

# Lights, Camera, Community Action\_Episode 2

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housing, people, tompkins county, community, tioga county, building, families, danielle, living, project, services, county, partnerships, funded, addressing, maureen, agency, create, issue, programs

## SPEAKERS

Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action, Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA, Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities, Charlie Quinn, RECAP, Michelle McKeon, RECAP

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### Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 00:15


Hello and welcome to Lights, Camera, Community Action, a podcast brought to you by The New York State Community Action Association, or NYSCAA for short. My name is Heidi Barcomb, Program and Communications Director for NYSCAA. NYSCAA is the State Association for New York's Community Action Agencies, commonly known as CAAs. NYSCAA's mission is to strengthen the capacity of the Community Action Network to address the causes and conditions of poverty. NYSCAA was created in 1987 to provide CAAs in New York with professional development opportunities, training, and technical assistance. NYSCAA is the hub that brings together Community Action Agencies in New York to network, share successes and challenges, and strategize to meet the needs of vulnerable New Yorkers. A community Action Agency or CAA is a local organization with the mission of reducing poverty through locally designed and delivered programs and services targeted to the specific needs of their community. The 47 CAAs in New York form a statewide service delivery system that connects individuals and families to the services they need to achieve economic status. When it comes to moving folks from poverty to self-sufficiency, Community Action Agencies know what works. Let's now introduce our guests. Maureen, can we start with you?

### Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 01:34

Sure! I'm Maureen Abbott. I'm the Executive Director at Tioga Opportunities. And I've been the Executive Director for almost eight years. And I've been in Community Action for thirty-three years. Thanks for having me.

### Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 01:54

Thanks for being here, Maureen. Charlie, can you introduce yourself?



**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 01:57

I'm Charlie Quinn. I'm the CEO of RECAP, the Regional Economic Community Action Program in Orange County. I've been CEO for seven years and with Community Action for about 13 years.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 02:10

Thanks for being here. Michelle, will you introduce yourself?

**M** Michelle McKeon, RECAP 02:15

Hi, everybody. I'm Michelle McKeon. I'm the Chief Operating Officer of the Regional Economic Community Action Program, otherwise known as RECAP, and I have been here for seven years.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 02:24

And we appreciate your time with us today. Danielle, will you introduce yourself?

**D** Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 02:28

Sure. Hi, I'm Danielle Harrington, Executive Director at Tompkins Community Action. I've been Executive Director for a little over a year, and I have 20 years as the Housing Director at Tompkins Community Action.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 02:41

Excellent! So, we have a lot of great experience with us here today. And I want to start off by just kind of asking people, what does the affordable housing look like in your communities? Can you tell us a little bit about that? Who wants to go first?

**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 02:56

Well, I think we need to start with. What do you mean by affordable and affordable to whom? There are different types of housing in the communities. Some are called Low-Income Tax Credit projects that are funded with IRS money. But you need to have a minimum income to get into those projects. So, a lot of people are not qualified. Their income is too low to get into those types of affordable housing. In Orange County, in addition to the Low-Income Tax Credit projects, we have a lot of HUD-funded projects for people who are literally homeless by HUD definition and have a disability. In our agency, it's often alcoholism or substance use disorder, housing for veterans, and also folks with AIDS and HIV-related illnesses.

**M** Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 03:59

Well, living in Tioga County, I kind of have to chuckle a little bit because our housing situation is

so so desperate in regard to that affordability. And, you know, we are rural. There aren't a lot of vibrant community centers in our county. Lots of deteriorating housing, older housing stock, and just the availability of any quality affordable housing is few and far between. Especially the more rural you go, the harder it is to find quality, affordable housing. So, it's a huge, it's a huge issue. And it's one that doesn't have easy answers. And, you know, I think we a little bit later we'll talk about strategies and stuff, but we just don't have a lot of new development. We don't have a lot of potential developers coming in for a whole host of reasons which I'll do talk about later. But it's just a major, major issue for many people, not just low income, but more so that worker, you know, ALICE family that is working and trying to put money aside for, you know, potentially buying a home. It's just, it's just, it's not a good situation.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 05:24

Maureen, I just want to ask real quick because I think a lot of people listening may not know. Can you give us a brief explanation of what ALICE is?

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 05:33

Sure, I apologize. I should have clarified. So, ALICE refers to Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed. These are individuals who are households that are working but are still unable to meet the basic needs for their families. So, they don't have a living wage necessarily. They might even be working two or three jobs and still unable to meet those basic needs. They're not at the poverty level. But still not meeting those basic needs of shelter, food, health care, all of those things.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 06:10

Thanks for that explanation. So let me ask then, how did you become aware of the need for housing supports in your or housing solutions within your communities?

D

Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 06:26

I can speak a little bit about Tompkins County. Just quickly touching back on what it looks like in Tompkins County, we need housing units, 1000s, in each income bracket in our community. We have the city hub of Ithaca, and then the rest is rural, sprawling. We're looking at old housing stock, mobile, home parks, no transportation out into those rural areas, one bus a day, Monday through Friday. And that's really where our low-income folks are even more marginalized. Our rent prices rival those of Manhattan without all of the services, we have extremely high rents driven up by Ithaca College and Cornell University, which also sucks up a lot of cities' housing units, further pushing our folks out. We have a wicked low vacancy rate where the units are already full before the person moves out. So generally, less than 4% all the time. The pandemic made that even worse. And a lot of our landlords sold off properties and got out of the rental game during the eviction moratorium. How did I become aware that the housing needed was so great? When I started as a section eight caseworker in early 2000, we were running into families who were eligible after they waited three years for a voucher and

then couldn't find a place to use the voucher and had to go back on the waiting list because there was no housing available. And I was able to work under a really great executive director who did all kinds of creative and innovative programs that I'll talk about later.

M

Michelle McKeon, RECAP 08:22

I think understanding the awareness is how connected you are to your community. So, it's the phone calls that you get, it's the, you're sitting around at a housing meeting, and someone says, hey, does anybody have any housing? And part of it is a macro view of the housing that's being built to Charlie's point earlier, which is connected to something else. So if you are struggling with substance use disorder, if you are living with HIV and AIDS, there are housing use available, if there if you were a veteran, if you are a senior, but when you're talking about an Alice family, or even an individual's low income, hitting that, you know, magic \$412 a month from Department of Social Services, there's nothing for those families. And if there is, it's not somewhere you would ever want to live. Because when we talk about what the housing stock looks like, not only is it not readily available because everything has people in it already, but it is not good quality, healthy housing stock. So engaging municipalities around the need for housing and then the need for code enforcers to make sure that those housing units are safe to live in is an ongoing battle. I think for many of the places that we're talking about.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 09:57

Uh, you know, I'll certainly jump in and just talk a little bit about some of the unique issues here in Tioga County. So, in 2018, we co-collaborated on a pretty comprehensive housing study. You know, we all would sit around tables and talk about housing issues, but we really wanted to do a deep dive into what was really going on and where was the greatest need. So, together with the County Economic Development, and the County IDA, we funded this study, and it was interesting because of where we're located along the Susquehanna River. Environmental factors and national disasters have really impacted our housing. The floods of 2006 and 2011, in particular, just decimated the village of Owego, Waverly, Nichols. And it created a huge issue in that it, you know, it disseminated any availability of safe, affordable housing for that population that Michelle was just talking about. So, the affected properties were bought up by out-of-town landlords, and they came in and bought these for next to nothing, put very little money into the repairs, and then rented them. And, unfortunately, these were the only properties that a lot of these families could afford, particularly in the village of Owego, because we also have no transportation throughout the county or limited transportation. You know, families would gravitate more towards those, the villages where there were a few more services. So, the amount of blighted housing was incredibly, I just couldn't believe it, when I moved here and began to look at this vibrant community center in this downtown area, and two blocks either way, you know, you were looking at extremely blighted housing. So that was a key contributor and a key factor in our involvement in the other was really the economic development aspect of this. And really what got us involved in regard to, you know, quality, affordable housing being very closely linked to the recruitment and retention of a workforce, we have the 86-corridor run right through our County. Economic Development, the County Economic Development has been very successful in recruiting businesses; we have crown core conceal, of course, Tioga Downs, Best Buy warehouse, and CVS warehouse. And yet, we have very little acceptable worker housing in our in our county, which means a lot of people are having to; they live outside the area and are driving in. And so, from that perspective, we

realized that this had to be one of the strategies that we were going to focus on decent, affordable worker housing so that we could begin to attract young families into our community. And kind of the last piece of this, and then I'll be quiet, it was our increased aging population. So, as we all know, older adults are living a lot longer; they're remaining in their homes a lot longer. And, you know, the 65-plus population in our county is projected to grow like 22%, and the 85-plus population at 31% growth. And at the same time, we're losing workers, you know, in that age group of, like, 25 to 60. With that, you know, the out-migration of that working-age population. So, you know, it's a multi-dimensional challenge, but all of that kind of contributing to this depletion. And then you add in the, you know, the code enforcement issues and the municipalities, you know, and then and then the overarching issue is the local resistance to any type of new development for low-income housing, which is a whole other podcast, but, you know, it needs to be, you know, a part of this conversation as well. So that's how I became aware of all the issues in our county.↵↵

**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 14:13

Maureen, I don't think you should ever be quiet. But it's not just resistance to new projects. There is resistance to existing housing for people with low incomes. Two of our municipalities in Orange County took affirmative steps to make it more difficult. In the City of Newburgh, code enforcement officials actually issue violations to tenants now, rather than landlords. And in the City of Middletown, they now require background checks for renters. The landlord has to get a background check both economic and criminal before they can rent it to a person.

**M** Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 14:59

Yep, and then we're dealing with zoning, zoning issues too. And a little bit later, I can talk about a, you know, a project that we were highly excited about with a public-private partnership with the neighborhood housing here in Tioga County. And you know, it was just a, the local municipalities zoning board and village board just stood fast and just fought us every step of the way. So, but we'll get into that later, I'm sure.

**M** Michelle McKeon, RECAP 15:31

Well, and this is Michelle from RECAP, but I think what also talks to our good poor and the bad poor, and whom are we choosing to help, right? So, if we need housing for seniors, great, as long as they're not too poor, right? If we need housing for veterans, everybody applauds housing for veterans, right? But when we talk about other populations, the parole re-entry population, the substance use disorder population, right? That's when we have that conversation about, well, we will have these folks in our community, but not those folks. RECAP runs a pro-reentry program, and Charlie and I went to talk to the municipality about building on land we already own and to put together a project for, you know, women-headed households in the City of Newburgh, which has a poverty rate of about 57%. And the question that we were asked by the mayor was, what are you doing about all the parolees who are dumped here? serving them? I don't know. We're not dumping them here. We're serving them when they get here. So, you know, unless we continue to battle the myths and misperceptions about housing and who deserves housing. We have a lot. We have a lot of work to do around the need for housing for all, not just the people who we think deserve housing, but for everybody.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 17:03

Yeah, this is Maureen again. And yeah, absolutely. You hit the nail right on the head. And you know, the only new development that has gone, that has been happening here has been senior housing, which is a need for sure. But we don't get the same pushback as we do for other types, whether it's low-income, reentry, or any of those things that are just off the table. I mean, it's a done deal before we even get, we get going. So yes, a lot of work to do in that area.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 17:35

Can you talk to me, or talk to us a little bit about the work that you are doing to address those needs? And maybe you Danielle, you can give us some ideas?

D

Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 17:47

Oh, sure. So, at Tompkins Community Action, we have rental assistance programs, the section eight Housing Choice Voucher Program, and some other smaller programs. We work with Ithaca neighborhood housing; Maureen mentioned them. They do the Low-Income Tax Credit projects in our area and are a nice location for our voucher holders, to get housing in town close to town. Alongside that voucher program, we have something called tenant-based rental assistance that we get funding from New York State Homes and Community Renewal, their home funding. We target people experiencing homelessness and the unhoused for that funding. We work with our local continuum of care and prioritize the most vulnerable to be served with that rental assistance plus a staff person. We don't like to use the words case worker or case manager. So, we have a specialist that works with them to find housing that works, that's safe and not deteriorated, passes an inspection, and do some life-building skill set. You know, the trash goes out, the lease compliance, building that stability piece and relationship with the landlord. So, when they come to the top of that section eight Housing Choice Voucher Program waiting list, they don't have to move again. And they can continue that stability right there. We've been really successful with that program. We were just awarded another two-and-a-half-year contract for that. So that's a little piece in the continuum. And then our bigger impact, I think, is with our HUD-funded and State funded homeless housing programs. We have 55 units that we own ourselves and then an additional 40 units that we do supportive services with youth, with our Empire State supportive housing initiative funds. And then we have another forty units of supportive services funds planned for a chronically homeless in the very central hub of the city of Ithaca on Green Street, right next to city hall right across from Tompkins County Mental Health building. That's coming online in early 2024. And then we just try to find little pockets of funding where we can meet needs and help navigate systems for people. And we try to keep everything person-centered so that it works. It's not a one size fits all in any of our programs. We do the trauma-informed care housing first model. Housing First is not popular in any community, from what we can tell from our own experience, but it really works. But we've had to kind of navigate new systems and create new partnerships in the community to kind of meet the needs that our homeless population has exponentially grown in the last couple of years. So that's kind of where our niche is, and the permanent supportive housing and we just keep building on that with our partners.

M

Michelle McKeon, RECAP 21:13

Danielle, this is Michelle, from RECAP, I have a question or a comment, I'm actually not sure where it is in my head. But when we look at, because we are also part of our continuum of care down here, when we look at housing the most vulnerable, I think that's obviously right. But what happens then to the folks who are just holding on, right, and they need some housing support? And I guess this is more of a macro conversation that if we're not, we're so good at intervention on all things. We're not as great as prevention, right? So, if we have the family, the ALICE family that Maureen was talking about, and they're holding on, and they're barely making ends meet, but they don't necessarily qualify for any of our housing. It's almost as if we've set it up where they have to then lose everything in order to be eligible for anything, or anything meaningful. So, you know, I know this is not the answer to Heidi's question. But how do we design a system where we're catching people before they're living in their car, right, or heading to a homeless shelter? Because we do, there are those moments where we get the call that says, my landlord just called they sold the building, and I have 30 days to get out. I work two full-time jobs, I make \$40,000 a year, and I have two kids, where can I get housing help? And the answer, almost 100% of the time is nowhere. Where do we start that conversation running concurrently with creating housing for those who are most vulnerable? Because if not, we're just growing our most vulnerable populations.

D

Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 23:07

Right, right. And I can speak a little bit to that. We've acknowledged that as a big issue in our community, just like everybody else. And our continuum of care has started identifying pathways of prevention and diversion from the shelter system. However, there's not, we don't have a steady stream of funding for that in Tompkins County, we have little pieces that we're trying to do the best. And we're really trying to build in those navigation support people so that when you get into your housing issue, you get that notice, and you don't have section eight, because basically, no one can afford to live in rental housing in Tompkins County without some sort of assistance. And so, we're trying to navigate that, we're doing a bunch of studies, there's all this data, but there's not really any dollars yet to back up how to handle that. But I completely agree that we're just adding to the pipeline, as we're triaging for the most vulnerable. And we have had a lot of development in Tompkins County of new housing units. And we are still waiting for that. Like we keep saying, oh, this will be the project that opens for our low-income families, and it doesn't seem to be happening yet. And what I think is happening is the folks that have moved away from the area that are still working in Tompkins County are moving back in to fill those units before the list moves for anybody else. So, I think that probably is happening in Tioga County, too.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 24:47

Yeah, it is for sure. You know, we operate the section eight Housing Choice Voucher Program as well. And, you know, I think Michelle brings up an interesting point and, you know, when you look at programs like section eight, it can be a lifelong, you know, voucher, so we've infused our financial social work with all of our section eight families. And we try to kind of interject in, you know, in with the, you know, just the acceptance of the voucher that, you know, what are your long-term goals and what, you know, what, what is it that you want to achieve, and, you know, really trying to help them develop a plan that goes beyond just a subsidized housing, you



know, thinking about that continuum, and moving forward, and we've had some good success with that, which has taken some time to kind of get it going, but it is, but it is working. You know, we also operate 137 units of senior housing through rural development. And that brings certain challenges along with it as well. But probably senior housing, as I said, is the only real new development that we've seen, but what we're kind of focusing on right now is the idea of acquiring and then rehabbing single-family and maybe two to four-family homes, for either rentals or for sale to first-time homebuyers. So, you know, the issue with seniors living longer in our county means that, you know, their houses, when they either move into long-term care or that house is sold, it's oftentimes in great disrepair, it's, it's older, it has a lot of older parts and in need of much rehab. So we decided that we are going to kind of focus in that area, you know, the development piece is a little beyond our means at this particular point in time, especially with what we're, we've been dealing with in terms of the local resistance, but we have a subsidiary that we formed called the Southern Tier enterprise group, which is going to house all of our social enterprises. And it'll allow us to do some creative types of things in housing. So, we're looking, we're working with a land bank currently, and we're looking at acquiring some properties through tax foreclosure and rehabbing them. And then we have some of our section eight people in the pipeline for first-time homebuyers. So hopefully, they would be able to get into some of these properties and get, you know, have them acquire that asset and become a home or a homeowner. So, you know, we kind of just decided that was a better route for us to go, and then use the money from a sale to reinvest again into another property and just keep, you know, kind of chugging along one, one neighborhood at a time. So.

D

#### Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 27:59

Thank you so much. Those sound-like fantastic programs. I just want to back up for one second about a philosophy that a few of you mentioned, and I think that it's worth really talking about because I think if you don't work with unhoused people, you may not be aware of this. This concept and that's the concept of housing first. So, will one of you talk about a little that a little bit about that, and how you have seen that shift? If it has shifted your work and the people, the benefits it has on the people that you are providing services for? This is Danielle in Tompkins County; I can talk a little bit about housing first. It's a concept where it's the belief that everybody deserves housing, it's a right it's not something you earn, it's not something you're ready for. It's the housing comes first, and then the services follow. So, there is no screening out if you have substance use issues, mental health issues, or criminal history. It is about meeting people where they're at, getting them into safe housing, and building from there based on what the person needs, not what the program goal is. So, we have shifted from that. The most basic example I have is with our supportive housing for people in recovery. Before housing first, we had a 30-day sober requirement, and that has gone away. We have been working with our coordinated entry system with the continuum of care. So, we are serving people who are coming in from outside and the encampments. And you know some of it is building community for that person moving in so that they feel comfortable staying inside the building. And sometimes it's as simple as you know, visiting the apartment. And it's a process. It's not just where we used to have, you know, somebody gets dropped off from rehab with their three suitcases and they're ready to sign a lease. There's also, because of that kind of shift in population, what we've experienced this winter, particularly is everybody's friends came to stay, because it's super cold out, there's not enough room in the shelter, or they're not allowed at the shelter, they couldn't, you know, jumped through the hoops. So, we ended up with, you know, additional folks in our community, who were also trying to serve, making sure they're in the Coordinated Entry System and making sure they're safe. And I think every community probably experiences a lack of services that are needed, for mental health support.



I know we don't have enough clinic clinicians or visits available in Tompkins County; I think that's probably everywhere. And what happened in the pandemic, the Zoom treatment, the Zoom one-on-one meetings worked until they didn't, and then offices didn't open fast enough. And so, we have this, you know, body of people who lost access to their services, and reconnecting has been challenging. And I think that you know, when you're starting with people who have been labeled as the most vulnerable based on the traumas they've had in their life, you know, you have obstacles that you didn't even think about four years ago with program implementation. So, housing first works, it's keeping people safe and alive and moving forward. But it's got a lot of challenges.

**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 31:50

And housing first describes the way we operate as agencies and the way we operate our programs. But it's something that needs to go out to the larger community. We have an incredible person in Orange County, she led the federally qualified health care program for decades, and Linda would walk around anywhere she went like she had Tourette's, health care is a right, not a privilege. And we need to get people saying the same thing about housing. Going back to what Michelle said before, there are certain people we'd like to house and other people that we don't, it's got to be universal. It's got to be for everyone. That's got to be right.

**M** Michelle McKeon, RECAP 32:31

And as we continue to, you know, look into the future regarding services and our communities. If we are not addressing housing, we're not addressing social determinants of health. We are not increasing health outcomes for individuals and families. And that is part of the mandate that the State is looking at now, right? So, how are we creating pathways to health, not just medical health, but emotional health, spiritual health, and housing is one of those first steps. Stable, affordable, quality housing is one of those things if you are unhoused, your ability to have safe, nutritious food is lowered, and access to health care is lowered. We have a woman who lives in the parking lot of our rec center in the City of Newburgh. She is a super adult, right, somebody over 65. She's probably over 75. She's terrified to be a woman in a homeless shelter. So, she lives in her car. And for the most part, her community takes care of her, right? We make sure she has food. And, Danielle, I think you're the one who said you don't just take somebody, and you drop them off, right? It's a process. It's engagement, it's creating relationships. We've asked her if she wanted an apartment, connecting her to the office of the aging, and we bring her food that she can manage in her car. But she has no interest in entering a system that is unsafe for her. So, her health outcomes over time are going to be less because we've created systems that don't allow for the addressing of stability first without doing all of the other things. I think housing first needs to be the model that leads the way but housing in general should be the thing that we're focused on because if you are one of the 250 families in Orange County, living in hotels this week, your school is probably not going to be consistent, food is not going to be consistent, transportation is probably not there. So, how are we actually completing our missions, if so many of the systems that the people that we serve are attached to, don't set them up for success? If you have a wheel and all of the spokes are working together, you have a functioning wheel. But if only the center and the center being Community Action is working, and all of the other spokes are throwing barriers and challenges,

and we have different requirements, we can't do our job to create the best outcomes for the people that we serve. We can't do it all by ourselves, even though we would like to think we can.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 35:34

I really appreciate those, those explanations about the housing first philosophy and approach, how did you decide to design and structure the program set you have?

**M** Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 35:50

This is Maureen from Tioga again. I think for us, it was once we really kind of got a handle, or I got a handle on, on what was happening around us, you know, there are so many issues and so many things we, as Michelle said, we can't, we can't do it all. So, I think we had to find in partnership with others what our niche would be and be and build off our strengths and our own agency capacity to be effective, and to be able to make an impact in our communities. So, you know, we dabbled in the partnership, you know, trying to get new development. And as I stated earlier, that didn't happen. So, you know, we kind of landed on this, you know, this overall neighborhood revitalization strategy. And, you know, focusing on that the acquisition and the rehab, and the resell, as opposed to really kind of focusing on the new development, will certainly partner with any private, you know, a developer that comes in or anything a neighborhood housing or whatever, but we just, we just can't, we can't do that right now on by ourselves. So, you know, and what really, the other thing that really kind of pushed us in that direction was the realization that middle-income buying power for families, in this area is between 90,000 and 1200, and 130,000. And there just aren't a lot of properties for sale that don't need another 30 to \$50,000 worth of work, you know, done. So, the ability for us to purchase low, rehab, and then sell within that 90 to 125 \$130 range is going to meet a need that just doesn't exist with and, you know, to be able to buy a property with little or no repair and updating needed will certainly, you know, meet a huge need. So, I think that's kind of how we landed on this particular strategy. Now, with that said, we are, you know, looking at potentially some more senior housing, not big, big developments, but more like, you know, townhouse-type situations in some of the more rural areas of the county. But yeah, I think that you know, we just decided we were going to build off our strengths. And, you know, because we have, you know, we have a lot of, you know, rehab type grants and a lot of expertise in that area, and good relationships with local contractors and stuff. We just felt that was a better avenue for us. And so that's why we're going in that direction.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 38:23

And Maureen and Danielle, you both mentioned, having partnerships and collaborations that have helped to build these programs. And I know that community action agencies do a great job of doing that in their communities, building networks and partnerships to meet the needs. But can you talk a little bit about what some of those partnerships and collaborations are that you've built and that have been successful?

**M** Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 38:49

Danielle, you want to go?

D

Danielle Harrington, Tompkins Community Action 38:52

We've become the permanent housing supportive services go-to for our community. So, we've had to say yes and no to some different projects based on our own capacity. But what we have done and what we're doing well, is we are partnering with Vecino which is a development company. And Cornerstone property management, which is the property management company for our newest project at art house. We've had to connect with some different community partners, we have reached medical which is a harm reduction model of health services, both physical and mental health. We've contracted with them to come on-site for us weekly. Kind of like an open-door mental health piece, where our residents who are between 18 and 25 can just walk in and have a doughnut with AI and talk about life and then go long their day without having to jump through all of the hoops and all kinds of things. And that is something that we plan to continue at our other housing sites. We've also brought our food pantry into a delivery system. So, our food pantry goes to that housing project. Here, we've had to have some creative solutions, you know, a lot of people whom I have worked with over the years have left for different positions, its new staff coming in with new ideas. Let's try this. And thankfully, Ithaca is a community where we do a lot of let's try this and see what happens and take the pieces that are good and keep moving them forward, we have a really strong continuum of care. And we play a big enough role in all of the committee's we kind of have our fingers and everything and pull our partners that way. And then linking our housing programs to our Headstart programs and encompassing the families in that way to kind of being our own partner. We're the same agency, different departments sometimes that that can kind of feel like different organizations from time to time. But I think that that piece was the kids living at a Michi house, walking across the parking lot to go to their Headstart, childcare center, while their parents go to GED class, or to work or go volunteer at our food pantry, you know, creates a nice little community, and nobody has to get in a car and do anything. So, I think there are a lot of benefits to our campus. So, I think that's, that's what I would say about that.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 41:47

Yeah, I wish we had some of that, you know, going on in our community, some of that more open-mindedness in terms of some of these projects. But you know, again, I mentioned earlier, the partnering with our land bank type, County Land Bank, Tioga County Economic Development, and then private developers, Arbor housing, two plus four, Ithaca neighborhood housing, doing a lot of strategies around neighborhood revitalization with them, and then, you know, really building relationships with municipalities, you know, and when I say building relationships, I mean, putting the time in to really get to know the elected officials and having them get to know us and what we represent and trying to bridge that cultural gap between the old entitlement while everybody wants a handout versus we want them to buy a home and become taxpayers and participate in, you know, the, you know, the village, you know, village politics or school or whatever. And that is, you know, that's taken time. But we've been, you know, we've been successful with that. We're looking at a few properties now in Waverly that have huge issues, some trending stuff with their use that are troublesome, troublesome. And I think that getting in there and doing some more work will be a great help. But yeah, that's kind of like I said, building off our strengths, who we've been partnering. We do work with a continuum as well. It's based out of Broome and I, sometimes I feel like Tioga County is, you

know, forgotten about and a lot of resources, go to Broome County and some of the surrounding counties. But we are there, and we try to be as vocal as we can be about what our needs are. So those are the majority of our partners.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 43:47

Thank you, Charlie and Michelle, do you have anything that you want to add to that piece about collaborations and partnerships?

**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 43:56

Orange County and it's not just the Community Action Agency. Orange County is incredible with the partnerships that are down here. There's an organization called JMHCA. It's like-minded agencies. We meet monthly to discuss what the needs of the county are and what individual agencies are doing to address them. So, it's a pretty tight, not-for-profit community and the county participates, and the municipalities participate. It's not perfect, it's not Eden. But we've taken the approach at a county level that is all about partnerships. Our COC continuum of care. There are six housing providers in it, but lots of not-for-profit agencies, municipalities, and private groups are part of it, contributing to making sure that the people we house get the services they need, and that the needs, that the other agencies are seeing, making sure that they are being addressed.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 45:12

So that leads me to wonder, what impact have you seen on your communities as you've been addressing the housing challenges that you have there?

**M** Michelle McKeon, RECAP 45:25

This is Michelle from RECAP. I think, in some ways, the impact is incremental, and in other ways it, you know, it leaps and bounds. I think until we move, there's a lot of othering, right in this work, and it's them and those of us right, that that's how we hear about the work that we do, well, we want to help those people, or we want to do things for those people. So, when something happens, it feels wonderful. But when you look at it, it's really not as impactful as, as you would like, you know, we are built for public-private partnerships. And, you know, we, we oftentimes find ourselves running into the walls, trying to get them with public partners who maybe have a different philosophy than we do about the helping of others. And I think that impact on one person is impact on a community. And that's a good thing, right? One less person unhoused, one healthier family, one more person in recovery. All of those things are impactful for those people, right, those individuals or families. I think the impact, we will see a true impact when our municipalities come to us and say, we need this, and we need you to do it., right? I don't think that happens as often as we would like or we would need it to, you know, we Charlie's talking about JMHCA. You know, we have a letter from JMHCA to our county executive to say, hey, we have a lot of ARMA money. And there are communities around us using that ARMA money for housing. Could you do something like that here, too, right? So, the impact would be oh, yeah, sure. Let's take, instead of a \$20 million infrastructure project, let's

do a \$15 million infrastructure, but 5.5 million to housing. Those are the partnerships that have an impact. Those are the things that change systems, change thoughts, and change minds about them, and us. And when we start when we stop, othering, folks and realize, many of us are many of our staff, or many of our families are one or two paychecks away from being them, how do we change the mindset of people who have the power to create the larger impact? We have the power to make an impact on the work that we do. We need bold people to take bold ideas and implement them. So, our impact is felt across systems and across generations, so that people with low income can improve their self-sufficiency and increase that so we can meet our missions and create healthier communities.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 48:47

Well, this is Maureen again, I'll just share a quick story. So, about four years ago, three years ago, I can't remember the village of Owego was awarded a \$10 million DRI grant. And so, through our partnership with economic development, we meaning Tioga Opportunities was encouraged to put in an application for this mixed-income housing project, literally two blocks off the main drag, which would lend itself to a lot of things lend itself to not only just meeting the needs of, of housing needs, but also addressing some other needs. So anyway, we said sure, we would love to, so we spent a lot of time putting this together. I sat in on the revitalization process committee, whatever. Only then to be one of the only programs that was not funded in the DRI. It was the most popular proposal when we had to hold the community forums, people spoke highly in the community. But the process was interesting in that proposals for an art Park and lighting on one side of the village. And, you know, there were a lot of things that were funded that how do I say this? Were like pet projects, I think of some of the elected officials, you know, so I knew early on in the process that it probably wasn't going to happen. But it was so indicative, I think of what, you know, small rural counties are up against. And it really kind of took the wind out of our sails. And I think that was also part and parcel to us shifting gears and moving more towards the acquisition and the rehab, and, you know, the resale of houses and renting of houses. So, it was very frustrating. So that was not a good impact. But it had an impact in regard to us really understanding what we were up against.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 51:05

And Maureen and Michelle, you both make comments that sort of make me want to ask this question or make me wonder, you know, Michelle, you talked about needing bold ideas. And Maureen, you had a great project that just wasn't funded, unfortunately. So, I'm curious if I could maybe wave my magic wand, and funding was no longer an issue. And I know you guys have answers to this on the tip of your tongue, right? You probably think about this all the time. If funding wasn't the issue, what program would you want to create to help those who are unhoused in your community? And what services?

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 51:49

Supportive housing is huge, you know, we've talked about that all, you know, throughout this, the need for you know, individuals coming out of substance abuse rehab programs needing assistance with that transition, you know, the reentry. I mean, homeless shelters, there's one

homeless shelter that's run by the YWCA in Binghamton, between Broome County and Tiger County, one woman shelter. Which is always full and it's hard when we have people that we, you know, that we become aware of because we know probably, they're not going to get a space there. So yeah, you know, there's all those things on top of a, you know, a whole bunch of others. But those are huge needs here.

**C** Charlie Quinn, RECAP 52:36

And I know the topic of the day is housing. And I don't mean to undermine the importance of housing for where we are right now. But if money is no object, and we're granting wishes, let's pay people what they need to, to live, to live in comfortable housing, decent housing, and put my agency out of business, I'd be glad that happened. We as a society are to content with a system that keeps generating people who live in poverty.

**M** Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 53:14

And I think transportation for rural counties is a huge issue that relates to everything, you know, how to access housing, work, jobs, you know, all of those things. And, you know, we I don't know, I mean, if, again, if money was no object, I think, to be able to address that would be a key item as well.

**M** Michelle McKeon, RECAP 53:35

Childcare, childcare. You know, how many articles have I read in the last, you know, three months about, you know, women being hit particularly hard returning to the workforce, because they can't find safe, affordable, quality daycare, and not just that follows the school schedule, right? You know, what about weekends? What about evenings? What about overnights? So, you know, and I think what we've kind of all laid out, was addressing social determinants of health and, and finding the appropriate housing and then letting all of the rest of it kind of filter in the use of our services. But New York State has the ability now and hopefully, the sweat equity to change how the addressing of social determinants are funded. And we don't get paid for our work. We get contracts, right? But we, when we provide a service, it needs to be paid for appropriately to Charlie's point in order to pay our staff appropriately, but to address all of the needs of the folks so as New York state looks towards different ways to fund the work that not for profits do, they need to take into consideration the human infrastructure that we build and create foundations and stability for in order for us to have people who are housed and fed, and healthy and have access to the appropriate transportation, childcare, mental health, substance use disorder, and emotional support that they need to be successful. If we can do that, then I am happy to be unemployed.

**H** Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 55:34

Thank you all for those answers. I think before we wrap up, I just I think a good way to end would be to ask you, if any of you have a success story, for a person, a place, a program that you would like to share with us.

M

Michelle McKeon, RECAP 57:12

I think our definition of success, in other people's different definitions of success can be different, right? So, I think back to a veteran that our staff worked really, really, really, really, really hard for. And we were kept being told by a whole bunch of groups, he needs housing, you got to get him into housing, and we would put them in housing. And then he would leave, and we would put him in housing, and he would leave all he wanted to do, and he kept telling us, I want to live outside by the river. It's where I feel safest, right? So, we finally stopped trying to put him somewhere he did not want to be now in the minds of others. People listening to this are, you know, the people in power. Was that success? Probably not because he wasn't housed. But was it success to our client? Who asked us for something, and we were able to deliver that for him and be able to serve him in a place where he wanted to be and surrounded by things that he wanted to be surrounded by. And of course, making sure that he was warm in the winter and cool in the summer and that he had transportation to his doctor when he needed it and food and all of those things. Yes. To him, that was a success. So, if we're measuring success, I think it needs to be measured by the people receiving the service, not necessarily the people analyzing the data.

M

Maureen Abbott, Tioga Opportunities 57:24

well said.

C

Charlie Quinn, RECAP 57:25

And I can think of another person that we served, who had been unhoused for a very long time. And it was as our agency was transitioning to a housing-first model, there was a person who had been living in the woods for a long period of time and could not keep the sobriety necessary to continue living in the housing. So, he would fall off the wagon, be evicted, go into rehab, come back, and be housed again. And it was a cycle that went on and on. And as our agency switched to the housing first model, a caseworker came to his apartment, and he was there with his bags packed. He was ready to go, he thought this was going to be it again. But he got to stay. Because we had changed the way we work. And it was one of the best success stories. I think.

H

Heidi Barcomb, NYSCAA 58:27

It's a great example of the benefits of housing first. Absolutely. So, Maureen, Charlie, Michelle, and Danielle, we want to thank you so much for joining us today on our second episode of Lights, Camera, Community Action podcast. Thank you for your time and sharing your expertise with us.

M

Michelle McKeon, RECAP 58:48

Thank you. Thanks, everybody.



