

Addressing Health-Related Social Needs through Innovation and Integration

Written testimony to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on 2024 Executive Budget Proposal: Topic Health/Medicaid

Executive Summary

This testimony, presented to the Joint Legislative Public Hearing on the 2024 Executive Budget Proposal (Health/Medicaid), outlines the pivotal role of TogetherNow, a community initiative in Monroe County and the Finger Lakes. TogetherNow is dedicated to addressing health-related social needs through innovative and integrated care systems, especially in areas severely affected by poverty and its related challenges.

Key Points:

- **Community Challenge:** Monroe County, particularly Rochester, faces severe poverty, with a rate of 29.3%, significantly higher than the state average. This socioeconomic backdrop creates complex health and social challenges.
- **Innovative Response:** TogetherNow has implemented innovative solutions, including the Systems Integration Project and MyWayfinder, an online referral and resource platform. These initiatives aim to create a coordinated, efficient care system.
- **Proven Impact:** Our efforts have led to measurable improvements in service delivery and community well-being. Since its launch, MyWayfinder has seen significant user engagement, indicating its effectiveness.
- **Request for Support:** To continue and expand our impact, an additional investment of \$5 million is requested. This funding will further develop our integrated care system and serve as a model for other communities.
- **Vision for the Future:** Our goal is not only to address current needs but to create a sustainable, replicable model that can elevate health and well-being across the state.

This testimony details the journey of TogetherNow, our accomplishments, the challenges we continue to face, and our roadmap for future growth and broader impact.

Introduction

As a leading community-driven initiative, TogetherNow, based in Monroe County, is at the forefront of pioneering an integrated system of care that spans the health, education, and human services sectors. Our mission is not just to provide services but to transform how these services are delivered

and accessed in the Finger Lakes region. This integration is not an end but a means to a greater goal: improving the health and economic well-being of our community members, especially those grappling with the multi-faceted challenges of poverty. Rochester, the heart of Monroe County, exemplifies the urgent need for our work. With an overall poverty rate of 29.3% — more than double the statewide average — and nearly half of its children growing up in poverty, the city is a stark reminder of the deep-seated issues we are committed to addressing. These statistics are not just numbers; they represent real people facing daily struggles that impact their health and opportunities for a better life. Our approach is not based on temporary fixes but on sustainable, systemic change. We are writing to share our journey, impact, and vision of a future in which every individual in Monroe County can achieve optimal health and well-being.

Background and Context

In 2015, Rochester participated in the IBM Smarter Cities Challenge. IBM documented a system of misaligned services and programs that were difficult to navigate and weighed down by measurement systems that were too focused on the outcomes of providers and funders at the expense of the outcomes for community members. IBM summed up its findings as “program rich and results poor.” In 2017, the Systems Integration Project was convened as a collaborative effort of the Greater Rochester community to establish an integrated system of care to improve the collective well-being of Monroe County. Thanks to New York State and philanthropic investment, the Systems Integration Project successfully created the foundation of an integrated system responsive to our community's needs. In 2022, the Systems Integration Project transitioned from a temporary status to an enduring entity—TogetherNow.

As the Joint Committee is aware, poverty and other social factors have consequences that range beyond the creation of a state of want. Health is complex and it is impacted by a wide range of socioeconomic factors. If a mental health concern goes untreated, a stable job might be unattainable. If a stable job is unattainable, a family might experience food or housing insecurity, which both may unlock new chains of plight. Socioeconomic forces do not happen inside a vacuum. They are intertwined and each contributes to an individual's overall wellbeing. We believe in investing in the whole person and helping them move away from poverty and vulnerability by addressing a spectrum of social forces that combine to act as determinants of health. Making investments in the whole person not only moves individuals and families away from poverty, and it can also prevent them from experiencing poverty in the first place.

Impact and Theory of Change

TogetherNow is working to fully implement an integrated service delivery model that strives to implement an integrated system of care. An integrated system will be more effective and efficient at delivering services to community members. It will increase the system's overall capacity by eliminating duplicative services. An integrated system allows a community member to present at a CBO (Community Based Organizations) to address an unmet social need and leave with referrals to address their other unmet needs with the help of different organizations. A more effective system can help community members through their crises. It also supports them as they move towards a

brighter future. We have many talented and dedicated providers in Monroe County. An integrated system will allow them to deliver a collective benefit to the community.

To support TogetherNow's integrated system of care we worked with our partners across the community to design, develop, test, and implement MyWayfinder, an online referral platform and resource directory that allows community members to connect directly with service providers, manage their own care team, play a central role in the care being furnished to them, and complete wellbeing check-ins that provide the users with a 360-degree view of wellness. MyWayfinder allows providers to collaborate like never before. It enables them to coordinate care and refer community members to the services that will help them achieve a better state of wellness. Nearly 10,000 community members have used MyWayfinder's resource directory to perform over 80,000 searches for services. Those numbers have relied primarily on word-of-mouth referrals and utilization by our growing provider network. We are preparing for a public launch in March, which we expect will precipitate a surge in usage.

TogetherNow is building a new system. One that holds community members at its center and believes in honing the potential of the social care system to create the best possible outcomes for community members. An integrated system can collaborate and innovate to realize its collective potential. We believe that our model can be replicated across the state to raise all boats.

Conclusion and Funding Request

We have come a long way since 2017. The foundation is laid, and we need to keep building the house. We are grateful for New York's investment in our work. An additional investment of \$5 million would help us realize our community's vision of an integrated care system that can help our neighbors realize higher states of well-being and serve as a model for communities across the state. The additional investment from the State would be put to work expanding our provider network and supporting our work as we reach fiscal sustainability over the next fiscal year. Thank you to the Joint Committee for taking the time to review this testimony.

For further information, contact Laura Gustin at laura.gustin@togethernowny.org or 585.474.0662 (cell). Ms. Gustin is available to deliver oral testimony based on this written testimony.