

ESPRI Taking Shape in Helping Reduce Area Poverty

In January 2016, Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced his vision to help reduce poverty in New York State. His plan was simple: Provide grants to a few cities and allow them to determine how best to either enhance or create programs that can help more New Yorkers become self-sufficient.

The timing of the new program neatly coincided with the United Way's state-wide study on the working poor called ALICE, which stands for Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed.

THE ALICE STUDY FOUND THAT:

- 2.1 million New York households have incomes above the poverty level but below the ALICE threshold budget for survival. Combined with the 1.1 million households in New York below the poverty line, the state now has 44 percent of its households that can no longer afford all of life's basic necessities: food, shelter, child care, transportation and health care.
- To meet New York's average ALICE threshold for survival, a single adult needs an annual income of \$20,496 or \$10.25/hour. Yet nearly 1 million New Yorkers who work in retail sales, restaurants and home health services are paid below the ALICE threshold.
- From 2007 to 2014, the cost of housing, food and health care in New York far exceeded the rise in salaries, thus increasing the number of ALICE households. The result is an increasing financial threat to state and nonprofit programs that provide such assistance.

Cuomo's enabling legislation, which specifies that Watertown will receive \$1 million, required the city to select a nonprofit to administer the grant. And last October, Mayor Joseph Butler selected the United Way of NNY.

We then hired Peter Schmitt to direct the effort and the results to date have been spectacular. Watertown is the first of the 16 cities to release RFPs (request for proposal) for areas where the grants will be concentrated.

To get to this point, Schmitt assembled more than 80 city residents from every economic stratum who have met since December to determine what would work best for our city. Low income members of the Task Force are entitled Community Advocates

THE FOUR WORK GROUPS AND CHAIRS ARE:

- **Workforce Development** – 22 members – Chair Kevin Hill, Community Advocate, and Vice Chair Jane Gendron, American

Red Cross Executive Director.

- **Housing** – 20 members – Chair Angela Hill, Community Advocate, and Vice Chair Tim Dermady, Disabled Persons Action Organization Foundation Director.

- **Education** – 25 members – Chair Krystin LaBarge, Community Advocate, and Vice Chair Carolyn Mantle, Community Advocate.

- **Transportation** – 15 members – Chair John Bonventre, Community Advocate, and Vice Chair Sam Purington, Executive Director of the Volunteer Transportation Center.

PROJECTS THAT WERE APPROVED MAY 24 ARE:

- **"Bridges out of Poverty,"** which will train mentors regarding the effects of poverty, and fund "Getting Ahead," a 16-week course for people in poverty to teach them how to help themselves to a better future.
- **"Wheels to Work,"** which will provide vehicles to residents who have jobs, but lack transportation.



Bob Gorman

- **"Pathway to Home Ownership,"** which will refurbish "zombie" houses that could eventually be owned by people who have a job but can't afford a mortgage.

- **Employee Resource Network,** which will help train employers how to avoid losing employees who have trouble doing their jobs due to the poverty and chaos in their lives.

Application submissions and reviews will take place in August and programs could start as early as November and conclude in March 2019. If successful, more funding is possible.

It's easy to tell the working poor that all they need for success is to pull themselves up by their bootstraps. But in the last half year many of us have begun to see the faces and know the names of too many members of our community who through economics and circumstances don't have bootstraps in the first place.

Will ESPRI be those bootstraps? We think so because the programs are designed for people who want to be self-sufficient, not for those whose goal is to stay on public assistance.

But there is also this: Our programs were developed in large part by the people who are most affected by the lack of economic opportunity in the region.

For those community advocates and their children, ESPRI has to work.

■ **ROBERT D. GORMAN** is president and CEO of United Way of Northern New York. Contact him at bgorman@unitedway-nny.org or 315-788-5631. His column appears every other month in NNY Business.



Eric J. Hesse, right, New York State Division of Veterans Affairs director, earlier this year met with community advocates during a training session for the Watertown Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative. Hesse, a retired colonel who spent 10 of his 26 years in the military at Fort Drum, outlined the state's role in helping the local ESPRI effort. Meeting with him were task force chairs, left to right, Kevin Hill, Workforce Development, Krystin LaBarge, Education, Carolyn Mantle, Education vice chair, John Bonventre, Transportation, and Angie King, Housing.