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Year of insights guide newly-formed United Way of Mid Rural New York into 2024



Staff and volunteers of the United Way of Mid Rural New York stand next to the fundraising thermometer outside NBT Bank in Norwich. The organization set a \$600,000 fundraising goal in 2023 to fund nonprofit entities in Chenango, Madison, Otsego, and Delaware counties. (Photo from United Way of Mid Rural New York)

SHAWN MAGRATH
EVENING SUN

NORWICH — It's been three years since Chenango County United Way Executive Director

Elizabeth Monaco set out to form a blueprint with neighboring United Way agencies that would merge three concurrently operating agencies into one. In 2023, details of the merger were sewn up as the Chenango

United Way, Madison County United Way, and the United Way of Otsego and Delaware counties became one single entity, dubbed the United Way of Mid Rural New York. Now, with one agency over-

seeing United Way efforts across four separate counties, Monaco and her team of two full-time employees are ironing out the details concerning

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Building the future: Achieve completes multi-million dollar facility project



Achieve CEO Amy Howard giving Congressman Marc Molinaro a tour of their new facility, located at 96-100 East Main Street in Norwich. The facility was under renovation for the past year, and was completed in early 2024, with a ribbon cutting scheduled for April. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

SARAH GENTER
EVENING SUN

NORWICH — Achieve didn't wait for someone else to shape their future; they went out and built it themselves.

Achieve is a nonprofit organization that provides skill

advancement, inclusion, independence, and socialization to more than 2,200 individuals with developmental and other disabilities in Broome, Chenango, and Tioga Counties.

In March of 2023, the organization broke ground on the approximately \$4.6 million

project that would transform an empty warehouse into a 24,000 square-foot facility.

A year of transformation

The Norwich Achieve facility has always been located outside of city limits on Country Club Road. However, in recent years

the building has been in need of several costly repairs and accessibility features.

Achieve also owns several buildings in Norwich, one of which was a subsidiary manufacturing facility known as CWS Plant 5, located at 96-100

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The Page Seed Company, located in Greene, NY, has expanded their production space by utilizing a previous storage area. The construction is a five year project and will offer new jobs with more machinery and equipment which will increase employment opportunities. (Photo by Kelli Miller)

Business SPOTLIGHT

Page Seed Company

KELLI MILLER
EVENING SUN

GREENE — The Page Seed Co. has been thriving since 1896 when it was first founded in Greene, NY at 1 Greene Street and just like their seeds; they continue to grow.

Vice President of Operations Kathy Granger said during the pandemic, with millions of people at home, many took up gardening at home and in result, there was a large increase in demand for seeds. Adding that to our package retail distribution sales, advertising specialties, and also contract packaging, the company continues to prosper.

"The building expansion will offer new jobs with more machinery, more equipment and more positions, which is good for other local businesses in town, and is always good for the entire community," Granger said.

"We're expanding the existing building by using a previous storage area that had unfinished flooring," she said. "MBI contractors provided footers and poured the new foundation but being this is a five year project, the electric and walls will be construction phase two."

"We're finished for now but do hope to get it done earlier than the five year projection," said Granger.

She said the company currently employs about 30 people and they are looking to hire additional employees.

The Page Seed Company was founded by Erford and Cornelia Page in 1896, in Greene. The couple started out selling sweet pea and nasturtium seeds over a century ago and now the business has grown to offer an abundant variety of choices ranging from flowers and vegetables to herbs and organics. In the fall of 2007, Lawrence and Jana Hough became the new owners.

According to the Page Seed website, currently, their best-selling seed products are traditional garden varieties such as beans, corn, peas, carrots, radish and sunflowers. They offer the highest quality seeds possible and they do not offer any retail or custom imprinted packets that are genetically engineered.

Their inventory also includes turf seed and forages as well as seed in bulk with packages ranging from one to 50 pounds.

To learn more about Page Seed Company, visit their website at pageseed.com.

Year of insights guide newly-formed United Way of Mid Rural New York into 2024 -

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donations, allocations, and the impact it all has on the non-profit entities kept afloat by the financial support of the United Way.

“It’s been a really big year for us,” Monaco said, citing the January finalization of a merger between the Chenango and the Delaware-Otsego United Ways, and the subsequent merger with Madison County United Way in April. “We’re now a four-county United Way, but we’re operating with a business model to keep each county independent in some ways.”

The United Way of Mid Rural New York (operating with the same staff as the former United Way of Chenango County) is ensuring that the four counties it serves will keep a local identity, but their needs will be addressed independently. And while it now operates as a United Way under one umbrella, with marketing materials that combine all four counties, the organization spent most of 2023 getting into those counties to form personal connections and better understand their needs.

“Keeping dollars local is what United Way is all about,” United Way Board Chair Jennifer Telesky said in a statement when the Chenango and Delaware-Otsego United Ways merged back in 2023. “This was a key concept in the discussions held by our joint task force, and we believe this model will best serve individuals and families in our rural communities.”

Monaco has pointed to a number of similarities between

the four counties that have been identified since the merger. Each county has similar demographics, with similar services, and similar needs to boot. Most notable, she said, is the comparable populace of each county that fits the demographic known as ALICE – individuals who are asset limited, income constrained, and employed; or colloquially referred to as the “working poor.”

The ALICE demographic struggles to afford basic needs, such as child care, housing, food, transportation, and healthcare. Roughly 13 percent of Chenango County lives at or below the federal poverty level, but the percentage of those who are categorized as ALICE is much higher.

“What was really interesting that we found from getting out into the four counties is that the needs are very similar across them. The ALICE population average across all four counties is at 40 percent at or below the ALICE threshold,” said Monaco, citing transportation, substance use, child care, and housing as key priorities.

The United Way is currently compiling data for its 2023 annual report which it hopes to roll out in the spring. With new counties in the mix, Monaco said it’s taking more time than usual to sift through all the numbers.

Yet despite not having finalized figures of an annual report, Monaco said she and her team already know where the data will fall. The United Way has requested six-month reports from the agencies that receive its help. Last June’s numbers



The New York Central Mutual Foundation offered a \$50,000 donation to the United Way of Delaware and Otsego Counties in 2023 in support of its mission to improve the quality of life for local residents in the areas of income, education, and health. (Photo from United Way of Mid Rural New York)

were a reflection that everything seemed on track at the time, and the organization doesn’t expect any surprises when numbers are crunched for the last two quarters of the year.

What does raise somewhat of a red flag, said Monaco, is the unequal campaign donations between the four counties served by the United Way of Mid Rural New York. Donations in Chenango County outpaced contributions from Madison, Otsego, and Delaware counties while needs across those four counties were comparable.

“We have a lot of room for

growth in fundraising in other counties,” said Monaco, adding that the topic could likely become a focus of the United Way’s updated strategic plan to be compiled later this year. That plan will also tackle a transitional funding application for organizations seeking financial support, and other priorities to be mapped out by Monaco and the United Way Board of Directors.

“A strategic plan will help us see if the issues we’re seeing in these communities are anything we want to concentrate more on,” she said. “We’ll be able

to ask: Is childcare or housing something we want to drill down on, or is there something else?”

A strategic plan will likewise direct the organization toward a more targeted approach to fundraising. Hopes are to work with more businesses and other organizations in Madison, Otsego, and Delaware counties in 2024 in an effort to bolster United Way contributions from local employees.

“We really need to raise more money if we’re going to these need areas. And those other communities are raising much

less than they could be,” Monaco said. “We plan on focusing on companies that don’t participate in the United Way campaign and look to strengthen community donations too.”

As the year rolls on, the United Way of Mid Rural New York intends to count their successes and handle challenges as they come.

“I’m excited that we’ve merged, and there’s a lot of opportunity,” Monaco said. “The community has shown its support so far, so we’re excited to see what happens next.”

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Business SPOTLIGHT Professional Teleconcepts

SOPHIA ROOT
EVENING SUN

NORWICH – Professional Teleconcepts, LLC. (Pro-Tel) was founded in Norwich in 1984.

Pro-Tel provides engineering, furnishing, and installation services as well as staffing solutions to the telecommunications market. Pro-Tel’s customer list includes regional wireline and wireless carriers, local and regional telecom companies, and OEMs.

Pro-Tel was founded by Norwich natives Will Ryan and Harold Jenkins and owned by them until 2000 when they sold Pro-Tel with the help of partner Eric Burrell.

Today, Pro-Tel is owned by Dycom Industries, a publicly traded company (NYSE: DY), but has continued to be locally operated and managed, first by Eric Burrell until September 2023 and now Tim Ryan, who currently lives in Norwich along with his wife Danielle and his four children.

Ryan stated, “Many people in Norwich may not know what

we do at Pro-Tel since we don’t sell products or our services to the general public but may have seen our many trucks driving through town.”

Pro-Tel has been headquartered in Norwich for almost 40 years and Ryan said he is “proud that Pro-Tel has employed hundreds if not thousands of people through central New York over the years.”

Pro-Tel provides engineering and construction services to the nation’s largest wireless and wireline providers. “We make technology work; we are the guys and gals turning the wrench” Ryan said. He claims that the work they do helps connect people and is proud that Pro-Tel can be the ones to bring a cell tower to an area with no reception.

Pro-Tel has engineered over 8000 projects, Installed or Upgraded over 600 Cell Sites and turned-up more than 1500 small cell sites.

Pro-Tel’s most important resources are their people. Both Norwich and Chenango County are full of hard-working men and women.

According to Ryan, “We are proud to have many of them working at Pro-Tel. Our technicians, engineers, and managers

in the field every day are what makes Pro-Tel so successful.”

“I can’t imagine living anywhere else, Norwich is where I grew up and is where me and my wife have decided to raise our kids. Norwich offers a fantastic support network of friends and family that always rally in times of need,” Ryan said.

The company encourages community participation by: “making giving back fun” and selecting community projects that are personal to the employees at Pro-Tel. They regularly participate by sponsoring a Gus Maker team and provide annual college scholarships to two Norwich High School graduates going to school for engineering. Additionally, they donated 10 food dehydrators to the Children’s place for a food experiment and participated in the Parade of Lights for the first-time last year Pro-Tel had such a good time and they are looking forward to registering for this year.

The company is open 8-5 p.m. daily and is currently hiring in their wireless division. Ryan said, “If you ever had dreams of climbing a cell tower 200 feet in the air you should apply now.” Applications can be submitted at their website: www.pro-tel.com or find them on LinkedIn, Instagram, or Facebook.

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Building the future: Achieve completes multi-million dollar facility project -

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East Main Street in Norwich. The facility closed its doors in late 2021, and since then Achieve Vice President of Development and Relations Preston Evans said the facility has been mostly vacant.

In an effort to utilize the space, improve programming, and further integrate with the community, Achieve's Board of Directors voted in February 2023 to move their day habilitation facility from their current location down to the former CWS plant.

A ground breaking ceremony for the "New Beginnings in Norwich" project was held in March to mark the start of the project that would transform the former plant into a sprawling facility with several rooms and spaces to aid Achieve in providing day services, skills and job training, community integration, and more.

"Today's ground breaking is a culmination of over a year of work to repurpose CWS Packaging, and relocate our services to this downtown Norwich area, raising the agency's visibility, providing greater opportunities for you to work and participate in your community," said Achieve Board of Directors President David Chambers during the ceremony. "There are exciting things on the horizon for this community, and there are opportunities associated with this project that will only continue to increase Achieve's presence in active ways."

Evans said the downtown location is a major benefit, as it

makes Achieve and their available services both more accessible and more integrated with the community.

"A big push both by the state, but also just in terms of our organization, is community integration and really being out and seen in the community, whether that's through employment, or volunteer opportunities, shopping, getting meals, whatever that might be," said Evans. "You can't break stigma without being out there and raising awareness. That's the best way to do this."

He said the Main Street facility is also located on the Chenango First Transit line, which opens up transportation options for individuals utilizing Achieve's services, as well as potential employees.

"This could be a barrier there for some people who don't drive, to either work for us or to receive services. So by having this on the transit line, we also open up employee retention and recruitment opportunities in there as well," he said.

In less than a year, Achieve was able to complete the remodel, and the organization is now working to furnish the building and create an occupancy transition plan.

"So in-house we're developing our transition plan, our occupancy plans, if you will. So getting all the furnishing, a big order for the furnishing went in," said Achieve CEO Amy Howard. "We're getting all the program spaces all kind of ready with regard to how they'll be used, and the activities, and put together a time



The remodel of CWS Plant 5 included the creation of an industrial kitchen to be used for workforce and life skills training. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

table. We've got the state in to certify the program, and we had actually several members of the fire department in two weeks ago I think to do a walk through and get acclimated and acquainted with the building."

A ribbon cutting ceremony to celebrate the completion of the project will be held on Thursday, April 25. Howard said the ceremony will be open to the public.

"We have a lot of community

supporters, businesses and individual donors, who have taken an interest and contributed to the project," she said. "We certainly want to continue to be friendly with the neighbors, so when you think of the residential houses on Griffin Street in particular, we would definitely want them to come in if they're interested in attending that event."

The newly remodeled facility features a litany of rooms and spaces where Achieve can continue to provide the great services and supports they always have, while also implementing plenty of new ones.

Facility features

Although there were office spaces in the front of the building Achieve opted to keep, the rest of the space was a blank canvas for the organization to build exactly what they needed.

Howard said a goal when they were designing the space was the keep areas open and bright, which creates a more inviting atmosphere.

"We built them light and bright, and where you would want to be or have your loved one want to be if he or she were receiving support from the agency," she said.

Evans said Achieve's day habilitation program is the primary program that will reap the benefits of the new facility. The remodel included nine "core rooms," which are similar

to classrooms, to be used for a variety of programming for the day hab program.

Howard said the rooms will be activity-based, with a concept associated to each one, such as art or theatre. In fact, Achieve will be hosting an art show on Valentine's Day, February 14, in one of their core rooms.

Achieve also hopes to expand their respite program to the East Main Street location as well, which would both give caregivers a break, as well as further integrate Achieve with the community.

"We have the model already in place down here in Broome County. We want to bring it up there and launch that as new programming as well," Evans explained. "The real goal there, if the respite program launches, is to make it available for non-disabled adults as well. So again, furthering that community integration."

Howard also emphasized the organization's focus on workforce training and occupational preparation for individuals with disabilities, which they will help foster through the construction of kitchens for a culinary arts program, and a cafe that will be open to the public.

"We are looking forward to giving people the opportunity in the day hab programming as well to kind of explore and practice vocational skills so that they can discover what it

is that they want to move on to," said Achieve Vice President of Community Based Services Catina Sutton. "Our dream is to educate them on what it is to be employed. Some of them don't know that they have that option or that we do customized employment."

During a tour of the facility in December, Congressman Marc Molinaro said the kitchens and training opportunities wouldn't just prepare individuals for the workforce, but also teach them valuable life skills that will help them live independently.

"A lot of individuals with intellectual, physical, and developmental disabilities don't have repetitive or even the access to some of these skills at home or, sadly, through school," he said. "Even to live with support in a residence, they may not know how to do laundry or don't repeat it often enough to do it."

"These are life skills that they just don't get otherwise."

Howard said they will also be working with local employers to determine workforce needs and find employment opportunities.

"This site also provides opportunities for the future. By partnering with local businesses and other entrepreneurs for employment opportunities, we're going to be able to assess needs, explore training options, and support these wonderful

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Building the future: Achieve completes multi-million dollar facility project -

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individuals that we serve to find their next best employment opportunity in the community, and employers [and] businesses to find their next best employee," she said.

One of the larger features of the new facility is the approximately 2,500 square foot, 200-capacity community center, which will be open for public use.

"This is a community center that we have built in here that's going to be open to all the community to use. We've looked at individuals, people who are disabled and non-disabled, to work at it and be able to invite the community in, serve food, all that kind of thing," said Howard. "So Rotary, community groups, NBT Bank if they need a meeting space, whoever. They can come in, we'll have this social area out here."

"It's really a building that's intended to support and serve the individuals in our programs, but it's also intended to be used by the community. We want to be an inclusive environment, people with disabilities and people without disabilities that are using the facility."

Also included in the building remodel was a Hoyer Lift system, which will assist with moving visitors with mobility or ambulatory issues to differ-

ent rooms; a nursing station; and a clinical services space.

Community partnership

With community integration as one of Achieve's goals with the new space, it's no surprise they've utilized partnerships with other organizations to learn about the area's needs and develop potential programs and services to better fit the needs of the community.

Two major goals for Achieve and community leaders is to add a senior center and daycare center to the facility in the future.

"If the seniors need help, there's no place for them," said Commerce Chenango President and CEO Sal Testani. "There's no place for them to go to socialize and interact."

The Place Executive Director Sharon Vesely shared the need for daycare services in the county, and the impact a daycare center at the new Achieve facility could have. She said the center they have planned could care for up to 56 children and employ 10 to 17 staff members.

In addition to the daycare center, Howard and Vesely would also like to construct an inclusive playground for children with and without disabilities.

"We want the playground area for the children in the daycare to be an inclusive playground for children with disabilities and without disabilities," said Howard. "Ideally we could have a few slots for children with disabilities for after-school services."

Achieve already has shovel-ready plans for the center, and 5,000 square feet of the building reserved, but need an estimated \$2.1 million for the center and an additional \$100,000 for the playground. Howard said it will be up to The Place to come up with funding



Congressman Marc Molinaro speaking with Commerce Chenango President and CEO Sal Testani and The Place Executive Director Sharon Vesely about the possibility of including a daycare center and playground at the new Achieve facility. (Photo by Sarah Genter)

for the childcare center, but she's confident it will be accomplished.

"I'm optimistic that one way or another we're going to place some expanded childcare into the building as well," she said. "We're very committed to doing our part to give back to the community, and I'm really hoping that we'll be able to get that project off the ground and help The Place be able to expand their services."

While these additions will be in the future, Achieve is ready now to begin making a difference in the lives of those with developmental disabilities and their families. Howard said

the project would not have been possible without the tremendous amount of support from the community.

Not only has Achieve partnered with local organizations such as The Place and Commerce Chenango to explore programs and resources, they were also able to complete the \$4.6 million project without any financing thanks to community supporters.

The organization has utilized reserves from previous property sales and grant funding from national foundations, such as the Mother Cabrini Foundation, to pay for a portion of the project, and they're currently wait-

ing to hear back on a \$250,000 grant request from the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (OPWDD).

However, much of project was also covered by grant support and donations from local organizations. Supporters included the Higley Foundation, the Mirabito Foundation, the RC Smith Foundation, NBT Bank, Mirabito Energy, NYCM Insurance, Golden Artist Colors, and many more. The Achieve Foundation also contributed \$500,000 to the project.

"The list goes on and on of corporations and businesses from the community that have

stood behind this project," said Howard.

"I think that's the amazing aspect of this story," she added. "The whole community has come together to partner with Achieve, this nonprofit, to be able to grow and expand supports and services for individuals with disabilities, but also to expand opportunities for neurotypical community members, for the broader community. I think that is just a beautiful story."

For more information on Achieve, visit AchieveNY.org or the [ACHIEVE](https://www.facebook.com/ACHIEVE) Facebook page.

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