



Alliance of Communities
Transforming Syracuse

Summary of Issues

PRE-K EXPANSION

Presenters: ***Peter Kozik & Ramona Moreno***

Peter Kozik, Assistant Professor, Education Division, Keuka College.

Ramona Moreno, Program Facilitator, Manos Dual Language Early Education Program.

For the last three years the Public Education Task Force of ACTS has addressed the need to expand pre-K classrooms in the Syracuse City School District. Our goal remains one of providing an opportunity for all four-year-olds to enroll in a full day quality pre-K classroom. Due to our efforts and the commitment and collaboration of the SCSD, Onondaga County, and City government close to 400 children have been added to full day pre-K classrooms. However, we are only halfway there: an equal number of children enter kindergarten without having had the benefit of a quality full day pre-K experience.

The good news is that the SCSD received a \$1.6 million dollar grant to expand pre-K offerings. Our task force has recruited children for the district; garnered support of the business community and criminal justice representatives; rallied on the steps of city hall; and enlisted the support of elected officials to increase support for pre-K expansion in the city and suburbs (only 7 of the 16 suburban school districts support a pre-K program).

We remain committed to Pre-K expansion. Providing a full day program supports the needs of families to balance their work schedules with their child's education. Research continues to document the immediate and long-term benefits of pre-K: children are entering Kindergarten better prepared for learning and more likely to be reading by the third grade. Long-term, graduation rates are higher and incarceration rates are lower for those having a pre-K experience. And, perhaps most important of all is the growing recognition that pre-K provides a vital step out of poverty, providing children with early academic and social-emotional skills.

PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Presenter: ***Peter Sarver***

Peter Sarver is the volunteer ACTS Convener for the Moving People Transportation Coalition. He serves as ACTS Board Vice President. His day job is as Executive Director for Welch Terrace Apartments, supportive housing for people with disabilities. He teaches at Le Moyne College and Syracuse University. Peter was President/CEO for Hospice of CNY over many years and continues his involvement in health care ethics, end-of-life care and advance care planning.

Public Transportation is a social justice issue with many dimensions. How to get to work...without a vehicle? *Answer = PT*. How to get to the doctor's office if you are disabled or elderly...without a car? *Answer = PT*. How to get your 4 year old to Pre-K class across town...without a vehicle? *Answer = PT*. How do you save money on auto fuel & maintenance, parking costs and save the environment? *Answer = PT*. Is the availability of and access to public transportation sufficient to address the needs of low-income people? *Answer = No*. Are there timely plans underway to expand public transportation to give new options for "moving people" when the current I-81 viaduct comes down to make way for the new I-81? *Answer = No*. The sad summary is that this vital resource in the greater Syracuse area is underutilized because it does not get people to where they need to go when they need to get there.



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Public transportation is a social justice issue because it is a necessity for low-income people that is overlooked, underfunded and impacts all aspects of our lives, including employment, education, health care, and the environment. It is an equity issue because local travel with a vehicle requiring expenses above the income of many in our community. It is a fairness issue because the elderly and disabled deserve the same opportunities to engage a full life as those of us blessed with full use of our bodies. Truth be told, it is also a middle class issue because suburban sprawl has made it difficult to meet the costs of travel (and parking) in and out of the city while wages and salaries are stagnant and fuel costs shrink our ability to meet other basic needs. Public officials should be held accountable for an expansion of public transportation options at a time when cultural forces are shifting us toward a “multi-modal” system of moving people and away from a continuation of one person/one car philosophy.

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Presenter: Rebecca Fuentes

Rebecca Fuentes, Lead Organizer, Workers' Center of Central New York

The opportunity to provide for the needs of yourself and your family is a fundamental social justice issue. In Central New York, thousands upon thousands of our brothers and sisters remain without jobs, or in jobs that pay well below a living wage. These folks are motivated and hard workers, as shown by their ability to overcome obstacles including: transportation to and from work without a car; arranging for childcare; and meeting parental responsibilities. Anyone working full time should not still live below the poverty level.

In our community, low household income relegates families to inadequate education, inadequate access to healthcare, inadequate access to healthy food, and limited access to recreational and cultural opportunities. Poverty is a key facet of many of the most vexing issues people in our community face. Jobs paying decent wages, made accessible to the unemployed and underemployed in our community, will contribute positively toward solving many of the issues listed above. There is dignity in all work, and family stability and a stronger sense of dignity both come from gainful employment with fair wages.

Raising the minimum wage, local source hiring, and more responsive workforce training are a few of the possible solutions - if we put our collective will behind these. We must ensure that everyone who puts in a full day's work makes enough money to provide for their basic needs, and has some funds for their future and the futures of their children and family.

LAND USE EQUITY

Land use equity as a social justice issue is about how communities structure their “land use” policies for housing, commercial or other developments. Typically land use is dictated by zoning and related ordinances that guide public decision-making. Many zoning measures have resulted in segregation by race and social class. Such segregation is a serious social problem in the Syracuse area undermining the well-being of the city and the suburbs. “Smart growth” planning criteria can be very useful in reversing this persistent injustice.



Supporting mixed-income housing in neighborhoods is critical to altering the course of individuals and families living in concentrated poverty. Neighborhood stability is greatly enhanced with mixed-use housing and with that stability comes greater educational achievement, a decrease in criminal activity, better health for residents, and all of these create more economic opportunities. With mixed-use housing comes a sense of safety; which allows adults greater opportunities to socialize with each other and mentor the youth in the community, peer influences become more positive social interactions, and there is a decrease in crime and violence. Potential businesses are drawn to areas where there is stability in their workforce and their customer base, and, in turn, help to insure the maintenance of a community.

When people are safe they can take ownership of their neighborhoods, decreasing each individual's sense of isolation; support greater access to community businesses and spaces, such as urban gardens; and advocate for themselves, allowing neighborhoods to act in their own best interest. The city of Syracuse is about to begin a total overall review of zoning regulations that govern the use of property throughout city. This is a critical time for ACTS to provide residents of Syracuse with meaningful input to the zoning process to insure property use supports mixed-income housing and fair and equitable use of land throughout the city.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE

Presenter: Langston McKinney

Langston McKinney became Syracuse's first African American city court judge in 1986 and served in that position until his retirement in 2010. During that time, he developed and oversaw the Syracuse Community Treatment Court, which is designed to divert people with substance abuse problems away from incarceration and into treatment programs. Prior to being elected judge, McKinney represented low-income people as an attorney with Onondaga Neighborhood Legal Services and Hiscock Legal Aid. Throughout his career he maintained a commitment to establishing a system that administers justice equitably and affirms the dignity of all those involved in it. At his retirement ceremony he urged people to remember, "Justice is not contained in the courtroom. Justice is a community effort, a collaborative effort." McKinney remains involved in a number of organizations and groups, including the Ban the Box campaign steering committee.

For several years, ACTS has worked to address criminal justice issues in a holistic manner. Approaching the issue of crime from a social justice perspective requires consideration of the ways in which the criminal justice system itself can be improved to benefit the victims of crimes, people accused and convicted of committing crimes, and the community as a whole. ACTS looks beyond punitive measures and encourages rehabilitative and restorative opportunities so that people ensnared in the criminal justice system can improve their lives and make valuable contributions to their communities.

Members of ACTS are particularly concerned about police-community relations, police brutality, inadequate indigent defense, mass incarceration, the school-to-prison pipeline, racial disparities in the criminal justice system, and a lack of opportunity for people with criminal histories to reintegrate into the community. It has become clear that the "get tough" response to crime is not working. There are alternative models for addressing crime that are more cost effective and better at improving community safety. Supporting structural solutions to the problems identified by ACTS members and utilizing restorative justice principles whenever possible will help ensure that Syracuse is a safer community and one that values the dignity of all of its residents.



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COMMUNITY VIOLENCE AND YOUTH

Presenters: **Jackie Warren-Moore & Dr. Marsha Weissman**

Jackie Warren-Moore is a poet, playwright, theatrical director, free-lance writer and community activist. She writes monthly for *The Post-Standard* and Syracuse.com. Ms. Warren-Moore conducts readings and workshops in prisons throughout the state of New York. She has been a writer-in-residence with the Syracuse City School District and a teaching assistant in Black Theater in the African American Studies department at Syracuse University.

Her long-time commitment to the youth of Syracuse is reflected in the bounteous collection of poetry, rap artistry and prose they have created while under her tutelage. Ms. Warren-Moore often reflects their issues, their concerns in her own work.

Dr. Marsha Weissman is the founder and Executive Director of the Center for Community Alternatives (CCA). She holds a Ph.D. in Social Science from the Maxwell School of Citizenship at Syracuse University. CCA provides alternative programs for youth and adults in the juvenile and criminal justice systems as well as research and policy advocacy. Dr. Weissman serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Dignity in Schools Campaign, was a member of the New York State Task Force on Transforming Juvenile Justice and was recently appointed to the New York State Council on Community Re-Entry and Reintegration. She has testified before the U.S. Senate on the problem of the “school-to-prison pipeline” and ways to reduce school suspensions. Dr. Weissman is the author “Prelude to Prison: Youth Perspectives on the School-to-Prison Pipeline” to be published by Syracuse University Press in November 2014.

There is broad concern among ACTS members about incidents of violence in the community, especially situations that involve young people. A social justice approach to youth and violence requires recognition of the structural violence inflicted on poor people and people of color in Syracuse. Structural violence is a term used to describe the ways that social institutions (schools, the criminal justice system, or economic models are examples) can cause harm or create disadvantages for particular groups of people. ACTS understands the individual violent acts committed by young people to be part of a broader context of structural violence.

ACTS recognizes that there is work to do in preventing violence from occurring but also in changing the ways the community responds when there is a violent incident. Young people who experience violence in their lives need healthy ways to move on from trauma. Members of ACTS are especially concerned about safety in schools and how problems can be addressed proactively by encouraging conflict resolution before an incident escalates to violence. We also want to encourage restorative, rather than punitive, responses to violence when it does occur. The young people in our community deserve to feel safe in their neighborhoods and their schools – safe from interpersonal violence and safe from the structural violence that permeates their daily lives.