



2024 Community Agenda

1. Pilot a Community Responder Team in Erie County

Erie County should fund and implement a community responder pilot program. Community responders are teams that respond independently to low-risk 911 calls related to behavioral health needs, social disturbances, and/or quality of life concerns. The team will include a paramedic, mental health clinician, and trained peer worker, equipped with a van stocked with basic food, hygiene, first aid, and comfort supplies to respond to certain 911 calls where no violence or weapons are involved. The team will assess, de-escalate, problem-solve, and provide services on-site and through linking and/or transporting people to the appropriate services for longer-term care. Erie County can pass a resolution establishing the pilot and fund it for one year and create an oversight body of peers and frontline community members to guide the planning and implementation.

Lead partners: VOICE Buffalo, Restoration Society, Evergreen Health, Erie County Restorative Justice Coalition, Little People's Victory, Social Welfare Action Alliance – Buffalo Chapter, Black Love Resists in the Rust

2. Address Racial and Special Needs Disparities in Buffalo Public School Discipline by Implementing New York State Education Department Recommendations

The Buffalo Public School Board of Education should adopt the NYS Education Department's current recommendations on student suspensions as a district policy. This would eliminate suspensions for Pre-K through 3rd grade, eliminate suspensions longer than 20 school days, and eliminate suspensions for insubordination and other low-level subjective infractions. The district should also provide access to regular schoolwork while children are suspended. These policy changes will impact the drop-out rate and result in a more educated population with better employment prospects and outcomes.

Lead partners: WNY Law Center, New York Civil Liberties Union, Community Action Organization, Legal Aid Bureau of Buffalo

3. Expand Language Access in New York State

New York State must work to implement and expand language access legislation in order to ensure equity and human rights for all populations. Currently, state agencies must provide document translation and interpretation services in the most commonly spoken languages, but this list of languages needs to be tailored to match varying demographics across the state. The state also needs to expand the reach of language access legislation to include agencies, such as the Department of Motor Vehicles, that are not under the Governor's jurisdiction. Additionally, our government must invest adequate funding in the development of a bilingual state workforce to address the growing need for trained interpreters and translators.

Lead partners: New York Immigration Coalition, Language Access Working Group, Buffalo Immigrant and Refugee Leadership Team, Burmese Community Services, International Institute of Buffalo, ACCESS of WNY, University of Buffalo School of Social Work, People Inc. - Deaf Access Services

4. Increase Legislator Oversight for County Jails in New York State

New York State should pass legislation allowing county legislators and their staff to inspect county jails. County jails, particularly in Erie County, operate largely without outside monitoring. A bill currently in the state legislature (Bill S181 in the Senate and A6487 in the Assembly) proposes increasing access to jails, currently limited to state elected officials, to include county legislators and their accompanying staff. This will allow Erie County legislators to inspect our own county jails and will add needed public oversight of these institutions, making human rights violations less likely and making clear the need for improvements in jail practices and policies.

Lead partners: WNY #HALTsolitary, Erie County Clergy Jail Visiting Project, NYS Jails Justice Network, WNY group – Jails Justice Network, VOICE Buffalo

5. Support a Forgotten Population: Reimagine Local Systems of Care for Foster Youth and Young Adults in Erie County

Erie County should develop new services and expand existing programs to support foster system alumni. In the county’s 2024 budget, legislators added a new funding line specifically for this population and called for “wraparound services for young people after foster care, including a central hub for resources and referrals; mentoring on issues like housing, finding a job, financial literacy, education, and additional engagement of older youth for services.” The Department of Social Services should implement this through a “Request for Proposals” to fund local service providers to create the resource hub and provide support. This initiative will ensure that foster care alumni have access to more of the resources they need to live full, sustainable, and successful lives.

Lead partners: Fostering Greatness, HomeSpace, and Housing Opportunities Made Equal (HOME),

6. City of Buffalo Annual Commitment to Fund the Arts

The City of Buffalo needs to comply with the city’s charter for the allocation and disbursement of annual funding for arts and cultural organizations. Cultural funding from the city shares a budget line with anti-violence initiatives. In the past five years, this budget line has ranged from as low as \$280,000 to as high as \$1.1 million. Unfortunately, year after year, very little of this funding is actually disbursed; in 2023 the city has paid out only \$59,900. The City should establish clear, recurring, transparent and dependable application and disbursement processes for this already established fund to help support financial stability for many small to mid-sized arts and cultural organizations.

Lead partners: Buffalo Arts Studio, Squeaky Wheel, Locust Street Art, Ujima Company, Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance, Frontline Arts Buffalo

7. Reform Parole to Reunite Families Across New York State

New York State should pass legislation to make it easier for older people to be paroled from prison. Like mass incarceration, parole denial is devastating communities in our area. Most people appearing before the Parole Board are denied based exclusively on their conviction as opposed to their rehabilitation and readiness for release. The State Legislature and Governor should address this crisis by expanding access to individualized parole release consideration and make the process fairer by enacting the Elder Parole and Fair & Timely Parole bills.

Lead partners: People’s Campaign for Parole Justice, VOICE Buffalo, Free The People Western NY, Center for Elder Justice, Citizen Action of NY, University of Buffalo Law School’s Criminal Justice Advocacy Clinic, Prisoners Are People Too

8. Fully Fund and Implement the City of Buffalo’s Proactive Rental Inspection Program

The City of Buffalo should fully fund and implement the Proactive Rental Inspection Program. The law creating the PRI program was adopted in 2020 to protect tenants and hold landlords accountable to maintaining safe and healthy rental properties. Intended to impact 6,000 houses annually, it falls woefully short of its goal. Mayor Brown and the Common Council should allocate the necessary resources in the 2024-2025 City budget to implement the program, as recommended by the City’s Affordable Housing Task Force. The PRI program should bring all eligible rental properties into compliance with the law in a timely manner, while ensuring the safety, maintenance and improvement of Buffalo’s housing stock and rentals citywide. The program should be implemented transparently and promote a high standard of accountability to achieve a better Buffalo.

Lead partners: PUSH’s Tenant Power Committee, Coalition for Economic Justice, University at Buffalo’s Eviction Prevention Program

9. Increase Funding for Youth Services in the City of Buffalo Budget

The City of Buffalo should allocate \$10 million to expand positive services for young people. For the past few years, the city has invested under \$3 million in youth programming annually, as opposed to enormous investments in policing and punishment. Many young people, particularly from under-resourced BIPOC communities, go without the services needed to promote hopefulness, safety, and success. Youth services such as full-service community centers, tutoring, youth employment programs, and mental health care access are needed to build a safe community for all Buffalonians. \$10 million in funding for youth programming should be adopted in the 2024-25 City of Buffalo budget.

Lead partners: VOICE Buffalo, Galactic Tribe, Real Talk, Black Social Worker Network, Mona’s House, Fostering Greatness

10. Performance-Based Education for Refugee and New American Students in Buffalo Public Schools

Buffalo Public Schools should implement performance-based learning and assessment for refugee and New American students. This model, which includes life skills, core classes and alternative measures assessed by school faculty, creates educational equity for all students regardless of their academic background or language proficiency. This is a first step to replace the requirement of New York State standardized testing (NYS Regents) for class advancement and college readiness with a system that enhances fairness and access. To achieve this, the Buffalo Board of Education and school leadership can public support the district's participation in Performance-Based Learning and Assessment and advocate with the New York State Department of Education for this initiative.

Lead Partners: Buffalo Immigrant Leadership Team (BILT), International Child Advancement, Jewish Family Services

11. Establish a Permanent Fund for Child Care in New York State

New York State should establish a permanent child care compensation fund so that child care providers can offer wages in line with kindergarten teacher salaries. Only one-in-ten child care workers earn a living wage, according to the Cornell ILR Wage Atlas. The median wage for child care workers in New York State is \$15.86 per hour, or less than \$33,000 per year for a full-time employee. The proposed fund will correct this injustice and properly recognize child care workers as educators who deserve wages at parity with public school teachers, as proposed in the Universal Child Care Act for New York State, Senate Bill S3245. New York State can establish the child care compensation fund in the 2024-2025 state budget, to ensure a living wage for child care professionals and help address the severe child care shortage in Erie County.

Lead partners: Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab, WNY Women's Foundation, WNY Child Care Action Team, Live Well Erie Working Families Group- AQA (Accessibility, Quality, Availability) Subcommittee, Workforce Solutions Consortium, Empire State Campaign for Child Care – HEARD (Humanity, Equity, Anti-Racism, and Diversity) Committee