ESPRI Workforce Development Work Group – Meeting Highlights
February 17, 2017 3:30 – 5:00 PM
Community Action Planning Council – 518 Davidson Street

Present: Michelle Alba, Community Advocate
             Jill Ahlgrim, Bridgeview Real Estate Services
             Teresa Gaffney, Department of Social Services
             Jane Gendron, American Red Cross
             Kevin Hill, Community Advocate
             Steve Hunt, NC Regional Economic Development Council
             Melissa Jenkins, Community Action Planning Council
             Aileen Martin, Northern Regional Center for Independent Living
             Cheryl Mayforth, Workforce Development Board
             Barb Peck, Children's Home of Jefferson County
             Yvonne Reff, Flower Memorial Library
             Don Rutherford, Watertown Local Development Corporation
             Roberto Smith, Community Advocate
             Orales Stroud, Community Advocate
             Peter Schmitt, Watertown ESPRI Director
             Bob Gorman, United Way of Northern NY
             Dawn Cole, Watertown ESPRI
             Tobi Darrah, United Way of Northern NY

Excused: Carmen Ashley, Community Advocate
             Tara Bohon, Staples
             Robin Holmes, Salvation Army
             Denise Young, YMCA

Introductions
Members of the group introduced themselves.

The Process
Mr. Schmitt provided an overview of the Watertown Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI). Watertown was one of 16 communities selected to receive anti-poverty funds based on a higher rate of poverty. The initiative was described as "collective impact" meaning that the entire community shares a common agenda to make meaningful change on issues relating to poverty in our community. The goal of ESPRI is a community-wide initiative to reduce poverty in the City of Watertown.

Mr. Schmitt explained the Collective Impact Model which includes:

• Steering Committee of 15 individuals

- Task Force, comprised of Steering Committee members, professionals working with the low-income population, people living in poverty, and those who have worked their way out of poverty

- Work Groups – comprised of Task Force and community members

- Community Engagement – neighborhood forums where further input will be collected

The Task Force met on January 25, at which time, four areas of focus were identified as priorities:

- Education

- Transportation

- Workforce Development

- Housing

Work Groups have been assembled in each of the four focus areas. The goal of each Work Groups is to identify barriers within their specific area of focus that prevent people from moving out of poverty. Once the barriers have been clearly defined, the Work Groups will develop strategies for addressing barriers – and helping to move people out of poverty.

The Task Force will review and ultimately select innovative and unique strategies to alleviating poverty for inclusion in the work plan. It is anticipated that initiatives will begin in June.

Mr. Schmitt explained that the grant allows up to $200,000 to be applied to administrative expense. The intent is to control administrative costs and to apply the savings to anti-poverty strategies.

Communication
Ms. Cole, a certified Bridges out of Poverty trainer, provided a brief overview of mental models, asking the members of the group to suspend their existing mental models and foster an environment of mutual respect. She explained that all voices will be heard throughout the process. Those living in poverty have valuable input into this process and as such carry the title of "Community Advocate."

Election of Chair and Vice-Chair
Kevin Hill was selected to serve as Work Group Chair; Jane Gendron was selected to serve as Vice-Chair.

Community Engagement
Mr. Gorman reported that plans are underway for a series of community neighborhood meetings to be held at Community Action Planning Council, Salvation Army, Watertown Urban Mission, and Watertown Housing Authority sites. Input gleaned from these meetings will be provided to Work Groups.

CAPC Survey and Information Needs

Mr. Schmitt distributed excerpts from a community needs assessment prepared by Community Action Planning Council in 2015. The group reviewed the data which includes a comparison of data collected through surveys of low-income households in 2015 against survey data collected in 2011. The changes in the local economy during the two time periods were discussed, and it was pointed out that the employment rate in Jefferson County was significantly lower in 2015. Mr. Schmitt asked the group to consider whether there were other sources of data which would be helpful to the process.

Barriers and Challenges –Group Work

The group was divided into two smaller groups and charged with discussing barriers relating to workforce development that prevent people from moving out of poverty. Groups reported highlights from their discussions:

Group 1

- Lack of public assistance benefits

- Cost of education / training

- Lack of marketable skills

- Generational poverty

- Cut back in hours

- Life – health, child care, and other expenses

- Not finding right employees

- Lack of soft skills

- Strings

- Turned down raise / afraid to lose benefits & security

- Housing costs

Group 2

The group requested poverty data relating to gender. According to the US Census American Community Survey 5-year averages for 2010 – 2015: 13.6% of men and 16.3% of women in Jefferson County live in poverty.

- How to get there

    o Training

    o Life skills

- o Job expense

- o Resume / technology skills

- Child care – costs / availability

- Transportation

- Quality of jobs / benefits

- Jobs require 2 employees

- Minimum wage stagnation

- Jobs not designed to allow for upward movement

- Military – skills not transferable

- Lack of awareness of available supports / resources - Navigators

- Help with chaos – sorting out priorities

Employer Perspective:

- Not showing up for work

- Distracted by chaos

- Replacement costs

- Training

- Disconnect between education and workplace – affects needs

Idea Sharing
The group discussed various aspects of workforce development in the local market, and it was agreed that there would be further consideration of the employer standpoint at subsequent meetings.

Next Meeting
The next meeting of the Workforce Development Work Group will be scheduled in March, once input has been gathered from community engagement meetings.