will also continue supporting the arts through the Statewide Community Regrants Program. The program was instituted by the New York State Council on the Arts in 1977 to ensure nonprofit arts organizations were supported, and that the arts reached every part of New York State.

of times, not to the naked eye but through my camera, there is an orb that is always above the drums. And it makes me feel like it is a participant in the regrants program, the Earlville Opera House is allocated funds each year to regrant to other organical eye.

nizations and individuals in the area for arts-related programs and performances. This year, the EOH has been allocated \$232,000 to distribute.

"Last year, we allocated \$116,500 in cultural funding to 41 nonprofit organizations and artists through the 2022 Broome, Chenango and Otsego Statewide Community Regrants Program," said Connelly. "\$15,000 of this funding has been provided for Broome County by the Stewart W. & Willma C. Hoyt Foundation. For 2023, we have double this amount available."

Also part of their plans for 2023 are to continue caring for the 130-year-old building.

"We continue to act as stewards of this unique, second-story 1892 building, restoring and renting three commercial spaces and one residential apartment," said Connelly. "We have secured grants to repoint bricks that make up this historic venue in order to ensure longevity for future generational use."

Connelly said the EOH has remained resilient and flexible over the last few years. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and subsequent shutdowns and mandates, haven't made things easy for arts programs, she said.

Despite the challenges, the EOH found ways to still provide programming while staying in compliance with mandates. Over time the mandates and restrictions lifted, and the opera house has been back to providing in-person programs and performances.

"The arts have had to learn to adapt to fluid times since the pandemic. EOH was closed for 18 months with doors locked but lights on while we navigated providing virtual artistic offerings to the public," said Connelly.

The Earlville Opera House continues to persevere, and hopes to continue supporting the arts and making them accessible to more people. Connelly said trying times just show how crucial the arts are.

"We learned to be more resilient to changing times while still providing access to the arts which oftentimes are a primary outlet for human expression, especially in challenging times," she said. "The arts are a tool to keep us civilized. We hope people have learned and felt the impact the arts make since faced with having no live arts for an extended period."

The Earlville Opera House is open to the public from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday and 12 to 3 p.m. on Saturday. To learn more about the EOH and upcoming performances and programs, visit EarlvilleOperaHouse.com or the Earlville Opera House Arts Center Facebook page.





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Another year of growth for I.N.N. -

Continued from Page 9 →

need for in-person services for people in need, especially in Chenango County. Westervelt said the growing need for services helped shape INN's priorities as it moved through 2022 into

"The need to care for our community members who are in crisis has increased with record numbers of children being placed in foster or kinship placements and those facing a struggle to find housing on the rise," said Westervelt. "Furthermore, while we know literacy has always been an area of growth for children, recent changes in education have moved many experiences away from handheld books and person to person interaction and comprehension."

She said with the current rate of inflation, along with less than perfect economic circumstances - now more than ever INN's community needs organizations to stepup and fill in the gaps.

"As we seek to Improve Norwich Now through several pathways, we are celebrating the increased connection within community to bring optimism to Chenango County," she added. "For example, through One Community, One Book, Fostering Futures NYCC, and Aunt Mary's House, we have seen local businesses step up in a big way to provide support and special opportunities, especially for our youngest community members."

Building Aunt Mary's House and Helping Mothers

According to Aunt Mary's House Executive Director Brenda White, the mission of Aunt Mary's House (AMH) is to provide a safe haven for pregnant and parenting young mothers to gain opportunities, resources, and knowledge toward becoming self-sufficient. White said the vision of AMH is to provide emergency and transitional shelter to homeless pregnant and parenting mothers, ages 18 years or older.

White said once AMH has a renovated home to work out of, the program will house up to four women and their babies a total of eight residents at any given time. She said the program is based on Grandma's House in Central Oregon, and that the Grandma's House program has been caring for pregnant and parenting youth for 30 years now, having assisted more than 250 mothers with their children since its inception.

"Mothers will be able to live in the home until their child turns 18 months old," said White. "Pregnant and parenting mothers will have access to prenatal healthcare, consistent childcare, support services, educational and vocational resources, transportation, and counseling and case management provided through partner organizations and local agencies."

"AMH will meet the basic needs and alleviate the and her children by providing them with shelter, nutritious food, independent living skill-building, case management, employment and educational services and access to medical care in a safe environment."

She said AMH will provide the foundation necessary for mothers and children to move from crisis to stability, and by helping mothers meet their basic needs, AMH aims to assist residents in developing the skills necessary to live independently and be self-sufficient. She added that families in the care of AMH will be given the tools needed to recover from past trauma, build self-sufficiency, and thrive independently.

She added that AMH hired its first Executive Director in April 2022, and was able to host its first fundraising event, the "Aunt Mary's House Gala at The Wild Owl" - which was a great success thanks to the generosity and willingness of local business and community members to support their success.

When asked what advice she would give herself having just come into the new position less than a year prior, White said, "It's important to realize you may not even realize a year out the changes that next year could bring. Would I have envisioned myself as the Executive Director of AMH a year ago? No. But, here I am. Change can bring tremendous opportunities

our community as a whole."

White said Aunt Mary's House has major plans for 2023, with steps already taken to completely renovate the house that they found to lease for the Aunt Mary's House headquarters.

"It will take most of 2023 to complete the necessary renovations, but in that time we will also continue to create partnerships, meet local program staff and make new friends of Aunt Mary's House," said White. "We will work on funding for staffing AMH as well as training and operational items, and we will also be working on all of the regulations, processes, etc to make sure AMH is ready to open when the renovations are complete."

She said one of the largest challenges the program faces is the limited time many contractors in the area have available to work on the renovations, along with ensuring that all of the funding is lined up beyond the early stages.

"While we have generous support from local donors to establish our program in its early stages, it will be necessary for us to secure ongoing funding support for the future," she said. "We will work on applying for grants, private funders, fundraisers and creating Friends Of AMH that will help our program financially."

"We have the opportunity to work with a local business partner and his wife, who are also neighbors in the area we will be will give us the opportunity to take a home that has been vacant for the last seven years and watch as we transform it into a beautiful home that will be filled with love for each of the women and babies that we are able to help."

White said in addition to the financial and logistical challenges Aunt Mary's House faces, they also will have to deal with the lack of affordable and accessible childcare that plagues Chenango County.

"There are so many new programs and resources available to our community that have really blossomed in the last few years," said White. "There are also more people in need due to the pandemic, job losses, and

burden of crisis on a mother for us as individuals and for relocations. It seems we are making progress as far as collaboration of organizations, businesses, and willing community members. This is a win, especially in a time when short-staffing but increased needs are prevalent."

> She said Aunty Mary's House plans to open its doors in 2023 to women and babies to help them get out of the crisis situation they are in and move them into a stable safe situation.

"We will help as many women and babies as we can every day to try to break the cycle of poverty, abuse, and homelessness," said White. "We will do this one mother and one baby at a time."

"We continue to be grateful for the active input and guidance being provided to us by Grandma's House, a highly successful program of the same nature on the West Coast."

With Aunt Mary's House focused on helping mothers with their children, Improve Norwich Now hopes to fill another void by assisting local foster families.

Growing Fostering Futures and Supporting Local Families

According to Fostering Futures New York Chenango County (FFNYCC) Executive Director Cathleen Albrecht, Fostering Future aims to provide practical support and assistance to foster and kinship parents so as to enhance their capacity to provide safe, stable, consistent, and nurturing homes for abused and neglected children helping them begin leasing the home. This lease to heal from the effects of the trauma.

Albrecht said the program's goal is to improve outcomes for children in the foster care system who have experienced trauma by providing practical support to foster and kinship families so they are able to provide a safe stable nurturing and enriched environment along with connections into the community.

"Although foster and kinship care is supposed to be a temporary solution, some children remain in care for many months because permanent homes cannot be found for them," said Albrecht. "These children are likely to be older, have medical or behavior problems, or be part of a sibling group."

"In addition, youth may change foster homes frequently because foster parents burn out. Foster/kinship parents are passionate about their work, but the job is sometimes too hard to do alone."

She said 2022 was a big year for the Fostering Futures program, with the addition of four new volunteer teams, with an additional five families and 20 more volunteers on the team. She added that this year they were able to offer four new celebrations for FFNYCC families and volunteers thanks to the support of several great businesses.

'Currently we have a program director along with 50 volunteer team members in total," said Albrecht. "Our hope is to add at least five more teams throughout 2023, and continue to help more families in need."

"Many people don't know about our program or services, and I think the easiest way to describe it would be that for the most part we try our best to provide practical help around the house."

Albercht said some of Fostering Futures work includes providing emotional support and affirmation to the foster parents for the work they do, taking care of practical household tasks such as yard work and babysitting, helping with celebrations for important family milestones, getting children involved in athletic and recreational activities, providing homework help, or instruction in life skills such as budgeting, job seeking, and cooking.

She said that she is grateful to live in such a supportive community, and looking forward to continuing to serve foster families in need throughout this year.

"This program has continued to grow and support our foster and kinship families in our community, no matter the obstacles that we faced," she added. "We are mission-focused and committed, and that will continue moving into 2023."

interested Anyone in learning more about Improve Norwich Now or its programs may visit improvenorwichnow.org for additional information.



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Positive Creativity Supports Growth at Chenango County Historical Society -

Continued from Page 9 →

well as engaging Chenango County Fair paintings created by artist Daniel Mosner of Oxford. As a complement to the in-person exhibit, we also launched the inaugural "Chenango Stories" oral history project featuring memories of the Chenango County Fair.

"Routes & Roadblocks: Black Motoring Experience" focused on Chenango County's history and the black motoring experience during the mid-20th century. This exhibit connected the history of Chenango County, the impact of the invention of the automobile, and the work of SUNY Oneonta Distinguished Professor Dr. Gretchen Sorin. Dr. Sorin is author of the book Driving While Black and producer of the PBS documentary "Driving While Black: Race, Space and Mobility in America."

Programs Specialty included our annual celebration of Smithsonian Museum Day, coinciding with our observation of Constitution Week held in collaboration with the James Madison Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution Partnering with (DAR). Chenango County Historian's Office, our observation of National Historic Marker Day provided any opportunity to show community pride and celebrate local history. Our inaugural "History Happy Hour" was held in conjunction with Commerce Chenango and the Tri-County Chapter of New York State Women, Inc. Patrons gathered at the Hidden Springs Brewhouse to commemorate the golden anniversary of the Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, a landmark legislation for gender equity. Guest presenters offered their perspective on this historic milestone which removed barriers for girls and women in education and sports.

Through the interactive presentation "Views of the Past: Through the Camera Lens of Vernon Duroe," we shared the long-dormant story of a talented local artist. Duroe (1872-1958) was professional photographer who taught photography in Brooklyn for 20 years. After retiring from teaching, he spent his time photographing Chenango County landscapes and people; many of the resulting works were exhibited at regional art shows.

Our "Path Through History" activities highlighted historically and culturally significant sites, offering new perspectives on New York state's heritage. Community festival engagement remained a key component of our programming, including a number of celebrations which brought our mission directly to our included the Afton Arts & Crafts Festival, Chenango County Fair, Dairy Day, E. Warren Eaton Airport Day, Sherburne Arts Festival, South Otselic Fishing and Heritage Day, and Saturday in the Park with Chobani.

In the spirit of creative endeavors celebrated during the annual ColorScape Chenango festival, we again hosted a series of programs featuring local structures during the second Saturday in September. The "Historic Architecture in Norwich" walking tours were led by Architectural Historian Bryan McCracken, who specializes in the preservation of American structures particularly buildings in and around Chenango County. One tour focused on community buildings, and the other highlighted historically significant residential structures. These tours were unique opportunities for engagement with everyday exhibits.

As we work to find new opportunities to accomplish our mission, embrace collaboration and partnership in our communities. For example, we continued our innovative partnership with United Health Services/Chenango Memorial Hospital, curating exhibitions related to the heritage of Chenango County for Senior Living residents to enjoy. While

audience. Some of these this initiative was originally intended to be a short-term program designed to lessen residents' feelings of isolation due to COVID-19, it has been so well received that we plan to continue this indefinitely.

Our creative approach programming greatimproved our ability to bring back in-person Educational Field Trips dorwhich had been mant during the pandemic. Experiences for youth included customized programming for the Children's Home of Wyoming, Liberty Partnerships Program of SUNY Morrisville, Gibson Elementary School, The Place (The Christian Neighborhood Center of Norwich), and 4-H. Similarly, we hosted specialized visits for adult organizations such the American Institute of Architects, Chenango County Bar Association, Chenango Retired Teachers Association, Leadership Chenango, Public Historians of Chenango County, Town & Country Garden Club, the Historical Society of Early American Decoration, and a DCMO BOCES professional development for educators in collaboration with the NYS Archives Partnership Trust's "Consider the

As we continued working to accomplish goals identified in our strategic plan, we expanded our

Source" project.

internship program with Cazenovia College, Colgate University, SUNY Cortland, SUNY Geneseo, and SUNY Oneonta's Cooperstown Graduate Program (CGP). With these dynamic young people on our team, many new programs and exhibits have been developed.

Established in 1939, Chenango County Historical Society (CCHS) received an absolute charter in 1956. Our vision is to offer immersive experiences through community engagement both on our campus and beyond. The organization's ability to embark on strategic growth in recent years has been made possible thanks to the tremendous contributions from a variety of supporters. The generosity of local foundations, community donors, museum members, and state and federal grant funding sources has allowed us to focus on continuous improvement in order to maximize all opportunities available to the organization.

As a museum chartered by the New York State Education Department, CCHS recognized the organization's responsibility to identify best practices to accomplish our mission. The staff and the Board of Trustees realized that being so close to operations could result in the team not being able to fully identify where systems, process-

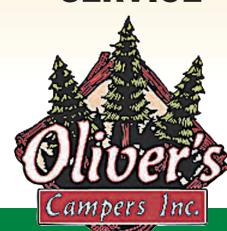
es, and programs could be adjusted for optimal performance. In a proactive commitment to improved civic involvement, public service, and overall excellence, we applied for and were selected to participate in the national Museum Assessment Program (MAP), administered by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM). The museum's participation is also made possible through funding provided by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS).

We opted to conduct a MAP operations assessment to improve performance by defining logical priorities, establishing systems for maintaining quality standards, and assuring sustainable practices as the organization grows capacity. Participating in MAP during 2022 helped the museum strengthen operations, plan for the future, and meet standards through self-study review. Through guided assessment and consultation with external museum professionals, participation in MAP is empowering CCHS to better serve our communities by striving to achieve the highest professional standards in the museum field. After completing the remaining MAP assessment activities in 2023, we will be better positioned for sustainable future growth and service to Chenango County.



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