

Meeting the Basic Needs of our Community: Findings from FOCUS Greater Syracuse and PEACE, Inc.'s Whole Family Summit, 22 November 2024



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Background

In September 2024, People’s Equal Action and Community Effort, Inc. (PEACE, Inc.) and FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. (FOCUS) partnered to organize a Whole Family Summit to Meet the Basic Needs of the Central New York Community. The initiative emerged from a collaboration between both agencies, each responding to community requests for a forum not only to speak about but also to develop solutions for escalating needs.

Both entities possessed funding to pursue this agenda. FOCUS had secured a grant from the Central New York Community Foundation (CNYCF) to pilot an engagement process that identified actionable steps and solutions based on recent community reports, including PEACE, Inc. 's 2024 Community Needs Assessment (CNA) for Onondaga County.¹ Meanwhile, PEACE, Inc. had recently received a grant from The Kresge Foundation to address the needs of low-income families through capacity building, cross-sector collaboration, and community-based advocacy.

With both entities recognizing the complexity of improving access to basic needs for people experiencing poverty, PEACE, Inc. proposed grounding the collaboration through a Whole Family approach. Additionally, PEACE, Inc. provided guidance and support to FOCUS in planning, implementing, and evaluating a replicable engagement process that could be used for other emerging community issues. The Summit occurred on the morning of 22 November 2024 at the Collegiate Hotel in Syracuse.

This report summarizes the methodologies used for the Summit, key insights from it, solutions identified by Summit participants, and recommendations/next steps for future community engagement.

Methodology

The goal of the “Whole Family Summit to Meet the Basic Needs of our Community” was to learn about and to enhance the community’s capacity to develop collaborative, family-centric solutions for overcoming basic needs barriers. The Summit was also intended to serve as a pilot that FOCUS could potentially replicate for other community priorities such as transportation, housing, and workforce development.

For the Summit, FOCUS and PEACE, Inc. invited human/social service leaders, funders, frontline workers, community representatives, and families. The format of the Summit included the following:

- a) A keynote speaker who brought a national perspective to the issue (Jennifer Gregory, Director of Mobility Learning Design and Practice at the National Community Action Partnership).
- b) A panel of experts who demonstrated lessons learned locally (Syeisha Byrd, Commissioner of Syracuse Parks, Recreation, and Youth Programs; Sarah Easterly, 2Gen Onondaga Program Director, Onondaga County Department of Social Services-Economic Mobility; and Jacki Evans, Head Start Parent Engagement and Male Involvement Coordinator, PEACE, Inc.).

¹ PEACE, Inc. “2024 Community Needs Assessment, Onondaga County, New York.” April 22, 2024. <https://www.peace-caa.org/2024-cna/>.

- c) Facilitated breakout sessions that provided a space for building connections while collaboratively identifying solutions for basic needs barriers in our community.

The Summit agenda follows.

Agenda

8:00-8:30 AM	Registration and Breakfast Register, meet participants from different organizations, and enjoy a continental breakfast
8:30-9:30 AM	Welcome and Keynote <i>Welcome</i> - Rita Reicher, Ph.D., President, FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc. - Sharon Owens, Deputy Mayor, City of Syracuse - Frank Ridzi, Ph.D., Vice President of Community Investment, Central New York Community Foundation <i>Keynote Introduction</i> - Carolyn D. Brown, Executive Director, PEACE, Inc. <i>Keynote</i> - Jennifer Gregory, Director of Mobility Learning Design & Practice, National Community Action Partnership
9:35-10:30 AM	Panel: Multigenerational Approaches within Central New York Learn more about programs demonstrating success and participate in a question and answer session <i>Panelists</i> - Syeisha Byrd, Commissioner, Syracuse Department of Parks, Recreation, and Youth Programs - Sarah Easterly, 2Gen Onondaga Program Director, Onondaga County Department of Social Services-Economic Security - Jacki Evans, Head Start Parent Engagement and Male Involvement Coordinator, PEACE, Inc.
10:30-10:45 AM	Break
10:45-11:45 AM	Break Out Groups Guests will discuss how the community can build capacity to meet community needs - Facilitator, Maribel Arce, Director of Grants and Planning, PEACE, Inc.
11:45-Noon	Concluding Remarks The program will close with a summary of the day and next steps - Todd Goehle, Vice President of Operations and Strategy, PEACE, Inc.

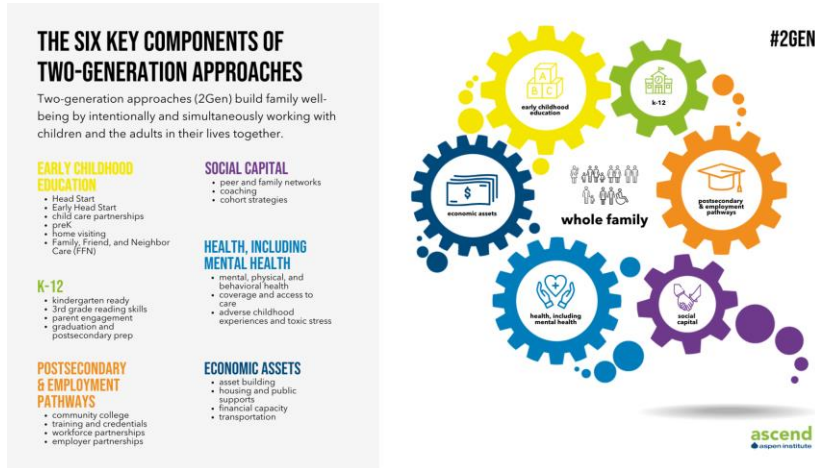
The organizers from FOCUS and PEACE, Inc. were intentional with the format of the Summit and the role each component in the agenda played toward the expected outcome. Key aspects of the methodology behind the Summit's design were to:

- **Select participants who have direct knowledge of the topic.** The Summit brought together approximately 80 participants from 52 agencies,² including frontline staff from community service organizations, housing agencies, advocacy groups, government agencies, faith-based organizations, local school districts, city planners, funding

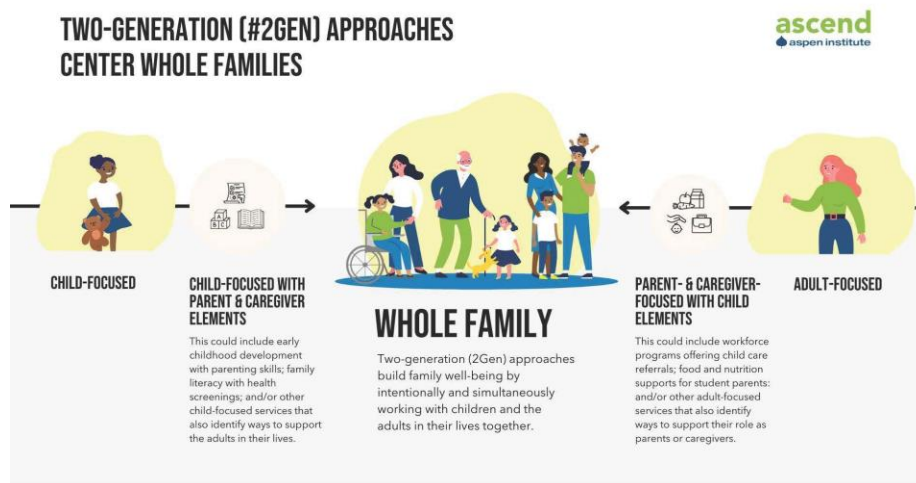
² See Appendix A for a list of agencies that attended the Summit.

agencies, and representatives from low-income households. FOCUS and PEACE, Inc. issued direct invitations to selected individuals from their network of partner agencies.

- **Use a broad lens/framework to analyze the issue.** The Summit addressed basic needs through a comprehensive and multi-generational Whole Family lens, specifically the [Aspen Institute’s Ascend #2Gen](#) framework. As displayed below, the Ascend #2Gen framework considers “six components to improve families’ financial stability, social capital, health care, and quality education.”³



Widely used throughout the country, the Ascend #2Gen approach was also attractive for the Summit’s purposes, as it stresses the need to work intentionally with both youth and adults. It is best displayed in the following image.⁴



Building from this Whole Family approach, the Summit expanded the concept to include older adults, acknowledging their critical role in family dynamics and community support

³ A copy of the graphics Ascend uses to convey the 2Gen concept was handed to participants in their packets. *Ascend at the Aspen Institute*, “Key Components of Well-Being.” Accessed January 25, 2025. <https://ascend.aspeninstitute.org/2gen-approach/>.

⁴ *Ascend at the Aspen Institute*, “2Gen Approach.” Accessed January 25, 2025. Ibid

systems. In this respect, the Summit aimed to build family well-being by intentionally addressing the interconnected needs of children, adults, and older adults.

- **Provide national insights and local expertise.** FOCUS and PEACE, Inc. were intentional in finding inspirational and informative speakers that would set the groundwork for fruitful breakout sessions. A national speaker presented the Whole Family framework which was followed by a panel presentation featuring local experts who shared their experiences in implementing different 2Gen approaches, emphasizing real-life examples and lessons learned.
 - The Summit's keynote speaker, Jennifer Gregory, applied a national perspective for how Whole Family approaches can meet basic needs. Gregory noted the effects of systemic barriers on families. She also brought inspiring, first-hand experiences for how the Whole Family approach can positively contribute to breaking the cycle of intergenerational poverty.
 - Sarah Easterly from 2Gen Onondaga shared insights about the successes and challenges of a) pioneering a two-generational poverty reduction program embedded within the Department of Social Services and b) shifting the measurement of success from compliance to active engagement and goal achievement.
 - Syeisha Bird and Jacki Evans shared their experiences creating motherhood and fatherhood groups both individually and through partnership with the Early Childhood Alliance and PEACE, Inc.'s Head Start/Early Head Start Program. By considering the needs of mothers, fathers, and children, each panelist successfully addressed barriers for participation.

Throughout their careers, the keynote speaker and panelists have embraced multi-generational service deliveries, recognizing their impact on families facing poverty-related barriers.

- **Foster a creative community environment through participant interaction.** Intentionally, the agenda provided generous time and multiple formats for participant engagement. FOCUS and PEACE, Inc. representatives collected questions during the panel sessions. Also scheduled were breaks and extended breakout group sessions to ensure participant engagement. Furthermore, to accommodate diverse learning styles and promote active engagement, the breakout sessions employed the following structure.
 - Participants were randomly assigned to groups and encouraged to engage with strangers. When signing-in, participants received a folder with the Agenda, a Persona and worksheet, information about Aspen's 2Gen approach, and more.⁵ Based upon the Persona in their packets, participants were divided into eight groups for the breakout sessions.
 - Participants applied their experience and expertise while incorporating a multigenerational approach for identifying actionable solutions to practical scenarios. For this purpose, PEACE, Inc. developed Personas as specific

⁵ These documents can be found in Appendix B.

examples or “case studies” and a worksheet as an analytical tool for the breakout sessions.

- Initially in the breakout session, participants paired to read and discuss the Personas. The worksheet in their folders guided their conversation through prompts, which encouraged feedback about the Personas’ realism, elicited empathy, and furthered analysis of potential solutions. By pairing participants into groups of 2 or 3 first, the methodology allowed smaller spaces for people who are shy or who needed more time to reflect on the issue.
- Facilitated small-group discussions followed, which allowed participants to share insights and recommendations in groups of 10-12 people. During the larger group setting, participants found commonalities but also learned of new ideas and approaches to address basic needs in our community. The discussion mirrored the worksheet guide, providing everyone with sufficient time to speak and contribute ideas. Given the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and backgrounds being applied to a case study, the room emerged as a fertile space for conversations.
- **Develop realistic case studies through Personas.** PEACE, Inc. developed the Personas based on information collected from its 2024 CNA, which included community conversations and interviews with over 200 low-income clients, students, and frontline staff. As discussed in the conclusion of the CNA, Personas are an increasingly popular means for businesses, social/human services providers, and others to understand their target audiences. Personas are fictional composite characters representing diverse populations emerging from Human-Centered Design principles. These Personas⁶—Ms. A (a single mother), JC (a teenager), and Mr. J (an older adult male)—provided tangible case studies for discussions. Each Persona included a one-page description outlining their current situation, aspirations, challenges, and goals. Purposefully, names and ethnicities were omitted to encourage participants to weave their perspectives and experiences into identifying solutions.
- **Design data collection and analysis mechanisms.** The worksheet was designed to let the conversation flow naturally without forcing topics or priorities on participants. Each of the breakout sessions’ tables had a designated facilitator and notetaker. Discussions were recorded through detailed notes and worksheet prompts collected from participants. Notetakers were instructed to write as close to what people said as was possible. While this makes the process of distilling the findings more complex, it allows for the true voices and intentions of the participants to emerge.

In addition to supporting the development of the tools (Personas and worksheets), two Syracuse University interns, Kelly Matlock and Lonia Mwiyeriwa, worked with Arce and Goehle to compile and synthesize the data collected in the spreadsheets. Matlock and Mwiyeriwa also shared their insights into key themes from the data that were incorporated in the report.

PEACE, Inc. and FOCUS met after the Summit to debrief on the positive outcomes that emerged, areas for improvement, and lessons learned. Finally, the PEACE, Inc.

⁶ The three Personas and the worksheet can be found in Appendix B.

community engagement team led by Arce read all event notes and synthesized the findings to create this comprehensive report that highlights strategic insights, identifies recurring themes, integrates participant voices through quotes, and outlines actionable strategies and recommendations for the future.⁷

Key Insights & Solutions

Insight 1: Relatability and lived experience

Overwhelmingly, participants found the Summit's Personas highly relatable, which helped create a compassionate, non-judgmental environment. Through this process, participants also focused on the personal strengths and barriers found within the Personas and, therefore, of the individuals they serve. A few participants noted that Mr. J, the older adult Persona, was less vulnerable than the older adults that they typically serve. This minor difference may reflect that Mr. J derived in part from information provided by AmeriCorps Seniors Foster Grandparent volunteers, who tend to be more active and financially resilient than older adults who are frailer and not earning a stipend.⁸

Regardless, participants connected with the stress and anxiety caused by the various issues depicted within the Personas' households. Some noted that this vulnerability can lead to any one issue becoming the tipping point that completely derails a family from its goals.

- *"Like Mr. J, I am recognized as the neighborhood grandma who provides structure. "We take that important work for granted. Kids won't remember the popular toy, but they'll remember Mr. J."*
- *Ms. A seems like a regular person, many factors involved... How hard she has to spin her wheels to go on, she is isolated."*
- *"The whole top section of the persona is related to what I do, and my wife works at a community center, she had a kid who dealt with the exact same problem as JC. The kid was homeless, had none of his documents, but because of that program he got it and is in college now. His mom was too overwhelmed. "*
- *"The Persona resonates in having a better understanding of refugee experiences. I'm first generation too and I see similarities."*
- *"Their lived experiences have given them more qualifications than could ever be put on a resume."*

⁷ FOCUS Board Member Nancy Smith and PEACE, Inc. Spring Intern Aidan John Kelly also provided critical final edits of this report.

⁸ Personas created through Human-Centered Design methodology excel at producing research-based archetypes that capture the motivations, behaviors, pain points, and goals of a target population. However, this precision comes with an inherent limitation. Their effectiveness stems from their specificity – they represent client profiles rather than broad populations.

Solution 1: Provide greater bandwidth to overburdened families

Participants found the Personas dealt with an excess of issues taking place at the same time. As a result, participants recognized that difficulties accessing services—such as requiring repeated visits —can create insurmountable barriers for families already struggling to make ends meet. Participants spoke about how small service delivery changes could be effective:

- Make conversations accessible; avoid acronyms and complicated terms.
- Some topics are too wide-ranging and complicated; people feel intimidated and overwhelmed.
- Reduce complexity by making action steps short and easy to follow; use simple language; coach clients through processes, check-in regularly, and provide reminders.
- Give families options “to get back on track” if an event (illness, car broke down, job loss) momentarily derails them from the path toward their goals.
- Provide people with clear timelines for receiving services (e.g., anytime between 2 weeks and 6 months is not a realistic range for vulnerable people to plan).
- Offer services after traditional office hours so people can work and still access support.
- For those who are digitally literate and possess access, hold meetings on Zoom so people can attend more easily; not everything needs to be in person.
- Revise programs to provide better online services through mobile/phone navigators.
- Reduce challenges to access services by providing child care and transportation.
- Bring services to people “where they are at.” Be intentional about locating services in high-need neighborhoods. This could include bringing resources directly to communities through mobile units or satellite offices.
- Create a centralized application system. Must be confidential.
- Provide translation services for Refugees, English Language Learners, and New Americans.

Insight 2: Trauma as a barrier

According to participants, many vulnerable families navigating support systems are in crisis and are burdened by fear, anxiety, and distrust. Systems often expect people to take control of their challenges without considering the emotional and psychological toll of their circumstances. Families often feel trapped, believing systems of support are structured to set them up for failure rather than success.

Summit participants emphasized that most programs address issues only after they have escalated. For instance, if a single mom loses her job, it may take 2 to 3 weeks for unemployment benefits to arrive. By that time, the family may already be behind on rent and facing an eviction notice. To prevent eviction, she may have to move. Securing new housing then requires a deposit and first month's rent at a minimum—an amount far greater than the initial income gap that started the crisis.

As problems escalate, they become more complex and difficult to resolve. Participants also noted the anxiety that families feel in preemptively addressing issues, driven by fear of punitive measures and poor treatment from government-funded social services programs⁹ that prioritize compliance.

- *It took 6 months to get an appointment with a mental healthcare provider, then 3 months for Medicaid to work out payment issues. Medication was denied because of worker comp issues. She would have to quit her job because employees are required to carry worker's comp. It took a person at Medicaid to advocate for her to work it out."*
- *"Fear, anxiety, nervousness of someone navigating governmental systems - always in survival mode."*
- *"Some people get punished (taken to court) when they are trying to fix a problem, which creates distrust and makes them feel like there doesn't seem to be a way out."*
- *"Teach people to advocate. Don't ask them to pull themselves by their bootstraps when they don't even have boots."*
- *"Even beyond knowing about programs, how can he attend? He is working multiple jobs, and he already feels othered in the community."*
- *"No matter how much intrinsic motivation they may have, they are supported by people in similar conditions - You can be what you can see."*
- *As a first-generation college graduate, my family had so much fear of the unknown that it set me back, like JC."*

⁹ Social services programs can be run by the government (federal, state, county, or city), non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, community-based organizations, or private agencies. The core purpose of these programs is to help low-income populations by providing support systems that allow people to meet their basic needs and work toward self-sufficiency.

- *“With gun violence, if a son passes, the family can lose their home if the paperwork isn’t filed ahead of time. The family can lose their home, they can’t always prove they are next of kin.” “Homeowners who need Medicare/Medicaid are at risk of losing their home if they get sick.” “Make healthy foods affordable.”*
- *“Lead is affecting children’s lives, but we keep testing children instead of fixing the houses that are poisoning them.”*
- *Recreational activities for kids seem to be disappearing, what can we do to help - after school program, skill building classes, instrumental, sports.*

Solution 2: Building a system for families to thrive

The keynote speaker encouraged participants to think beyond self-sufficiency¹⁰ and consider providing families with the support they need to thrive, emphasizing that “thriving” should be defined by the families and not imposed upon them by others.

While acknowledging the resilience possessed by families living in poverty, participants recognized the importance of providing families with the education that they need to break the cycle of poverty. For example, 2Gen Onondaga uses the Mobility Mentoring model practiced by Economic Mobility Pathways (EMPath) to encourage parents to set and achieve goals through recognition and incentives.

Participants emphasized the importance of building resilience through education on critical topics such as estate planning, basic banking, credit management, the financial implications of moving out of a parent’s home, credit scores, basic legal forms, life insurance, retirement savings, and the role of compounding interest in creating wealth, among others.

A system reset that encourages families to save and build wealth is needed. Participants recommended programs including Individual Development Accounts that provide matching grants to incentivize savings and Syracuse Housing Authority’s Family Self Sufficiency Program, which provides an employment incentive to help Section 8 recipient families build an escrow account as they increase their income and achieve their goals.

During the breakout sessions, participants overwhelmingly recognized that meeting basic needs was insufficient. In addition to basic needs such as shelter, food, and clothing, other quality of life issues were identified as unmet and requiring solutions including safe, affordable, and lead-free housing; quality affordable child care and afterschool programs; access to healthcare; gang/gun violence prevention; safe recreational spaces; and more. Participants recognized that, for families to thrive, these issues needed to be addressed holistically.

¹⁰ The whole family model and comments raised by Jennifer Gregory problematize the self-sufficiency model’s framing on individual success, ignoring that interdependence is a normal part of human existence. Additionally, the self-sufficiency model frequently fails to account for wellbeing beyond financial independence and ignores the varying abilities, circumstances, and structural obstacles faced by different populations.

Insight 3: Overburdened systems and professionals

Basic needs are emergencies for families, yet social services programs often lack the capacity to respond swiftly enough to prevent families from experiencing extreme hardship. Chronic underfunding has left many social services programs understaffed and under-resourced. For example, as shared by a Summit participant, families experiencing housing insecurity may remain on Section 8 Housing Voucher waitlists for years. In the meantime, the emergency support that had them temporarily in a hotel will end and they may experience homelessness until they are able to access transitional housing support.

The effect of this crisis ripples throughout the network of organizations that serve struggling families. Schools are increasingly acting as social service hubs while not having sufficient social workers to address the needs of a city with the highest child poverty rate in the nation. School counselors and teachers are becoming part of the support system for families. Teachers are unprepared and overwhelmed by these additional responsibilities, leading to a mass exodus from the profession.

Overburdened systems result in support services that, while existing in theory, are often inaccessible in practice. Frontline social service workers,¹¹ tasked with the painful responsibility of turning families away, experience Secondary Traumatic Stress.¹² Frontline social service workers must confront the brutal reality that they don't have solutions to impossible problems, such as a homeless family of four living on \$20,000 a year. At the same time, these social service workers are themselves underpaid, overworked, and struggling with their own financial instability.

- *"There are so many waiting lists right now that by the time they get help, something traumatic has happened."*
- *"I sometimes feel bitter because we aren't helping people who are affected."*
- *"Social services [programs] are so overloaded, we need to distribute the caseload better."*
- *"We need to use more grassroots resources that don't have waiting lists."*

Solution 3: Strengthen resource networks and collaboration

In addition to paying fair wages for social services workers and recognizing the vital role that they have in the community, participants suggested the following additional measures.

- **Collaboration.** Whole Family approaches provide service workers with the holistic perspective needed to truly address the issues that families face due to poverty. By eliminating barriers among programs to serve families instead of individuals, service workers will effectively find solutions. For example, participants stated that schools

¹¹ The term "social service workers" refers to the frontline staff of social services programs.

¹² PEACE, Inc.'s 2024 CNA provides a deeper understanding of additional factors that contribute to frontline staff's secondary trauma and stress in Section IV. Human/Social Services Capacity (pages 112-118).

need to collaborate more intentionally with social service agencies to alleviate the pressures experienced by teachers, school support staff, and more. By creating pathways to truly address issues collaboratively, burnout and compassion fatigue can be reduced.

- **Build social capital networks.** By bringing frontline staff together from different sectors, they can create a network of colleagues who know, collaborate, and refer to one another. Participants noted that the Summit successfully fostered relationships and meaningful collaboration among participants from diverse organizations who otherwise would not have met.¹³ Additionally, an option discussed during the debrief meeting was to organize an annual accelerator where people from nonprofit organizations can “speed-network.”
- **Centralized Resource Directory.** Develop a comprehensive, accessible directory (e.g., a laminated card or digital platform) shared across agencies.
- **Capacity Building for Service Navigators.**
 - Equip frontline workers with tools and training to provide effective guidance, follow-through, and compassionate services such as the Family Development Credential (FDC).
 - Increase coaching and family development/goal-setting skills.
 - Strengthen mindfulness and self-care skills to prevent secondary trauma.
 - Provide additional trauma-informed training for service navigators.

Insight 4: Fragmented and disconnected resources

Families struggle to know where to go or how to ask for support. While programs exist, systems that can connect people to resources are fragmented and siloed. At the Summit, even experienced frontline staff were surprised to learn about services that they did not know existed. Programs end or change, making it challenging to create a directory. Although 2-1-1 was often mentioned as a resource, participants noted that the information is often general or insufficient for families to access services because varying eligibility requirements make support systems complex to navigate.

Additionally, programs are designed to solve a specific problem for a specific target population. For example, workforce development programs will pay for transportation to work but often lack resources to accommodate families that need to drop off children at a daycare site before going to work.

To meet the needs of all its members, families must navigate complex webs of supportive

¹³ A list of organizations participating in the Summit can be found in Appendix A.

services. Furthermore, families are expected - amid a crisis - to identify programs, assess their eligibility, navigate complex requirements and forms, and keep track of multiple deadlines for application. Vulnerable families find it hard to achieve all this, and they may lack the bandwidth to complete these processes.

- *"People need to know what exists, they know their problem, they don't know the tools."*
- *"Access to resources is privileged information."*
- *"Could there be a central application or online system for services? So many applications have to go to so many different agencies."*
- *"People need a single place that doesn't just send them away after, they need follow-through and follow back up with them, a soft handover is even better."*
- *"People sometimes get a recommendation they don't like or understand so they become fearful and hide or ignore the problem due to fear and anxiety."*
- *"Some people get punished (taken to court) when they're trying to fix a problem which creates distrust because there doesn't seem to be a way out."*
- *"People need a single place to go to be directed and that the place doesn't just send them away after. They need to follow through and follow back up with them."*

Solution 4: Connected, Whole-Family Service Delivery

- **Apply a Whole-Family approach to address needs holistically.** The Summit panelists encouraged participants to explore how weaving services from different programs can help address barriers, providing an example of collaboration between Early Childhood Alliance and PEACE, Inc.'s Head Start/Early Head Start Program. They noted how attendance at peer support groups improved by simultaneously scheduling meetings for mothers and fathers as well as incorporating transportation and child care. The partnering agencies resolved parents' concerns about the competence of the person providing child care during the meetings by having trained Head Start staff provide this service.
- **Make connections for families; don't just send them or refer them.** Ideally, families should be able to use multiple service providers in a single location, allowing them to access various services in one convenient place. 2-1-1 is a centralized information resource that is not widely known or effectively used because eligibility and application requirements vary among programs, and families must often navigate complex application processes alone. Guiding clients through transitions was thus identified by many participants as a "best practice."

Issue 5: Disconnects between assumed needs and real barriers

Programs often dictate solutions based on either the program's primary focus or the perceived needs of clients rather than addressing the core challenges faced by families. Families are experts in their situation; they need to be empowered to be the drivers of the solutions for their families.

- *"Workforce programs assume people need a job, instead of asking, "Do you have clothes for an interview?"*
- *"The people know what they need. Stop offering help without giving them what they are actually in need of."*
- *"Parents need a seat at the table."*

Solution 5: Co-design solutions with families

Summit participants noted that families and their voices need to be incorporated into service design, execution, and governance. Summit panelists Syeisha Byrd and Jacki Evans echoed these sentiments by providing specific examples from their work at the Early Childhood Alliance of Onondaga County and PEACE, Inc.'s Head Start, respectively. Such principles shaped the approach of PEACE, Inc.'s 2024 CNA and its conclusion that, for all to benefit from the promise of socioeconomic revival in our region, "sustained advocacy and power-building campaigns to raise awareness of the issues faced by Onondaga County's low-income households" are needed. Summit participants noted that such work will require investment in developing the following.

- **Advocacy Groups.** Specifically, a) support grassroots organizations to give people the spaces they need to raise their voices, leverage intergenerational strengths, and provide training on how to advocate for oneself and one's family; b) provide the resources, information, training, mentorship, and emotional support that families need to find their voice and to develop strategies to push for positive change; and c) educate families on how to connect with elected officials' constituent service representatives whose responsibilities are to help residents navigate and receive support from bureaucracies.
- **Facilitation Skills.** Invest in the development and training of local residents - preferably from the targeted communities in question - who are interested in leading/facilitating community discussions and initiatives.

Furthermore, community members who possess advocacy and facilitation skills should be compensated fairly for their expertise and their time. This is especially important for parents and other low-income populations, as they are expected to invest considerable time and effort without any recognition of the hardship this might create for already vulnerable families.

Insight 6: Benefits cliffs punish hardworking families

Summit participants noted the punitive nature of benefits systems. Many participants shared that benefits cliffs discourage work and socioeconomic progress due to fear of losing essential aid. Slowly performing bureaucratic support systems and burdensome eligibility requirements often push individuals into extreme vulnerability and distress before assistance is granted.

- *“WIC meetings plus the recertification process are difficult and not worth the effort except in summer when they give fresh fruits and vegetables.”*
- *“Very real worrying about earning too much and losing services.”*
- *“I have seen this in food pantries with families who make just over the limit, families in this group struggle.”*
- *“There needs to be services while people grow out of the situation they are in.”*
- *“What can we do about the income cap for folks trying to get ahead but restricted to 20 hours of work? I.e., program to success, period of time to complete classes.”*

Solution 6: Create benefit slides rather than cliffs

There is an emerging body of research nationally on the topic that should be examined and incorporated locally. The Summit keynote speaker, panelists, and participants all shared the difficulties of changing a culture that expects families to overcome hardship on their own despite lacking resources. As the keynote speaker noted “The systems aren’t broken –they are functioning exactly the way they were designed to, disproportionately affecting Black and Brown families.¹⁴

These challenges are compounded by social service programs with varying eligibility requirements, making it difficult for families to navigate support systems. Often, as families work their way out of poverty, their conditions worsen due to benefits cliffs, as small increases in income can make a family lose important subsidies (i.e., child care, health insurance).

In response, many Summit participants cited the need to expand income-generating programs such as Child and Earned Income Tax Credits. Participants also advanced the need to create novel benefit slides rather than cliffs, providing families the time that they need to build resilience and save money before cutting social services. As a result of the panel, 2-Gen Onondaga was also cited as a promising practice which, among other actions, supports vulnerable families as they build social capital and navigate financial transitions without the fear of losing vital support, thus providing them with the bandwidth to focus on achieving individualized goals. Summit panelists and participants shared examples about the institutional and systems challenges when moving from a focus on compliance to a focus on

¹⁴ While race was discussed during the breakout sessions, these conversations were seldom captured in the notes. Although participants acknowledged existing racial disparities, the breakout session discussions prioritized solutions for low-income families, regardless of race and ethnicity. Other factors such as gender identity and disability were not consistently captured in the notes. Such topics can be explored further in future events.

fostering long-term success for families.

Insight 7: Fractured neighborhoods undermine resilience

Summit participants cited lack of safety, gun violence, and displacement caused by housing insecurity as forces that have weakened the social fabric of communities. Summit participants expressed a deep longing for cultures of community, where neighbors and neighborhoods collectively help raise children and support older adults.

- *“When we get together to discuss community, we sometimes mention older adults, but mostly we don’t. Yet, in this small group we are all connected with that topic. We need to bring all generations to the conversation!”*
- *“We need more education around lead and what’s affecting children, integrating people like Mr. J (older adults) in the conversations.”*
- *“Community is crucial because they do not feel safe where they live.”*
- *“When this community tries to address issues, groups are in separate silos of their different topics, and they don’t connect or follow through.”*

Solution 7: Foster community-led interventions

Participants suggested strategies for generating community resilience, including:

- **Peer Support Groups.** Peer support groups where low-income individuals can engage in meaningful dialogue with others facing similar situations. These groups can foster resilience by providing safe, non-judgmental spaces to encourage mutual support.
- **Community-Building.** Survey respondents noted the most favorable aspect of the Summit was the possibility for building connections to overcome gaps in services. In this respect, the Summit emerged as a community building exercise for frontline staff from various agencies. At the family level, participants noted how intergenerational connections were essential for fostering purpose, belonging, and well-being.

Insight 8: Caregiving is an intergenerational challenge

Summit participants noted that taking on roles as guardians or caregivers can affect -if not outright destabilize- the financial well-being of family units. Participants’ anecdotes shared how families are most vulnerable when they have small children or family members with disabilities or chronic illnesses. Also noted was how caregiving of children and additional responsibilities, without adequate support, can be especially burdensome for older adults

living on fixed incomes.

Given the aging population, caregiving of older generations is increasingly affecting families. Participants shared personal examples of how caregiving for older adults can emotionally and financially strain families for years. They observed that while older adults often worry about being a burden on their children, this guilt is sometimes misplaced, as children are typically willing to support older adults with love and care. Finally, various participants shared examples of how sudden health events or the death of a family member can disrupt families, underlining the need for proactive conversations about end-of-life goals, health proxies, and estate planning.

- *"I had to go with my daughter to assist her with applying for child care because of the way the staff were treating her. One worker was yelling at my daughter. If my daughter can't get child care, she can't get to work."*
- *"I had a client with a sick family member, mom had to leave work for family leave, and it hurt the family's finances."*
- *"For older adults, connection to their families is part of their life purpose and identity, it can be difficult to ask for help with things they can no longer do. Someone with a stroke or other health event is suddenly less capable."*
- *"I have experience with my mother through such changes, it is hard on the whole family."*

Solution 8: Intergenerational care and support

Greater investment is needed to expand services that provide caregivers with opportunities for respite. This includes enhancing older adult programs offered by Community Centers and increasing child care options through initiatives like PEACE, Inc. and Child Care Solutions' Early Childhood Career Pathways Program.

Participants mentioned the importance of intergenerational care and support in building community bonds, fondly recalling examples from their youth when older adults cared for the neighborhood children. By addressing the issue of caregiving through a multigenerational approach, the support that different generations provide to one another becomes part of the solution. For instance, families with young children who are working multiple jobs often lack the time to attend community meetings or advocate for their families' needs. However, older adults can assist with child care and/or engage in these activities on behalf of their families. Younger generations can also provide older adults with the support and companionship to age in place. Intergenerational approaches benefit the whole community.

Insight 9: Transportation is a barrier to all aspects of life

Unsafe walking routes and limited access to public transit significantly affect the lives of low-

income families, making it difficult to access work, school, essential services, medical care, and meeting basic needs. Participants highlighted concerns about the timeliness, frequency, and reliability of public transportation for the families they serve. In total, the participants echoed sentiments raised within PEACE, Inc.'s 2024 CNA and studies produced by the Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council (SMTC).

- *“Not having a sidewalk for 3 weeks impacted my ability to get to medical appointments.”*
- *“The bus stop got moved causing my granddaughter to have to walk three blocks each day, it is not safe at 5 pm.”*

Solution 9: Prioritize transportation innovations to vulnerable neighborhoods

One solution mentioned by Summit participants was Westcott Community Center’s Vehicles to Work Program, which removes transportation barriers for Work Train participants. More broadly, Summit participants noted there are solutions being developed by Centro that will emerge in the future (Bus-rapid-transit and transit-on-demand).¹⁵ But, it may take years until the benefits of these innovations reach the low-income families that are most impacted because they depend on public transit and sidewalks to reach their destinations.

Conclusions & Recommendations from the Pilot

As noted in the previous section, the Summit fostered actionable steps for community improvement. It also fostered fertile ground for collective action. Though difficult to quantify, the energy in the room was palpable, a byproduct of charismatic, knowledgeable speakers; guests from different fields, experiences, and positions of power; and intentionally structured tools, spaces, and time to create meaningful connections. This engagement was evident, as many participants remained after the Summit’s conclusion to continue their discussions.

While participants identified ways to improve social service programs' responses to Whole Family needs, their solutions primarily focused on ground-level changes rather than system-level transformation. The results are actionable strategies that stem from the experience of frontline staff, whose main concern is strengthening capacity, removing barriers, and addressing immediate family needs. Consequently, deeper discussions about structural barriers, racism, and program funding needs were limited.

In thinking about “lessons learned” and how this pilot could be replicated in the future, it’s important to discuss participant feedback, areas for improvement, recommendations collected from exit surveys, conversations with participants, and broader ideas emerging from FOCUS and PEACE, Inc.’s post-Summit debrief.

Participant Feedback

¹⁵ For more information, visit SMTC’s website, “Exploring Tomorrow’s Transit.” Accessed January 25, 2025. <https://smtcmpo.org/studies-plans/centroett/>.

According to participant feedback and the 34 post-Summit exit surveys, the event was favorably accepted by the community. Keys for success included the following.

- The keynote speaker, Jennifer Gregory, was especially inspirational because she herself is a Whole Family “success story.” Summit participants rated her presentation highly and would have liked her to have spoken longer. In organizing future Summits then, identifying speakers who are both knowledgeable and charismatic will be essential.
- The Summit panelists – Syeisha Bird, Jacki Evans, and Sarah Easterly – provided first-hand insights into how collaboration among different programs is necessary to provide Whole Family support. Providing subject matter experts who can speak knowledgeably about local conditions and practices ensures that discussions remain relevant, actionable, and grounded in the realities faced by families and service providers.
- The methodology for the breakout sessions was flexible enough that facilitators took ownership of their roles and contributed to the creative process.
- The Personas and worksheet were designed to encourage open dialogue without constraining participants to predetermined issues or solutions. This flexible approach allowed participants to consider both individual family members and the family system as a whole when developing support strategies.
- The networking opportunities created by randomly assigning people to breakout groups were important, as it generated connections and exchanges of knowledge that had not existed before. Overwhelmingly, Summit participants valued the opportunity to connect while problem-solving together, discovering ways to integrate their services to better support families. Doing so also provided momentum for reform and collaboration among participants beyond the event setting.

Areas for Improvement

While the methodology intentionally developed empathy-building and solution-oriented thinking as planned, areas for improvement include the following.

- Reducing the time used for introductions/welcomes and providing more time for conversations among participants and networking.
- Providing additional time to network. Even though the time allotted for breaks and breakout sessions was generous, several participants commented that additional time was desired.
- Anticipating participants will express interest in connecting after the Summit. Ask participants to share contact information during registration and promptly share the list after/at the end of the event.
- Filming the keynote speakers’ presentation. Her national perspective and inspiring lived experience visibly moved the audience.
- Asking participants to write down one action step that they will take after the Summit, as setting intentions increases the likelihood of follow-through and helps assess outcomes.

- Organizing a separate session prior to the Summit to train both facilitators and notetakers.
- Requesting notetakers to type the notes and have more notetakers at each table, ensuring more quotes can be used to strengthen the quality of the information collected.
- Allowing people to follow up with connections they made at the Summit by convening more often.

Next Steps/Actions

Representatives from PEACE, Inc. and FOCUS shared that the Summit surpassed their expectations. Clearly, there is a need for more iterations of this type of event to address other issues that affect Central New York. For example, some participants expressed they wanted to see something similar on the topic of housing/homelessness.

With its citizen-driven mission for promoting civic engagement, participation, and education in Central New York, FOCUS is well-positioned to replicate the lessons learned from this pilot and to engage the whole community on other priority issues. For example, in the pilot, PEACE, Inc. used their background in human/social services, Whole Family advocacy, and antipoverty programming to select Summit speakers and participants. With its well-earned reputation as a community convener, FOCUS can recruit other topic-appropriate local experts who can provide similar levels of knowledge and who can pair national and local expertise. Two issues that emerged from the debriefing session included:

- Transportation. Centro is piloting transit on-demand in Rome, but it is not new nationally; and
- Civically engaged journalism and community engagement. Central Current is a local example, and Detroit has a similar movement.

It's also worth noting that different approaches might be required to generate solutions for different issues facing Central New Yorkers. For example, PEACE, Inc. recommended a Whole Family approach due to the agency's Head Start program and its engagements with national entities such as the Kresge Foundation and the National Community Action Partnership. While this report shows that a Whole Family approach works well for addressing basic needs, it is just one lens or approach. Different lenses might be more appropriate in different contexts. Methodologically then, the key is to use approaches that broaden perspectives and provide real-world examples to shed light at the systems constraining progress and the paradigms upholding these constraints in our community.

Overall, the Summit's findings and feedback provide a replicable engagement model for FOCUS and other organizations to address other community challenges in the future. Key takeaways include:

1. **Engagement Models.** Replicate the key components that worked from the Summit to other initiatives, communities, and/or topics.
2. **Leverage Local Expertise.** Utilize community champions and connect to their networks to drive change and to strengthen civic engagement.
3. **Foster Networks.** Provide attendees with tools to encourage connection and contact

lists to enable ongoing collaboration.

4. **Develop Action Plans.** Identify responsible parties to lead the implementation of recommendations.
5. **Communicate Results.** Share publicly a detailed report summarizing insights and action items.
6. **Convene Regularly.** Schedule follow-up events to maintain engagement, foster partnerships, and refine solutions.
7. **Sustainable Change.** Build long-term momentum through recurring forums, increased collaboration, and systemic reforms.

Sometimes, the process is the solution. The methods used to develop the Whole Family Summit can be applied with different topics and groups to build stronger, more connected communities that better meet the needs of all residents. Ultimately, the call for action from the community is clear:

"Don't pat yourself on the back for the goals you've met, let the people give you that praise when you've actually done it and helped them. Stop wasting time in meetings that make you feel good - get out and serve the people you say you are serving!" - Summit participant

Appendices

Appendix A - List of Agencies/Organizations

Allyn Family Foundation
Catholic Charities Refugee Services
CenterState CEO
Central New York Community Foundation
Child Care Solutions, Inc.
City of Syracuse
CNY Fair Housing
Cooperative Federal
Early Childhood Alliance
Early Childhood Alliance of Onondaga County
Early Childhood Alliance- Help Me Grow
EDR
Families for Lead Freedom Now
FM Realty
FOCUS Greater Syracuse, Inc.
Food Bank of Central New York
Frank H. Hiscock Legal Aid Society
Good Will of the Finger Lakes
Helio Health
Hiscock Legal Aid Society
Interfaith works
InterFaith Works of CNY
LeadSafe CNY Coalition at United Way of CNY
Legal Services of Central New York
MCC
Member of Senator May's Office
Mothers & Children in Crisis, Inc
National Community Action Partnership
NHSmith Consulting
NYS Senate
Onondaga Community College
Onondaga County
Onondaga County 2Gen
Onondaga County Public Libraries - White Branch
PEACE Inc
Reproductive Health Health Center
St. Lucy's Parish
SUNY Upstate Medical University

SUNY Upstate Medical University- Geriatrics Dept
Syracuse City School District (SCSD)
SCSD Literacy Zones - Adult Continuing Education
Syracuse Housing Authority
Syracuse Metropolitan Transportation Council
Syracuse Northeast Community Center
Syracuse University School of Social Work
Syracuse-Onondaga Food Systems Alliance
The Determination Center, Inc.
United Way of Central New York
Urban Jobs Task Force of Syracuse
Westcott Community Center
YMCA of Central New York
YWCA of Syracuse and Onondaga County Inc

Appendix B - Personas & Worksheet

Persona - Ms. A

Meet Ms. A, a single mother of three in her early 30s, living in a low-income neighborhood in Syracuse. Ms. A's daily routine is a testament to her resilience and determination. Each morning, she wakes up at dawn to get breakfast for her high school-age son, James, who takes the bus at 6:00 am. Often in challenging weather conditions, she walks her younger children over a mile to daycare and elementary school before heading to her part-time job at a fast-food restaurant.

As she is walking to work, Ms. A dreams of saving to buy a car. She would be able to work more hours, get a better paying job, she could go to college. But then she remembers the income cap and worries if she will fall off the cliff and end up worse off. "Don't hit that income cap" - she tells herself - "otherwise there are no services." She doesn't know how she would afford health insurance and child care without public assistance.

Because of intergenerational poverty, Ms. A's extended family is also struggling to make ends meet. Ms. A relies on her own resilience to navigate life's challenges. Ms. A moved to the city when she escaped Domestic Violence during the pandemic. Initially she had been reluctant to call the police, as her boyfriend's addiction got worse during lockdown. When asked why she didn't leave him she says "People don't understand that things have to be drastic to get real help. When the police arrive, issue an order of protection and leave, it has an impact too. It makes you more vulnerable." Amanda was down, feeling guilty about her own choices by the time her boyfriend threatened her with a gun.

It took Ms. A a lot of effort to get where she is at right now. She has a job that keeps her mind off her problems for a few hours, but she wishes it would pay a living wage and offer benefits. If she misses work, she does not get paid. The stress of making impossible decisions constantly weighs on her mind. Should she forgo a day of work to make it to the Department of Social Services to apply for additional support?

Ms. A feels like she must constantly advocate for herself and her family. Support systems exist, but you must ask specifically for the program you want and be sure you are eligible for it before you apply. Months may go by before you get help, there are waitlists for rental support, the food pantry application must be submitted a month before, etc. Ensuring stability for her family while dealing with her trauma and the financial strain feel like an overwhelming burden. By the time she gets home after picking up her daughters, James has been out of school for a long while and cooked dinner with the little food they could get from the church pantry. James would like to play basketball but there are no buses to bring him home after games and Amanda does not want him to walk home at night alone. Not only is there gun violence in her neighborhood, but she is afraid someone might call the police on her son just for walking outside on the street.

After helping with homework and putting her kids to sleep, Ms. A is exhausted. Her heart beats fast as she opens the mail. Her landlord has increased her rent to \$1,000. More than she can afford with her annual income of \$20,000 a year. She might have to move again if she gets an eviction notice, but she knows that it will be difficult to find somewhere cheaper. Having to uproot her children, especially her oldest son who is already struggling with the adjustment to a new school, weighs heavily on Ms. A. Ms. A wipes her tears and opens her book to start studying for her High School Equivalency Diploma. She will study until she falls asleep, because she can't stop taking these small steps to create a better life for her family.

Persona - JC

JC is a 17-year-old high school student who lives with his father. Originally from Cuba, his parents came to the US hoping to build a better life, but their journey has been far from easy. The initial support they received ended after a few months, and tragedy struck when JC's mother passed away during childbirth. Now it's just the two of them.

Last summer, their landlord raised the rent, forcing JC to get a job to help his dad. He got a job at the mall, but the bus schedules did not align with his typical workday. With a five-hour shift and hours-long commutes, he was essentially working full-time but getting paid part-time. While JC is in school, his father works multiple jobs to make ends meet.

Despite living in Syracuse for decades, language is a barrier for JC's father, who never really learned to speak English. Google Translate doesn't work. Even if they can get to a social services agency, it can take them hours to figure out what programs to apply for. JC's parents rely on their children to accompany them, translate at visits, and advocate for the family. JC often feels that he must translate not just the language but also the culture for his parents. While the Cuban community is close-knit, he senses a stark difference in the broader neighborhood, where it is "every man for himself." Each neighbor is dealing with their own struggles with poverty.

JC spends much of his free time playing video games because there are no safe spaces to hang out with other teenagers. The last time he walked down his street carrying his skateboard, a neighbor asked him menacingly if he was allowed to be there. He knows that other neighborhoods have parks and spaces to spend time safely, but where he lives, the parks aren't safe due to gang violence.

JC and his father are close, but they have a generational and cultural disconnect. JC's father is part of the PEACE, Inc. Fatherhood program. As an immigrant, he joined the program to learn about his new country's cultural values and to discover what is expected of him as a parent. Initially, he did not think he would stick with it because he doubted anyone there could relate to his background – but he discovered *three* families there with similar roots and has made a lot of progress in understanding his son.

Born in the US, JC speaks English fluently but faces barriers as a first-generation American navigating systemic discrimination and complex bureaucracy. He has become disheartened, feeling that the opportunities people mention often don't seem intended for someone like him. For instance, he missed the SAT deadline because his counselor provided incorrect information - a common issue in a school where counselors serve hundreds of students.

As the first in his family to pursue higher education, JC has little guidance. His well-meaning father encourages him to "figure it out." One major obstacle is his lack of an ID, which he needs for work and future plans. Unable to locate his birth certificate and with his father overwhelmed with work and financial stress, JC has a mountain to climb before accomplishing his goals. JC hopes that someday, he will be able to have reliable transportation, live in a safe neighborhood, and make enough money to support himself and his family.

Persona - Mr. J

Mr. J is a retired 72-year-old who lives in a senior home. The community is quiet but active, with regular card and bingo nights providing opportunities to socialize and have fun after a long day volunteering. Mr. J had to relocate last year because Centro changed the bus routes, making living independently difficult. He tried using Call-a-Bus but doesn't qualify because he is not disabled.

Previously, Mr. J lived in the house he bought with his late wife when they first married. Throughout the decades, he saw growing crime, drugs, and homelessness in his neighborhood. Yet, Mr. J misses the vibrancy of living near other generations and connecting with neighbors while walking his dog in the park. He misses his neighbor across the street, who would inform him of potential safety concerns.

Mr. J especially misses having his family nearby. He used to help his two adult sons by caring for his grandchildren, who would come to his house after school. Mr. J would take them to the park and help with homework. While living alone, his sons helped Mr. J with home repairs and shoveling snow. Mr. J's health has declined in the last couple of years; he cannot walk very far. Mr. J's sons work long hours while juggling parenting responsibilities; he doesn't want to burden them more. He is concerned that his sons have a much harder time than he did at their age in making ends meet.

Mr. J is a Foster Grandparent volunteer at the Syracuse City schools. He cherishes working with children but thinks we should return to the old ways. Respect is a problem; Mr. J believes it is not the children's fault but their upbringing. Mr. J is also concerned about the 2nd-grade students he works with who don't know their letters and numbers; they are very behind in learning their fundamentals compared to his sons at that age. More importantly, he sees the trauma in the children he serves. According to Mr. J, "Children are bringing the street into the classroom; when they see somebody shot and see the violence, it impacts their behavior."

Living on a fixed income of \$25,000 annually, Mr. J depends on various older adult support programs to keep afloat. Recently, he saw increases in his social security go directly to offset a decrease in rental assistance because he doesn't have significant medical expenses. He feels penalized for being healthy. Mr. J's income has not increased enough to adjust for inflation; food and rent are much more expensive now. As a result, Mr. J has learned to advocate for himself; he participates with "the Tenant's Network" to address concerns such as garbage, crime, safety, traffic, and housing affordability.

Mr. J believes in advocating for improvements that benefit everyone. He wants fewer corner stores where gangs congregate and more grocery stores. Mr. J would like to see more healthy activities for youth to do in the neighborhood. He would also like seniors to be able to go on more local trips, such as to Niagara Falls and daytime senior events. He wants more forums to talk to elected officials, ask them about the programs that are not funded anymore, and advocate for more affordable housing units. Mr. J is passionate about creating a more age-friendly environment in his neighborhood, where older adults like himself can live comfortably and independently while enjoying the support of a caring community.

THINK PAIR SHARE WORKSHEET - Please turn paper in to your facilitator at the end of the event

- 1) Introduce yourself to the person(s) you are matched with. Take notes; you will introduce them to the rest of the group later. Ask the following questions:

What is your job/role/ responsibility?	What does a typical day look like for you?

- 2) Read the Persona together and share. Based on your lived experience, identity, and work, do you find the Persona relatable to your experience? Please elaborate on why yes/no.

- 3) What stands out to you most about the persona?

- 4) Where do you see gaps in available services?

THINK PAIR SHARE WORKSHEET - Please turn the paper in to your facilitator at the end of the event

5) Applying a Whole Family Approach:

People mentioned in the Persona (Main character & family members)	Pain Points/ Daily Challenges	What changes are they working towards in their lives or they would like to see in their environments?	Existing resources to help them