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Community Foundation
FOR SOUTH CENTRAL NEW YORK

COMMUNITY News

Groups Promote Safe Housing For All

BROOME COUNTY RESIDENTS could soon gain greater access to safe, affordable housing, thanks to two initiatives funded through the Community Foundation. The Relocation Assistance Program and the Fair Housing Advisory Board each received $150,000 this year from the Broome County Housing Trust Fund, a partnership between the Foundation and Broome County Government.

The roots of these two programs go back to 2018, when Broome County convened a group called the Safe Housing Task Force. That body developed several recommendations on how to improve housing access. Although the county implemented some of those ideas, certain important ones never moved from paper to the real world.

In 2021, the Community Foundation contracted with housing consultant Rebecca Rathmell to form and oversee several working groups that would address those remaining recommendations. Equitable access to living space is crucial to a community's well being, Rathmell said. "There is not a single initiative—not a health initiative, not an economic initiative—that can move forward in this county or region unless we begin to prioritize stable, safe, affordable housing for residents."

The working groups included three kinds of stakeholders—staff from agencies that provide housing support, local housing activists and people who have lived with housing insecurity. "Our goal was to learn from the community and build these work groups with folks with experience in having to seek assistance, who have been unhoused or housing unstable," Rathmell said.

One of the groups developed the Relocation Assistance Program, basing it on a pilot program conducted in Broome County several years back. "The Relocation Assistance Program will pay for both rental assistance and housing search assistance for individuals and families who are experiencing homelessness, or who are at risk of homelessness," Rathmell said. For example, the program could provide a security deposit and a couple of months' rent, plus supportive services to help insure that tenants can stay in their housing for the long term. The Addiction Center of Broome County (ACBC) received the grant for this program and serves as its lead agency.

The Housing Protection Working Group, which developed the Fair Housing Advisory Board, included representatives from Citizen Action, CNY Fair Housing, Legal Services of Central New York, the Binghamton Tenants Union and the UniverCity Tenants Union, along with community activists and people who have experienced housing struggles, said Rathmell.

The CF Housing Task Force work group

The group focused on how to help residents understand their rights as tenants, how to keep track of landlord-tenant relations in the community and how to promote good housing policy, said Jabari Randolph, mission impact director at the YWCA of Binghamton and Broome County, who served on the working group and now is part of the Advisory Board.

To create a framework for the Advisory Board, the working group began with a plan that was developed in Binghamton some years ago but never implemented, Randolph said. "We updated it to see how it could be made more inclusive of people with lived experience and added some additional things that we'd like to see there."

Citizen Action's Public Policy and Education Fund is the funded agency for the Fair Housing Advisory Board. The grant supports the program for 12 months, starting in March 2024.

The Advisory Board's jurisdiction includes the City of Binghamton, Johnson City and Endicott. Some of its near term plans involve outreach to tenants and tenants' unions, to inform residents about existing laws that protect tenants, Randolph said. The group is also considering activities that could take more time. "We've talked

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Needs Assessment Examines Region's Vital Issues

OUR REGION needs a lot more mental health care providers, and it will take some creative thinking to expand the workforce in that field.

That's just one of a wide range of insights in the Community Foundation's 2024 Needs Assessment, a study of critical issues in the Foundation's five-county region.

The Community Foundation commissions an in-depth assessment every few years to help us understand how needs are evolving in our communities, and help us determine how to invest in effective solutions. In 2023, we contracted with Lisa Horn, president of Horn Research in Slaterville Springs, to study five areas of major concern: mental health care, poverty, equity, housing and the capacity of nonprofits.

> *"There are opportunities to create a more collaborative network"*
>
> – Lisa Horn, president of Horn Research

Horn based the study largely on data drawn from previous research, conducted by many different organizations. "There are always lots of assessments being done throughout the region," she said. "This was a way to pull all that information together and organize and analyze it." Horn also conducted follow-up interviews with several experts.

The resulting report highlights significant areas of need in our region and points to possible solutions. For instance, Horn found that in the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, a growing number of adults in some of our counties suffer from poor mental health. And throughout the five-county region, there's been a dramatic rise in adults with depression. "People face more stress and more challenges, so they are feeling more mental health difficulties," Horn said.

Unfortunately, the pool of mental health care providers hasn't grown to meet the need. And although federal law says insurance companies must cover mental health services just as they do services for physical health, things don't always work out that way, Horn said. That creates a financial barrier for many who need help.

One bright spot in our region is an array of mental health services based in schools, which do a good job of meeting families' needs, Horn said.

Organizations and funders that want to build a pipeline for mental health care professionals might look to economic development initiatives for models. For instance, apprenticeship programs could attract more people to careers in behavioral health care, Horn said. Or agencies could help individuals access federal and state student loan repayment programs that make it easier to prepare for those careers. "Also, there are opportunities to create a more collaborative network, to recruit on a broader scale," she said.

Like the Foundation's last Needs Assessment, in 2019, the new one also looks closely at the challenges facing nonprofit organizations in our region. Tight budgets make it hard for many of those institutions to hire staff and attract well-qualified leaders.

The human resource challenge stems partly from attitudes about pay in the nonprofit world. "There's a mindset that people working for nonprofits should be willing to do it out of community spirit and love for the work," Horn said. But to attract top talent, nonprofits need to align professionals' salaries with the skills those jobs demand.

Funders might improve the situation by offering more general operating support, rather than only giving grants for programs, Horn said. Organizations could also save money by sharing back office services. "There are a lot of small nonprofits that could be open to somebody facilitating a shared services agreement with other organizations for their HR, financial services, IT–that kind of thing," she said. In addition, greater transparency about employee salaries could help raise standards for pay in the nonprofit sector.

In a similar way, the Needs Assessment discusses challenges our region faces in the areas of housing, poverty and equity, while recommending solutions that funders could support with grants. Readers can access the full report through a link on the Foundation's web site.

While the study divides the region's critical challenges into subject areas, Horn points out that these complex issues are highly interconnected. For instance, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) students, and students from economically disadvantaged homes, are more likely to be chronically absent from school than students in other groups. Those differences lead to many kinds of inequities for students, she said. "There are direct follow-on outcomes that lead to longer-term economic issues, health issues, mental health issues–all those things."

Continued from page 1

about establishing Court Watch [an organization that uses volunteers to observe court proceedings, to make sure they run fairly], as well as establishing a database of landlord-tenant relations," she said.

This publicly accessible database will provide information on landlords who are known for housing discrimination or housing violations, said Rathmell. "We want to connect directly with tenants and learn from their experiences, offer opportunities for them to advise and provide insight on how we can improve fair housing services locally." Advisory Board members also hope to support tenants in filing discrimination complaints, she said.

In addition, the Advisory Board wants to hold periodic meetings with community members to discuss the problems that tenants face, Randolph said. And over the long term, the board wants to advocate for public policy that will promote more equitable access to safe and affordable housing.

Taken together, the two new programs should make it easier for residents to navigate the network of services designed to help people find and stay in suitable homes, said Rathmell. "We're hoping to improve access to homeless assistance services, to make them more direct and targeted in a way that reduces the burden for households in crisis."

Residency Spotlights Women's Art

WOMEN'S HISTORY MONTH this year brought a chance for people who visited the Roberson Museum and Science Center to see a contemporary woman artist in action. Helped by a $5,800 grant from the Community Foundation's Women's Fund, Roberson hosted Anna Warfield, a soft sculpture artist whose work incorporates original poetry, as an artist in residence on five Saturdays in March.

Roberson developed the residency in connection with "Placid Thoughts From Inside Her Eyelids," an exhibit of Warfield's work that opened in August 2023.

Stationed in a replica studio within the exhibit, Warfield worked on new pieces while chatting with visitors. Each session lasted two to three hours, and each included a talk by Warfield on another woman artist, such as Louise Bourgeois or Yayoi Kusama. "We look at the through lines between my work and other contemporary women artists, so we can learn about people who have different backgrounds and different ways of making," said Warfield.

A textile enthusiast from an early age, Warfield grew up in Whitney Point in what she recalls as "a very creative household, a very matriarchal space." Her mother was an industrial embroiderer; her aunts are weavers and quilters; family members gave quilts as gifts to mark milestones such as weddings and graduations.

After making many kinds of art in college, Warfield returned to working with fabric, in part from financial necessity. "It was a medium I already understood, so I didn't have to spend money learning the medium," she said. "And since my mom was an industrial embroiderer, there were sewing machines and threads everywhere. I could just go home and have a plethora of materials at my fingertips."

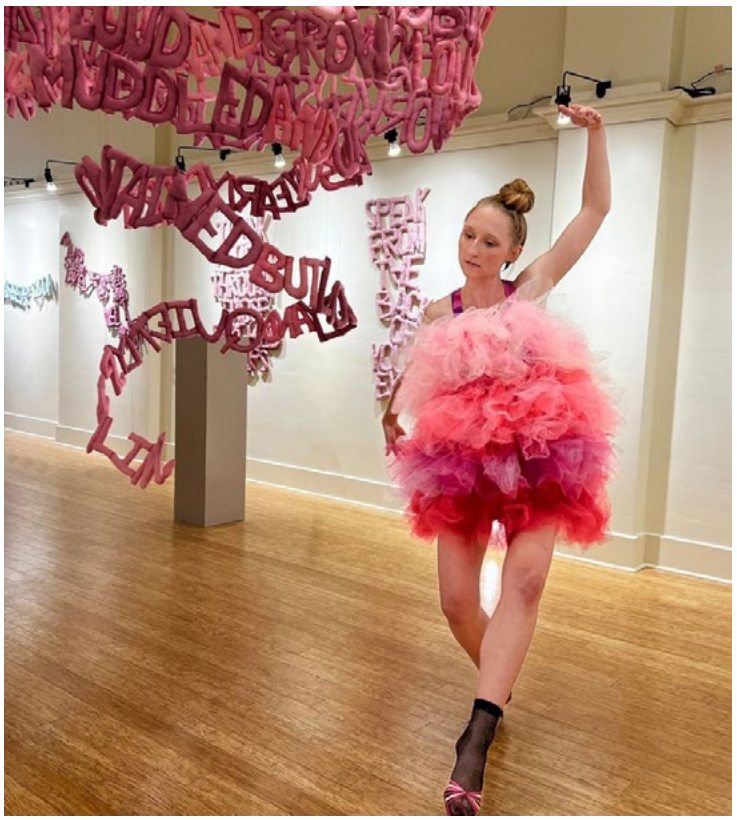
Warfield started incorporating poetry into her sculptures in 2019. "They're hung in space so you can walk around them. It's kind of like confronting the human presence as they take up a human amount of space, in space," she said.

While Warfield's pieces are made of soft materials, their content is sharp, said Michael Grasso, executive director at the Roberson Museum. "I like that juxtaposition of a really strong message that is displayed in what seems to be a friendly, puffy, bright medium."

The feminist impulse in Warfield's art springs from the history of women's work. Traditionally, across many cultures, women have been the ones to turn fibers into utilitarian objects, she said. "My work builds on that history and our knowledge of those comfort objects such as quilts, rugs, things like that, to create a larger commentary, asking what does it mean to be a woman or female-identifying today, and what are those complexities."

The art comes from a very personal place, Warfield added. "I struggle with my own identity–how much I want to engage with my feminine side, and how much I want to suppress it." But the work is not necessarily just about herself, she said. "It's about experiences that I hope others can understand, or try to understand and learn from."

Based on the reactions of people who attended the opening reception for Warfield's exhibit, her work makes a forceful impression on observers. "To see not only people I knew, but also strangers in the room, who were truly moved because it spoke to them in a way that you and I could not have predicted, was very powerful," she said.



Anna Warfield interacting with her installation at Roberson

"I like that juxtaposition of a really strong message that is displayed in what seems to be a friendly, puffy, bright medium."

–Michael Grasso, Executive director at the Roberson Museum

The grant from the Women's Fund mainly paid Warfield for time spent creating and conducting the five workshops. "I would like to thank the Women's Fund and the Community Foundation for recognizing that artists should and deserve to be paid for their work," Grasso said. "One of the things that makes this grant special is that it provides direct support to the artist."

People who come to the show at Roberson can trace Warfield's development over time, since the sculptures on display range from pieces she produced in college through the work she is making today.

In-person workshops give visitors a chance to learn more about the artist's work and process than Roberson can offer through signage, Grasso said. "We hope the series of workshops in 2024 will be inspirational for the people who attend and also give Anna a platform as an artist to increase her visibility, and not just locally. I think her work has a national and even international appeal."

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Hygiene Pantry Fund is a Success!

IN RESPONSE to an increase in the number of requests we've received to fund hygiene pantries in our region, our development officer, Shawn Graham, organized a fund-raising campaign to meet this critical human need.

Our goal for the fund was $10,000, and because of the generosity of our donors, we were able to meet that goal in just two weeks! As a result, we've been able to make ten significant grants to hygiene pantries operating in Broome, Tioga, Chenango, Delaware and Otsego counties.

Our most sincere thanks goes out to all donors who answered the call:

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