



OCO STATE OF THE AGENCY SUMMARY & COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT *OCO Strategic Plan 2022-2024*

Introduction

Strategic plans provide a road map for long-range business destinations. Effective strategic planning requires that guiding members of the business come together and gain an understanding of the current situation impacting the business, including feedback from key stakeholders and an examination of future challenges. This is known as a *Community Needs Assessment*. From this, members envision the organization's future and collaboratively develop the necessary tasks, timelines, procedures and operations to achieve the desired future. The end result is a plan that everyone is committed to accomplishing.

Beginning in March 2021, OCO started planning its next 3-year cycle for strategic planning for 2022-2024. This Community Needs Assessment and State of the Agency Summary provides:

- Synopsis of the 2019-2021 Plan, its accomplishments, challenges, and updates of identified needs
- Analysis of data collected through OCO's Community Needs Assessment process in 2021, including focus groups, customer satisfaction surveys, demographics and statistical reports relating to poverty in Oswego County
- Examination of future trends, challenges and opportunities
- Summation of how this information shapes OCO's 2022 - 2024 strategic plan.

OCO'S CURRENT STATUS

I. Significant Accomplishments 2019-2021

Highlights from OCO's 2019-2021 Strategic Management Plan

A. OCO led / participated in over 200 community collaborations, including:

- COACH – County's Continuum of Care for Homelessness
- Oswego County Nutrition Consortium
- Rural Health Network
- Literacy Coalition LIFT Oswego – Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative
- Health & Nutrition Advisory Committee
- Oswego County Transportation Coalition
- Oswego County Poverty Task Force
- Oswego County Workforce Development
- Oswego County Runaway & Homeless Youth Task Force
- CNY Care Collaborative
- Community Services Board Integrated Sub-Committee
- Oswego County Integrated Delivery Network
- Oswego County Workforce Board
- St. Lawrence County Health Initiative & Samaritan Medical Center partnership in creation of Cancer Services Program of the North Country
- Rochester Cornerstone project to create Champlain Commons, permanent supportive housing beds
- Oswego County Domestic Violence Coalition
- Oswego County Literacy Coalition
- VOW Foundation
- Oswego County Breastfeeding Coalition

B. OCO assured people have access to resources to meet basic needs:

1. Food / Nutrition

- a. Increased home delivered meals for seniors & drive-through contactless meal pickups
- b. Partnered with Fulton schools to distribute school meals during pandemic shutdown

2. Housing

- a. Expanded homeless housing services in 2020 to serve an additional 11 homeless individuals and families, or 8 households, through receipt of \$135,000 from Federal Housing & Urban Development agency in expansion dollars
- b. Increased the availability of affordable housing in Oswego County through the completion of Champlain Commons in August 2019, a 57-unit affordable housing project owned by OCO
- c. Increased affordable housing and support services to 10 homeless families as a result of a securing an Empire State Supportive Housing funding and partnering with an Affordable Housing Developer on the development of Selkirk Landing, a new 64-unit affordable housing in Pulaski, NY
- d. In partnership with Vera House, expanded rapid rehousing homeless & DV services to serve an additional 31 homeless individuals experiencing domestic violence in late 2021, through receipt of \$350,000 from Federal Housing & Urban Development agency

3. Life Skills & Supports for Self-Sufficiency

- a. OCO was an integral partner with SUNY Oswego in helping to expand the use of Circles of Security parenting & healthy relationship education curriculum to other human service agencies
- b. Enrollment in Self-Directed Services for the Developmentally Disabled grew from 2 to 18 individuals by late 2021

4. Services for Youth

- a. Maintained Clubhouse program throughout pandemic to keep youth engaged & connected with peers
- b. Expanded LGBTQ+ services to youth and young adults through providing extra day of drop-in support services in City of Oswego

5. Targeted Health Services

- a. Federal funding received to fund an Oswego County collaborative focused on opioid challenges and solutions for Oswego County
- b. Federal funding received to support the development of an IPA called Oswego County Integrated Delivery Network to coordinate the health, behavioral health and social care of community members
- c. Funds received from Mother Cabrini Foundation in 2021 expanded Migrant Health Services

6. Connecting People to Resources

- a. 94% of all OCO services are now using the agency's universal intake and data management system in order to maintain accurate records and reports
- b. Secured Grant for Baby Bundle project providing basic supplies & resources for up to 1125 new parents, foster parents, and grandparents

C. OCO assured people with low incomes have a voice in services and in the community by:

- 1. Assuring Head Start parents are members of Head Start Policy Council
- 2. Assuring OCO Board of Directors has members representing the low income
- 3. Adhering to OCO's Guiding Principle of CHOICE, OCO programs engage consumers in developing their own goals, deciding on activities and service offerings, planning menus, and determining the type, level, and frequency of support and services they need
- 4. Publishing an OCO toll-free number, email and online feedback forms for the general public to have input on services and actions of OCO
- 5. Providing 24 social media sites where consumers and community members can interact with OCO on a variety of topic and issues

6. Publishing an OCO Customer Satisfaction Survey at least annually. In 2021, 1868 surveys from 32 different programs were collected with 99% of customers indicating that OCO services were easy or somewhat easy to access, that OCO employees were helpful, that they were satisfied or very satisfied with services received, and would recommend OCO to a friend in need
 - a. OCO customer feedback is valued and heard:
 - *"It was very easy to get services, I met with someone a few days after we talked on the phone!"*
 - *"I told my friend they should call OCO like I did. I am so grateful for the help!"*

D. OCO enhanced its public image & brand awareness through marketing & outreach strategies:

1. Daily / Weekly:
 - a. Starting in 2020, OCO's Social Media Trainer/Specialist coordinated and assured 24 OCO social media sites communicated information about programs & services and provided training to site admins to improve their skills
 - b. In 2021, OCO began daily updates to its website
2. Monthly:
 - a. 2020: OCO News Flash email account launched to communicate critical news & information. Created initially in response to the changing rules and regulations surrounding COVID-19, it also functions as a method to reinforce OCO's brand and image, program information, job opportunities and hotline numbers to employees
3. Annually:
 - a. 2021: Initiated a video version of OCO's annual report, to share at virtual Annual Meeting and also to use on internet media & as a presentation for staff who speak at community events
4. Ongoing:
 - a. 2020: OCO's inter-agency Workforce Committee oversees innovative recruitment and retention strategies that include creation of PR materials such as staff videos, social media posts, and ads on sites such as Indeed & LinkedIn
 - b. 2021: OCO website upgraded & converted to user friendly & ADA compliant WordPress platform
 - c. 2020-2021: Increased the number of internet-based media spots more than 200% annually due to shift to virtual services during pandemic; this trend is continuing

E. OCO researched and implemented workforce strategies to recruit, retain and provide opportunities for professional development more effectively:

1. 2021: Performed wage comparability study and adjusted positions based on results
2. 2021: Completed implementation of new wage scale and 10-year step increase for employees
3. 2020-2021: Used special CSBG CARES Act funding to hire a social media trainer/specialist to increase outreach for staff recruitment and to improve careers section of agency website
4. 2019-2021: Continued revisions to wage scale to accommodate the required increases to minimum wage and exempt wage rules
5. 2020-2021: Responded to surge in staff turnover and retirements due to COVID-19 pandemic with recruitment incentives, sign-on bonuses and stipends for high-vacancy direct service positions
6. 2021: OCO Board approved the use of earnings from its Investment Account to launch a new Leadership Development Program for OCO employees which will begin in 2022
7. Ongoing: Wellness activities and incentives developed in response to staff needs and interests

F. OCO continued successful implementation of fund development and investment strategy:

1. Developed a comprehensive development plan that includes a mix of events, SM campaigns, personal appeals, growth of unrestricted funds, investments, and legacy giving
2. From 2019 to 2021, total "unrestricted" donations increased by just over 100%
3. By 2021, OCO's long-term investment fund balance reached \$3.5 million
4. In 2021, OCO Board developed and approved a policy/procedure for annual distribution of investment earnings to support agency initiatives

G. OCO improved operational excellence to build capacity in midst of COVID-19 pandemic

1. OCO aligned its annual work plan & performance measures with Community Action Standards of Excellence
2. OCO implemented and expanded Universal Service Delivery procedures agency wide, including adoption of quality assurance and performance management components in 2019-2020
3. Expanded use of mobile technology in 2020 in response to pandemic, resulting in efficiency and cost savings that led to adoption of hybrid work options beginning in 2020
4. Adapted to loss of in-person service operations in 2020-2021 by vastly increasing use of Social Media to assure continued service provision; targeted marketing and communication with program participants; and as a way to recruit new clients
5. Shifted to virtual meetings 2020-2021, saving time and money by eliminating travel expenses

II. Significant Challenges 2019-2021

A good strategic plan achieves goals and identifies gaps, so it comes as no surprise that the demand for services exceeded available resources. The following challenges emerged and persisted during the 2019-2021 strategic plan cycle and are supported by both qualitative and quantitative data gathered during the Community Needs Assessment process

A. Inability to afford Housing:

The 2021 needs assessment data show that individuals living in poverty need to earn at least \$17.32/hr. to afford the fair market monthly rent of \$901 for a 2-bedroom apartment in Oswego County. This disparity forces many individuals and families to move frequently, which creates barriers to holding a job, opening a bank account, and doing well in school.

In Oswego County, 34.63% of individuals are living in households with income below 200% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). At the fair market monthly rent, as stated above, you can see why households in poverty cannot afford to obtain and maintain safe and affordable housing. This indicator also demonstrates that poverty creates barriers to access, including health services, healthy food, and other necessities that contribute to poor health status.

B. Lack of Transportation:

In 2019, OCO was forced to reduce our public bus routes from 14 to 6 routes, due to a loss in funding, thereby stranding individuals who were reliant on these daily runs and compounding the challenge of transportation in a rural county.

Again in 2020, during the pandemic, Public Transit services were shut down for many months, interfering with OCO's ability to connect people to necessary in-person services and removing, what for some individuals, is their only method of transportation. Although we were able to slowly bring back some of our public bus routes and utilize our On-Demand transit services to help with the transportation needs for individuals & families to access essential services, we are still dealing with an overall reduction of 46% of our On-Demand routes, due to the utilization rates being much lower during the pandemic.

Additionally, workforce shortages within OCO Transportation Services since the start of the pandemic have interfered with continuity of service and caused occasional shutdowns of individual bus routes, creating a hardship for individuals & families who relied on public transit for work, health, shopping & social connections.

C. Services for Youth disrupted:

Much of OCO's youth programming is tied to school districts. With the mandatory school shutdowns due to COVID, along with contracting challenges with funding, limited delivery of such services as Afterschool, Community School, Drop-in programs for youth, Youth Health Outreach, LGBTQ+ services, health, and domestic violence / safety education in the classroom.

D. Inadequate Mental Health & Substance Abuse services:

Focus Groups and survey results from OCO's 2021 Community Needs Assessment ranked mental health & substance abuse services among the top 5 needs. Federal & state data support the premise that existing services are inadequate. Mental health providers generally have a waiting list of 3 – 6 mo. for new patients. DataUsa reports mental health providers in Oswego County see 677 patients per year, while OCO's client service data for 2020 show more than 1,100 individuals seeking improved mental and behavioral health. Oswego County has been designated by the federal Health Resources & Services Administration since 2002 as a high-priority Health Professional Shortage Area. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the impact of isolation and inability to receive services has had an obvious impact on the mental health of individuals who came to OCO seeking help in 2021.

E. Recruitment & Retention of OCO Employees:

The COVID-19 pandemic "great resignation" significantly impacted OCO. OCO Turnover rates of 27.9% in 2020 and 34.5% in 2021 were well above the national benchmark of 19%. The stress of COVID saw an exit of OCO employees - as employees retired or resigned to pursue higher-paying and less stressful jobs. Overtime expenses skyrocketed, staff burnout increased, and the risk of employee errors was on the rise. Changes in recruitment methods and a focus on retention incentives have increased the number of new hires in 2021 but shortages in essential direct service positions continue. In addition, 80% of the executive leadership team and one-third of the service directors are eligible to retire in the next few years.

F. COVID-19:

Adapting to the post-pandemic world requires a culture shift from crisis management to a new normal for conducting business and providing services. This means:

1. Assuring high-quality, secure, user-friendly, and adaptive technology for staff who are properly trained to use it to its fullest potential
2. Accepting and incorporating PPE, test kits, cleaning/disinfecting services and supplies, office space reconfigurations, and often burdensome reporting requirements as part of doing business
3. Assuring successful virtual and hybrid methods for recruitment of employees and clients, delivering services, conducting meetings, and communicating information
4. Absorbing the added costs associated with items 1, 2, & 3
5. Helping employees to manage a hybrid workplace

III. Shaping the 2022-2024 Strategic Plan through Data Collection & Analysis

As the 2019-2021 strategic plan drew to a close, data was also taking place in preparation for the 2022-2024 plan. Analysis of focus group and stakeholder feedback, results of surveys to diverse populations, and outcomes from the previous plan serve as the roadmap for the new 2022-2024 plan. This summary outlines OCO's strategies to meet the top needs of individuals, families, and the community:

A. Improve service through assuring agency capacity and operational excellence:

1. Universal quality assurance processes for service delivery to improve outcomes for individuals & families
2. Attract and retain talented employees through pay and benefits, leadership development opportunities, and flexible schedules
3. Implement targeted marketing that enhances OCO's public image and builds awareness of services

B. Support activities that build thriving communities:

1. Enhance partnerships and engage in community initiatives for affordable housing, expanded childcare, and employment opportunities
2. Ensure adequate referral systems are in place to connect people to services provided by our partners and work together to address gaps
3. Increase collaborative efforts to secure funding and resources for high-need and high-impact services such as mental health and substance abuse

C. Empower individuals and families to move from poverty to self-sufficiency by providing services, supports, and resources to:

1. Obtain and maintain safe, affordable housing
2. Gain affordable, quality, and flexible childcare
3. Develop skills to obtain and maintain living-wage employment
4. Develop the ability to advocate for themselves and have a voice in their community

These strategies are supported by the data:

- A. The employee turnover rate exceeded 34% in 2021, amplifying the need for augmented wages and flexible scheduling to stay competitive
- B. OCO consumers who completed surveys said that while services were easy to access, they would like our employees to be more knowledgeable about services outside their own program areas
- C. More than 1 in 5 survey respondents cited the need for affordable, safe housing as their number-one concern
- D. Stakeholder group feedback revealed the perception that community partners and local employers can do more to provide accessible and convenient job skill training and connect clients to employment
- E. Survey respondents cited lack of access to adequate, reliable transportation as a barrier to employment and healthcare; *“a taxi costs too much and vehicle ownership is out of reach,”* one survey respondent said.
- F. Focus group data revealed the need to continue initiatives that improve coordination of services within OCO and among our community partners
- G. Childcare is either unavailable or out of reach financially; one survey respondent considers *“quitting my job and staying home”* because of these challenges.

IV. Implementing the 2022-2024 Plan: What Lies Ahead

The new Strategic Management Plan distills volumes of data into three overarching categories with specific strategies to address the top priority needs:

A. Strengthen Agency through Building Organizational Capacity & Operational Excellence:
OCO advances and streamlines quality improvement processes universally for service delivery to better serve and improve outcomes for individuals and families

In order to advance and streamline quality improvement processes across our agency for more efficient and effective service delivery, we must work as a coordinated team, outside of our programmatic silos.

We will look at achieving these challenges through work in these areas:

1. Implement improvement plans in areas that have barriers and hardships
2. Increase efficiencies in targeted program areas
3. Increase collaborative efforts for gaining funding
4. Increase efforts to coordinate provision of like and similar services to reduce duplication and have the most effective services to individual and families to succeed and thrive

In the areas of building agency capacity and operational excellence, we will continue to:

1. Assure the necessary supports and resources are in place to manage increased programming
2. Increase awareness of OCO, & accessibility to OCO services
3. Implement Leadership Development program & supporting staff enrollment through sustainable funding
4. Augment employee benefits & compensation, specifically for employee retention
5. Provide and evaluate pay, longevity, flexible benefits & incentives, to further goals of employee retention and to attract new employees to OCO
6. Continue implementation and evaluation of universal agency standards of operational excellence

**B. Communities Thrive through Enhancing Partnerships & Engaging in Community Initiatives:
*OCO will enhance partnerships and engage in community initiatives in the following areas:***

1. HOUSING: *Lead or engage in initiatives that focus on developing new, safe, and affordable housing opportunities for our community*

In order to develop new, safe, and affordable housing opportunities for our community, we must work in tandem with our community partners to develop opportunities for collaboration and be unified in reaching our goals

We will look at achieving these challenges through work in these areas:

- a. Increasing our partnerships and collaborations in the community, focused on housing
- b. Developing positive relationships with key stakeholders in the community
- c. Ensuring that the voice of individuals and families in need is heard regarding affordable and safe housing as we develop new opportunities
- d. Increasing housing opportunities, specifically providing more stable and affordable housing options and more permanent supportive housing options for individuals and families with low incomes

2. CHILDCARE: *Develop enhanced collaborations and engage in initiatives which expand the availability of increased high quality, flexible, and affordable childcare options for families in need*

In order to increase the amount of affordable childcare options in the community, we must work with other community partners to have streamlined goals to bring in more flexible childcare options to individuals and families in need.

We will look at achieving these challenges through work in these areas:

- a. Increasing our partnerships and collaborations in the community, focused on childcare
- b. Developing positive relationships with key stakeholders in the community
- c. Ensuring that the voice of individuals and families in need is heard regarding flexible and affordable childcare options

3. EMPLOYMENT: *Develop and/or enhance programs, and engage in initiatives that will provide increased resources and support individuals to gain employment skills, leading to employment*

In order to increase the resources and support in the community for individuals and families to gain employment skills, leading to employment, we must work with other community partners to evaluate expansion opportunities and ensure that our goals are aligned in the area of employment.

We will look at achieving these challenges through work in these areas:

- a. Increasing our partnerships and collaborations in the community, focused on employment and employment supports and resources
- b. Developing positive relationships with key stakeholders in the community
- c. Ensuring that the voice of individuals and families in need is heard regarding employment opportunities
- d. Enhancing existing employment and workforce programs to encompass more flexible eligibility, in order to serve increased number of individuals and families

C. Service Initiatives Empower & Support Individuals and Families to be Successful and Thrive:

OCO will strengthen & engage in service initiatives which empower and support individuals and families to be successful and thrive in the following areas:

- 1. HOUSING: *OCO will support individuals and families to obtain and maintain, safe & affordable housing opportunities***
Housing – Affordable, safe, & quality housing for all
- 2. CHILDCARE: *OCO will support individuals and families to have needed resources to gain high quality, flexible, and affordable childcare options***
Childcare – affordable, flexible, and safe childcare for individuals and families in need
- 3. EMPLOYMENT: *OCO will support individuals and families to have needed resources to obtain and maintain employment***
Employment – Living wage and job creation, especially in areas where residents can use public transportation to and from work

In order to assist individuals and families to meet their basic needs of Housing, Childcare, and Employment, we will focus on these overarching areas:

1. Increasing and enhancing our strategic partnerships in the community, including in the areas of housing, childcare, and employment
2. Ensuring there are adequate referral systems in place to connect individuals and families to the valuable resources they need to succeed and thrive
3. Ensuring our individuals and families have a voice in their services
4. Educating individuals and families on supportive life skills topics that will assist them in achieving their goals, including in the areas of housing, childcare, and employment
5. Providing the most effective services we can by ensuring coordination of services across the agency
6. Advocating and leveraging our collective voice of partnerships and collaboratives to maintain existing resources and secure additional supports to serve our constituents and our communities
7. Increasing awareness of services to enhance OCO's public image and awareness through marketing and measure impact on target populations

V. Conclusion

The needs and challenges surrounding the multi-layered barriers to self-sufficiency and success imposed by poverty remain consistent as OCO transitions from 2019-2021 to 2022-2024. Lack of affordable housing, insufficient mental health & substance abuse resources, lack of transportation options, growing needs for job and life skill development are not new.

The unforeseen influence of the COVID-19 pandemic is new, however, and it has permeated every aspect of this organization, from burdensome recordkeeping and reporting requirements to unparalleled staffing shortages; from reductions in services that clients depend on, to employee burnout from working months without a break. And it is not going away anytime soon.

Successfully addressing these challenges requires a long-term commitment to strengthening OCO's capacity, building thriving communities, and empowering individuals and families to break the barriers of poverty and embrace successful, productive lives. The strategic goals are concrete, time sensitive, measurable and, most important of all, achievable over time.

If the last strategic plan cycle taught us anything, it is that OCO is resilient and responsive in the midst of unprecedented and unforeseen circumstances – thanks in large part to commitment of our employees to OCO's mission and adherence to strategies that successfully help people, support communities, and change lives.

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