

A History of  
Oswego County Opportunities, Inc.  
1966 - 2016



50  
YEARS

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Helping People. Supporting Communities. Changing Lives.

# Did you know ... It's OCO!

## Celebrating 50 Years of Service to Oswego County in 2016

In 1964, the Congress of the United States passed the Economic Opportunity Act for the purpose of "eliminating the paradox of poverty in the midst of plenty". The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) was given the mission to develop and carry out a national strategy to end poverty by working with and through key public and private institutions at the national, state, and local levels. As a result, Community Action Agencies were being formed across the nation as a local mechanism to address and end poverty in local communities.

Resolution No. 46 was passed in June of 1965 by the County Board of Supervisors (now known as the Oswego County Legislature), under the leadership of Supervisor Eugene Saloga. The resolution permitted the establishment of a local agency to receive OEO monies and operate local anti-poverty programs.

Immediately, concerned county officials and individuals set about to establish such an agency to fulfill the goals of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 and the County Legislators Resolution of 1965. In March 1966, Oswego County Opportunities (OCO) was chartered.

### Roots in Economic Opportunity Act

OCO was incorporated as a not-for-profit human services agency on March 15, 1966, as a result of President Lyndon Johnson's Economic Opportunity Program. The original intent was to operate programs through Oswego County's Office of Economic Opportunities; but the county never applied for funding. Some of the individuals working on the original Board of Directors included: Herbert VanSchaack, Arthur J. Clawson, Frances T. Sullivan, W. Harlow Stratton, Marguerite B. Lincoln, and Francis R. Mirabito, who were all signees of the original charter.

At that time, with the organizational goal accomplished, interest waned. There was no one to drive the program and funding forward. Thus, when OEO monies were most available nation-wide, Oswego County received none.

### Services Needed Year-Round

However, during this stage of inactivity for OCO, a new agency, working primarily with migrant farm laborers, known as Oswego County Interfaith Ministry of Concern, Inc., became chartered. They received OEO Migrant (Title III-B) Funds for the first time in 1969. Interfaith Ministry soon realized the need for a year-round working agency that it could use as its base for summer migrant work, and consequently set out to reorganize OCO.

The reorganization plan was developed at a special OCO Corporation Meeting on December 14, 1970. A new Board of Directors was chosen to serve until the annual meeting in April 1971, when a full slate of Directors would be elected. In December 1970, a group of original OCO Board Members began to seek grants to provide poverty-related services in the County.

In June of 1971, OCO received its first program grant from OEO migrant funds for \$17,000, and in August 1971, the agency received a grant from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for \$60,000, to establish an out of hospital Family Planning Center.

### New Beginnings: 'A Venture in Faith'

In 1972, OCO held its first Annual Meeting and published its first Annual Report. The agency's first Executive Director, E. Peter Geitner, noted: *"OCO began as a venture in faith. As some pilgrims search across the seas for a better life for themselves, OCO sought to renew the life of its own community hand in hand with those who were the tired, the poor, the discouraged and the disadvantaged."*

The number of employees at OCO has grown considerably over the years. In 1974 there were 20 employees working for OCO. By 2012, there were 660 employees. Today the Agency has more

*Note: this is a brief summary. While all OCO programs and services are worthy of detailed narratives; unfortunately, this space does not permit us to give them the space they deserve. For more information please visit our website, [www.oco.org](http://www.oco.org)*

than 560 employees and over 1,200 volunteers. OCO is one of the top ten private employers in Oswego County. Its 50+ programs are administered at over 80 sites, and in virtually every County community, serving nearly 22,000 people each year.

In addition to family planning and migrant services, the Head Start program has been with OCO since 1972. Head Start and Day Care fall under the auspices of OCO Education Services, which now includes after school programs for youth, Literacy Volunteers, the Community School program and Universal Pre-K.

Senior meals have been a part of OCO's "menu" of services since 1974, starting out with three dining centers and now providing home-delivered meals as well as lunches at its dining and activity centers.

### **Growth Continues in Number and Scope of Services**

The Agency began operating community residences for adults with developmental disabilities in 1975, and a grant to purchase a vehicle to transport these consumers was awarded that same year. In 2016 OCO's Residential Services operate 13 homes throughout the county as well as Day Hab and Respite programs. There are also supportive living apartments for adults with mental health diagnoses, for men transitioning from OCO's residential chemical dependence recovery program into the community, and the homeless.

OCO has provided services and supports for pregnant and parenting teens through its OPTIONS program since 1980. This service recently expanded to serve all women of reproductive age. The 1980s also saw OCO begin providing public transportation services. In 1983 the Agency assumed operation of Services to Aid Families, Inc., and this program to assist victims of domestic violence/abuse remains active today. The program's emergency shelter opened just a few years later.

In the mid-1980s OCO began offering primary care services, which grew steadily into the 1990s. To improve access and maintain financial stability of primary care across Oswego County, OCO collaborated with Oswego Health and the Northern Oswego County Health Services, Inc. (NOCHSI) to move all primary care under the NOCHSI umbrella in 2012.

In the early 1990s OCO became the first in the county to serve runaway and homeless youth with emergency housing and transitional living. Program expansions and fluctuations continued through the 1990s. Health services started providing facilitated enrollment in 1999 to help uninsured residents enroll in a health plan. This service continues today as the IPA Navigators Program. OCO opened the Backstreet Book Store this same year, selling gently used books and providing a job skill training site for adults and teens.

In the 2000s Head Start continued to expand with Universal Pre-K, and new residences were opened for developmentally disabled adults. Transportation Services added Call-N-Ride for elderly and special needs passengers. OCO was instrumental in forming a countywide Nutrition Coalition. Residential Services provided housing for homeless youth and adults in apartments above the Back Street bookstore. By 2007 OCO was providing no cost/low cost cancer screening services and the Day Hab adult daycare for disabled adults moved to the Fulton YMCA.

### **Service Improvements to Better Meet Client Needs**

The late 2000s into the 2010s saw OCO develop and implement a new service delivery model and organizational structure, moving from seven program divisions plus administration, to four departments: Health & Nutrition, Community Services, Residential Services and Corporate (Administrative) Services. Nutrition Services opened its new Mexico kitchen facility that provides a centralized location for preparing and serving up to 10,000 meals each week. Programs for runaway and homeless youth expanded in 2011, along with domestic violence education, adolescent pregnancy prevention and homeless services for individuals and families. Great strides

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# History of OCO...

*[continued from page 3]*

were made in the 2010s to utilize technology in greater ways to provide services, especially in the field through portable Internet connections, laptops and tablets, smartphones and teleconferencing and video conferencing. In 2013 OCO implemented "any door access" for assessing eligibility and connecting people in need to services with a single visit or phone call to one of the Agency's portals. In 2013 funds were secured to renovate a house as a group residence for homeless youth.

In 2014 OCO entered a 2-year ADVANS program provided through the Gifford Foundation to undergo an intensive assessment and planning process to build capacity and strengthen the Agency's fiscal and human resources to better serve our clients. This led to hiring a development coordinator and launching a marketing/brand awareness campaign in 2016.

## **Collaborations and Partnerships Propel OCO into the Future**

Collaborations and partnerships remain a key component of OCO's focus, with the Agency playing both supportive and leading roles in numerous local and regional cohorts, including COACH coalition to address homelessness, the CNY collaborative preparing for the statewide transition to a managed care model by 2018 for persons with physical and mental disabilities, and a partnership with Cornerstone Group to develop and build workforce housing rental units in 2017.

Much has been achieved in the past 50 years, and much remains to be done. What "began as a venture in faith," now is a strong, vibrant agency that actively and effectively pursues its mission:

**OCO inspires partnerships and provides services  
that empower people, support communities  
and change lives.**

**315-598-4717 ~ [www.oco.org](http://www.oco.org)**

Oswego County Opportunities, Inc.  
is a private, not-for-profit Community Action Agency that helps lift people out of poverty by reducing and breaking down its many and often subtle forces. We provide person-centered and strength-based services and supports that meet people where they are and help them get where they want to be. When that happens, our lives and our communities are enriched and the quality of life is made better for all.

