

Erie County Executive Mark C. Poloncarz  
Buffalo Poverty Research Workshop  
Opening Remarks  
March 28, 2014; 9:00am

Good morning.

I want to thank the Partnership for the Public Good for the opportunity to speak before you today.

### **LBJ War on Poverty**

In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson said, *“Unfortunately, many Americans live on the outskirts of hope--some because of their poverty, and some because of their color, and all too many because of both. Our task is to help replace their despair with opportunity.”*

Johnson went on to note, *“It will not be a short or easy struggle, no single weapon or strategy will suffice, but we shall not rest until that war is won. The richest Nation on earth can afford to win it. We cannot afford to lose it...”*

It’s hard to believe it’s been 50 years since President Johnson launched his “War on Poverty.” Many of you here today, were just kids...or like me, not even born yet.

In the years since LBJ, his programs have lifted millions upon millions out of desperate situations. Unfortunately, we have lost the focus we once had.

### **Erie County Poverty Stats**

While Erie County's unemployment rate and levels of poverty are better than the state and national averages, not everyone is benefitting from our resurgent economy.

In fact, many at the lowest rung of the economic ladder are being left behind, and income inequality is now putting at risk the middle class.

Poverty plays a profound role in the educational challenges in a city where nearly one in two students does not graduate high school on time.

Poverty also contributes to high rates of adult illiteracy, poor health, criminal activity, homelessness, unemployment, and dependency on limited government services.

Poverty hurts us all – imposing high costs not just on those suffering it, but on government, businesses, and neighborhoods.

Poverty is also widespread; while the levels of poverty are more extreme in our urban areas, the suburbs and rural areas now contain more people, in total, living in poverty.

There is hope. We are having the candid discussion that we need regarding poverty – this workshop today, where we will get the chance to hear about new and ongoing research and the promising convergence of innovative anti-poverty programs in our region.

### **Medicaid Report**

We know that a person cannot advance themselves if they are suffering from a lack of high quality health care.

Recently the County's Medicaid Inspector General Mike Szukala conducted a first of its kind analysis of Medicaid usage in Erie County.

The report revealed nearly one-quarter of all Erie County residents receive Medicaid, which includes three of every ten children in our community. Worse yet, the number of enrollees is increasing at an average rate of more than four percent (4%) per year.

Think about that for a moment.

Nearly one in four Erie County residents receives Medicaid as his or her primary insurance coverage, and that includes not just those who are unemployed but also many recipients who have jobs. People who are working full time and still cannot make ends meet.

For example, under new guidelines, in a one income household, the head of a family of four (4) still qualifies for Medicaid if he or she makes \$15.00 per hour full time year round. That's nearly double the minimum wage in New York State, yet still unable to get by without our help.

And, while many Medicaid enrollees do live in the City of Buffalo, a growing number of enrollees live in our suburban towns and in especially in our rural village centers.

Many of these individuals have no primary care doctor and only seek medical assistance when it is too late.

As we work to move our County's economy forward, we cannot leave behind the health and well-being of those on the lowest rungs of the economic ladder.

## **Erie County Medical Mall**

I am proud to say we are only weeks away from the opening of the Erie County Health Mall—a new primary care, dental and mental health clinic located at the former Matthew Gajewski Clinic on Buffalo’s east side near the Cheektowaga border.

Erie County residents, whose only option may have been to visit a costly ER, or worse yet not even see a doctor, will now have access to a “one-stop shop” for quality and affordable health care.

The investment we make today on this clinic will pay big dividends for our future by improving the community’s health, while reducing long-term healthcare costs. And that will benefit us all.

## **Say Yes**

In order to make the next great improvements in our safety network, we must leap ahead of the largely reactive programs to get ahead of the problems before they come in the front door with desperate needs.

We know that the greatest tool to take a person out of poverty is to educate them.

But for too long the Buffalo Public School System was failing in this basic task. Too many of our greatest assets – our children – are dropping out and becoming a drain on our greater community.

We have made a major breakthrough to end this cycle of failure by partnering with Catholic Charities, Buffalo Public Schools and the Say Yes program. This partnership features a significant expansion of social work, mental health services and clinics into Buffalo public school buildings so that students in need of these services can easily access them in a safe environment – their own schools.

This new role will strengthen the Erie County Department of Social Services' ability to protect and serve at-risk youth.

Our task is to see that family and community concerns do not prevent students from graduating and taking advantage of the Say Yes scholarships. And, together we will.

### **Workforce Development**

To lift families out of poverty, we must also focus on workforce development to ensure we are training our citizens for the jobs that exist today.

I have led the call to address the workforce development needs of our community. We are collaborating with our partners at the Buffalo Niagara Partnership, ECC, the Workforce Development Consortium, the Buffalo and Erie County Workforce Investment Board, and New York State to effectively train our residents for the careers of tomorrow.

For example, just recently, New York State announced the next step towards the creation of an Advanced Manufacturing Training Center in our community, and Erie County and ECC will play a key role in making that happen.

We do this because we know if we can educate our population for the jobs that exist today we can reduce overall poverty in our community.

### **The Future**

Unfortunately, poverty in Western New York has not yet received the sustained attention it deserves, and I believe the time is now to make a unified regional effort.

An effective anti-poverty strategy requires more than creating good-paying jobs. It requires economic development efforts and human services programs working hand in hand.

While economic growth will create the conditions necessary to lift many out of poverty, human services initiatives are needed to allow disadvantaged citizens to take advantage of these opportunities.

In support of these efforts, my administration is working on a health and human services plan, “Initiatives for a Stronger Community,” as a counterpart to our economic development plan, “Initiatives for a Smart Economy.”

As we develop this plan, we must strengthen our fragile families.

Often families come through our doors numerous times for a variety of reasons. Maybe needing assistance to provide food on the table or heat for their home, or in need of a child-care subsidy in order to work and provide for their family.



They may even need us to enforce child support from an absent parent. Other times, these families find themselves in trouble and are coming through our doors for the wrong reasons, such as being on probation.

Whatever the reason someone may come through our front door, our goal will always be for them able to exit it ready, willing and able to take care of themselves and their family. If we fail at this task, our community will not and cannot be as strong.

We must provide better and more choices for our young people. We must create a sense of hope. That if they work hard and play by the rules, the sky is the limit.

One of the most important things we can do is help parents make good choices for themselves and their children. Our County has seen too many children's lives taken or destroyed due to drug abuse, untreated mental illness, and family violence.

Too many single mothers in our community have chosen new partners who abuse drugs, and are abusive to them and their child.

We will be putting forward an initiative to inform parents about family violence, safe sleeping, stress management, and community resources available to them.

Additionally, many seniors who have worked hard their entire lives now find themselves living on limited retirement incomes and on the edge of poverty.

All too often our seniors are not aware of services and benefits that can help them make ends meet. As such, throughout 2014, we will be working to raise awareness of these benefits and assisting our seniors to get the help they need.

Many other residents are only one health event away from poverty. A stroke, heart attack, or even a fall can result in costly out of pocket expenses. In worst case scenarios, family members may have to choose between caring for their parents and keeping their jobs.

While not always preventable, we know that communities can reduce these kind of health care events by investing in good health promotion efforts that focus on preventing falls and controlling the chronic diseases that often lead to critical health events and Erie County will take the lead in doing so.

There are also many anti-poverty programs, funded by the federal government, which are being underutilized in our community.

Nationwide, about one in five people eligible for food stamps do not apply for them. And, about one in five also do not claim the Earned Income Tax Credit. We can assume there are tens of thousands of qualified Erie County residents not taking advantage of these vital programs.

Not only does this hurt those families, but it hurts our local economy. If we can increase participation rates for these programs, which do not impact local taxes, millions upon millions of more dollars can be injected into our local economy.

Erie County government needs to proactively tackle these challenges and aggressively pursue opportunities to improve the quality of life for all our citizens. And we will.

As Supreme Court Justice William Brennan noted 44 years ago, anti-poverty programs exist so we “can help bring within the reach of the poor the same opportunities that are available to others to participate meaningfully in the life of the community.”

We can give our citizens living in poverty the tools they need to carve out a brighter future.

We can give them hope for a better tomorrow not only for themselves but for their children and, as a result, strengthen our entire community.

## **Conclusion**

While we may never eliminate all poverty in our community, we should never let the fear of failure stop us from trying.

As long as a significant portion of our community lives in poverty, we are all poorer for it.

It is our responsibility to protect those who cannot protect themselves, and to help lift up those who cannot do it on their own.

We hear so often from elected officials that they are “protecting taxpayers” but shouldn’t we also be coming together as a community to also protect those in need like our seniors, our children? Shouldn’t we be “protecting people?”

We must work together to address the roots of poverty. We cannot simply stand by and say it is someone else’s problem to fix.

If we are to succeed in reducing poverty and give each and every one of our residents the opportunity to live the American dream, as was the case in generations past, government must be part of the solution.

This is what I promised during my state of the county address last month, and this is what I promise to you today. Erie County will lead and will be part of the solution to poverty in our region.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to be here with you today and participate in this important workshop. Let us go forward after today

with a renewed sense of urgency and willingness to foster stronger partnerships on behalf of our entire community.

Thank you.

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