

# Narratives

## Executive Summary

The Chenango County Retired & Senior Volunteer Program is sponsored by Opportunities for Chenango, Inc. An estimated 332 volunteers will serve in various focus areas during this three year funding cycle. The primary focus area of this project will be in the Healthy Futures focus area. Some of the activities the RSVP volunteers will be involved in are: 1. the Friendship Project which provides home-bound seniors with socialization so that they feel a part of their community, 2. working at area food banks, which help replace food insecurity with food security and, 3. Meals on Wheels which delivers nutritious meals to seniors who are shut in or recovering from an injury or illness, helping to keep them healthy and able to live on their own. There will be respite for caregivers, disaster planning and responses to disasters both local and regional, as well as enabling area nonprofits to carry on their good work by building their capacity to fulfill their missions. The CNCS federal investment of \$30,696 will be supplemented by \$18,838 in local support.

## Strengthening Communities

Chenango County RSVP enlists the services of 332 volunteers across 39 separate volunteer stations to help address the needs of citizens in the county. The majority of these services fall in the Healthy Futures service area. The program has been active in Chenango County since 1995 and has been sponsored since that time by Opportunities for Chenango, Inc. (OFC). OFC is the county's resident Community Action Agency and has been in continuous operation since it was established in 1974 as part of President Johnson's War on Poverty. Chenango County RSVP serves the residents of Chenango County solely. The amount being requested from CNCS is \$30,696. The remaining non-federal program funding is \$18,549 at the current level.

Chenango County, a rural county located in upstate New York, is 894 square miles and has 23 townships. In 2010 the US Census Bureau estimated there were an average of 57 persons per square mile here as opposed to 411 for the rest of the state. Because this is a mostly rural county there are severely limited public transportation options. In addition it is at least 21 miles from the center of the county to the outer reaches of the county border, which makes the use of taxis prohibitive. In 2013 an assessment revealed that over 95% of Chenango County residents speak only English at home. The population consists of 96.9% as White, 2.1% Hispanic, .9% African American, .5% Asian, and .4% American Indian. The median household income in 2012 was estimated to be \$44,127 (a decrease from the 2010 figure), compared to \$57,863 for New York State as a whole. The cost of living index however is high for a rural community, 96.4%, which further exacerbates the lower income. 86.6% of

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the population graduated high school but only 16.8% pursued a degree beyond their secondary education. For comparison, in New York City 32.8% of the population has acquired at least a bachelor's. Food stamp usage in Chenango County is measured at 14% of the population / 24% of all children in the county. Once again by comparison, the borough of Queens has 11% of their population using food stamps and only 21% of all the children in the borough.

US Census data reflects that from 2010 to 2013 the total population in Chenango County decreased by 1.9%. However, the percentage of seniors 65 years of age and older has increased from 16.6% in 2010 to 18.4% in 2013. The 2013 Chenango County Community Health Assessment revealed that the median age in the county as of 2000 was 38.4 years of age. Currently it is 42.9. Another statistic the county assessment pointed out was that the percentage of county residents between the ages of 25 and 64 has decreased 9.2% since 2000 while the percentage of the population 65 and older has increased 9% in the same timeframe.

In relation to the total county-wide population of 49,503 the percentage of males to females is even at roughly 50%. The percentage of males to females in the age ranges of 25 -- 54 is equal as well; 39.4 % to 39.6% respectively. Above the 55 age bracket the percentages becomes disproportionate. In the age groups 55 years and above males account for only 28.9% of the age group population, compared to 41.3% for the females. This trend is reflected in the volunteer base as well, female volunteers outnumber their male counterparts at a rate of almost three to one. Chenango County has struggled for many years to maintain an economic equilibrium like many other smaller previously agrarian communities. At one point in its history Chenango County was home to a number of large manufacturing firms but that time has passed. Current census data indicates the percentage of citizens living at or below the poverty line is at 14.6%, only slightly better than the 2013 state wide average of 14.9. The US Department of Labor estimates the current unemployment rate in Chenango County is 7.1%, compared to a state wide rate of 6.6% and a national average of 6.8%. The number of families being served by county food pantries is up over 9% with 22,000 in 2012 and 23,700 in 2013. In previous years this has been a duplicated number. Starting with the 2015 application the prediction for the number of families served through RSVP volunteer efforts will be unduplicated.

Area thrift stores have also reported greater numbers of customers seeking help in stretching their household budgets by taking advantage of the no and low-cost items provided there. A 2013 community needs assessment conducted by Opportunities for Chenango found that more than one-third of the people surveyed (37%) had been forced to choose between purchasing essential food or paying a basic needs bill. The thrift stores rely heavily on RSVP volunteers to make it possible for

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them to serve their communities and the citizens who count on them. Without the capacity building aspect of RSVP volunteers these organizations would not be able to offer the level of services their clients need.

The service activities that will be performed by RSVP volunteers during this funding cycle will be concentrated primarily in the Healthy Futures focus area and will focus on independent living/aging in place, food security, non-emergency medical transportation, disaster preparedness and response, blood drives, respite care, quality of life for veterans, and capacity building to address community priorities. There are other volunteer activities that will track across focus areas other than the primary one.

There will also be activity in the Veterans and Military Families Focus Area. The US Census reports there are 4,253 veterans residing in Chenango County. RSVP interacts with them through three main activities: 1. volunteers working at the Veterans Home, who perform such services as transporting veterans to physical therapy, special interest classes, and on excursions outside the facility, as well as one-on-one time spent talking, playing games with, or reading to, the veterans, 2. a volunteer van driver specifically for veterans with the Disabled American Veterans agency and, 3. as drivers for the RSVP medical transportation program which enables some veterans to continue living independently by transporting them to non-emergency medical appointments.

Another focus area which will see volunteer activity is Disaster Services through the American Red Cross and local volunteer fire departments. American Red Cross utilizes RSVP volunteers as members of their disaster preparedness and planning services. RSVP volunteers serve by being on emergency stand-by call, disaster preparedness training, and when they are deployed to disaster areas. Volunteers will staff blood drives in the registration and canteen service areas, crucial elements to any successful effort to maintain the emergency blood supply.

The progress of all these activities will be tracked throughout the funding cycle by means of program and client surveys, annual evaluations, quarterly reports, conversations with stations, and hourly log records. RSVP is required to report out on a semi-annual basis to the Chenango United Way, partial funder of the medical transportation program, as well as to OFC for its New York State Community Services Block Grant (CSGB) reporting. RSVP must report goal based program activity to CSBG on a quarterly basis, even though it does not now nor has it ever received CSBG funding from the state of New York.

### **Recruitment and Development**

The continuing influx of new volunteers into any volunteer-driven nonprofit organization is essential

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for program survival and Chenango County's RSVP is no exception. Over the years a number of different strategies have been utilized, from placing posters in prominent locations in each of the 4 major communities, running ads in the local newspaper and "Penny-Saver", and staff presentations of RSVP to civic groups like the Rotary and at agency health fairs and retirement events. The only method that works consistently is word-of-mouth but this is as expected in a small, rural county. In 2012 60% of all new volunteers were recruited through private exchanges between individuals. Last year, 2013, that figure was 54%. Although the level of Chenango County media coverage available is decided at news headquarters located outside the county RSVP continues to have a good working relationship with our local media and can count on several pinpointed good feature articles each year. In addition to the usual intergenerational programs such as helping in the schools or with the local scout programs, RSVP is working with a station that is developing an after-school program which matches high school students who demonstrate an interest in how items were made in past history with volunteers who have those proficiencies. The Chenango County Historical Museum has an after school program for those students interested in learning a variety of skills, such as how to build radios, quilt, churn butter, or work a loom, for example. Other opportunities for intergenerational service programs continue to be available to interested volunteers, such as in schools and after-school programs, as well as the Boy and Girl Scouts. Linking different age groups through coordinated planning efforts provides RSVP with added community awareness utilizing an avenue not normally available.

By the end of the current funding cycle in March of 2015, Chenango County RSVP will have successfully completed two three-year funding cycles of consistently increasing scrutiny concerning the type of volunteer activities and the scope of their service to the community. The majority of activities in all those previous cycles have primarily been in the Healthy Futures focus area. Whereas in previous iterations funding criteria has allowed certain activities to be included in this focus area, current criteria mandate that those activities be moved to Capacity Building. During those funding cycles both the activities remaining and the activities being moved successfully produced not only outputs but acceptable outcomes in the Healthy Futures category.

By the end of this application's grant cycle there will be no less than 301 total unduplicated volunteers on the Chenango County RSVP roster. Of those 301, there will be no less than 76 unduplicated volunteers dedicated to producing outcomes in the Healthy Futures primary focus area. In Healthy Futures volunteers will be distributed among the four major objectives: Aging in Place, Aging in Place-Respite, Access to Care, and Obesity & food. There will also be unduplicated volunteers involved in

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activities in the focus areas of Disaster Services - Assistance Provided, and Veterans & Military Families - Veterans & Military Families Served. In addition, there will be no less than 31 of those unduplicated volunteers dispersed among the aforementioned primary focus areas with performance measures that have outcomes attached.

Volunteer retention efforts consist of frequent personal contact such as telephone calls and in person visits, sending personal cards when needed, as well as recognizing volunteers in the media. New volunteers are contacted soon after their placement to see how the placement is progressing. Once a year, most recently in October, active volunteers are recognized at an awards and recognition breakfast. This is and has been a consistently well attended event. In August every year the county fair recognizes seniors with Senior Day at the Chenango County Fair. Seniors are given free admission and the Senior Day Committee recruits a slate of exhibitors of interest to seniors and plans games, door prizes, and entertainment as well as staffing a booth. RSVP is one of the founding members of the committee that plans Senior Day each year in conjunction with community and RSVP volunteers, Area Agency on Aging, and a representative from Chenango County government. New volunteers are officially welcomed in each quarterly newsletter and also in the edition containing their birthday. Educational information is included in the newsletter as well, covering topics such as exercise and preventing identity theft. Each edition also contains a revolving list of current volunteer opportunities along with a brief description of the position. This publication also serves as a vehicle to attract new volunteers through one-to-one and group recruitment efforts.

Leadership opportunities for new and existing RSVP volunteers are incumbent in some volunteer jobs. For example, the Ombudsman program administered by the county Area Agency on Aging (AAoA) office trains volunteers to be advocates for patients at long term care facilities and nursing homes throughout the county. The volunteer in this position becomes an advocate protecting the interests of the seniors in those facilities. The volunteers who run the Bone Builders exercise groups become leaders in the fight to maintain and attempt to improve the battle against osteoporosis in the seniors who take the classes. The American Red Cross relies heavily on volunteers taking a leadership role in their disaster preparedness, fire response, and blood services. In other positions leadership opportunities arise from time to time. The most common instance is in stations that rely heavily on assigned volunteers for their operation. The Greene Clothing Bank, Our Daily Bread food pantry and the Common Cents Thrift Store are all managed by a volunteer board, and staffed completely with volunteers. Leadership opportunities for existing volunteers become available when long term volunteers relinquish their supervisory positions and recruit other faithful volunteers to assume their

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position.

RSVP has been an established program in the county since 1995. RSVP volunteers come from all over the county and as such the program is viewed as covering the whole county. In addition RSVP has worked to increase its visibility in neighborhoods in the more remote areas of the county, such as New Berlin in the east, the northeastern town of Otselic, the northern town of Sherburne, and the southeastern town of Mt. Upton. In these areas a smaller percentage of current volunteers reside; therefore word of mouth growth is more difficult and actual presence goes a long way in recruiting. Development of new volunteer stations is continuously being explored. However, in order to be consistent with the new funding paradigm potential stations must undergo closer scrutiny in order to ensure that the anticipated activities being performed by the new volunteers will fall within the parameters of one of the six focus areas.

As future growth is assessed, focus will continue to be placed on that group of individuals closer to and just over age 55 in an effort to interest them in volunteering. There is a change coming in the profile of the typical volunteer. The current Chenango County volunteer is most likely female, 74 years of age, widowed, drives just enough to get to the market and to church on Sundays but rarely out of town and never during the winter. The current volunteer prefers to work where her friends are working and then only at jobs she feels comfortable doing. She does not have a computer or an email address.

Over the next five years and into the future the face of the new RSVP volunteer will look dramatically different. Many potential volunteers currently in the 55+ cohort have expressed an interest in doing something but not "a regularly scheduled something". The seniors currently in this age group are much more adroit with the internet and social media forms of communication than their predecessors and the ones that follow them will be even more so. This change will make overall solicitation and job canvassing much easier and less expensive; both in time and in postage. It will be a challenge to get this group interested in volunteer activities that align with the six focus areas. However, if those volunteer opportunities can initially be more short term in nature there will be a greater chance of building a bigger buy-in among volunteers in the new service environment.

### Program Management

The relationship between RSVP, the volunteers, and the stations where they work is only as viable as the lines of communication. Regular contact during the year between the stations and RSVP helps to keep those lines of communication open. The number of contacts per year should be at least two and hopefully more as time and resources permit. In any circumstance one of those contacts must be a

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face-to-face. Chenango County is a small and very rural county and as such the personal touch is essential to building and maintaining relationships. With regular routine contact issues can be dealt with in a timely matter before they escalate. Sometimes issues can arise between contacts. If the relationship is solid the station feels empowered to initiate contact with RSVP as soon as issues develop. Together RSVP, the volunteer, and the station attempt to resolve the issue to the satisfaction of the station and volunteer. Sometimes the solution may be training the volunteer to do another job. Sometimes the only solution is finding another volunteer opportunity.

Whenever a new station is added to the RSVP roster the project director sits down with the requesting agency and prospective station supervisor and together they develop a job description for each job for which volunteers are being sought. At that time the RSVP staff discusses with the new supervisor the concept of prohibited activities and gives specific examples as illustrations. The supervisor is then instructed to contact RSVP staff if an issue surfaces and the question of prohibited activity arises.

Developing volunteer stations and overseeing volunteer assignments at those stations is the responsibility of the project director. The director meets with interested programs and determines if the program fits in the new CNCS funding paradigm. If it does and there is a need that RSVP volunteers can address then the RSVP director, the station manager, and the volunteer supervisor discuss the nature and parameters of the job(s) and the training process. It is explained to the station manager that performance measures will be conducted to ensure that the station and volunteers are meeting the proposed outcomes. The station manager agrees to train the volunteers for agency specific activities. The result of that discussion is a job description and a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) to be signed by the new station and RSVP. RSVP then starts the volunteer recruitment process which includes reviewing the skill sets and aptitudes of current volunteers and approaching likely candidates with the new opportunity, as well as starting to canvass for new volunteers. RSVP conducts routine follow ups with the new station and the new volunteers, to develop the relationship with the station and to gauge the quality of the experience for the volunteer. These interactions help to remind the station of the need to turn in their paperwork in a timely manner, as well as improve retention efforts with the volunteers.

These relationships produce benefits for all involved participants. The stations receive the volunteer help they so desperately need to support their efforts in service to their mission. Volunteers receive the priceless intangible attributes that come from feeling needed, staying active, maintaining their social connections, and feeling the pride of having offered a service that is valued by others in their community. Unfortunately, it is this pride of service to one's community that is most at risk of injury

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during this period of changing national funding priorities. This priority change predetermines that some current stations will fall outside of the confines of the six focus areas and beyond the reach of the maximum allowable percentages. There are most likely two stations that will have to be graduated. This RSVP has already started having informal preliminary conversations with members of one of the two stations in an attempt to assay the likelihood of reassignment.

The primary difficulty that has emerged from these initial meetings is volunteers feel this action is an attack on the nature of their own worthiness. The point that there are other volunteer opportunities that would benefit from their involvement does not assuage their feelings. The point that this move in no way altered their ability to volunteer did not matter. The message they hear is RSVP no longer values their contribution. The fact that their primary alliance is to the organization and not to RSVP was irrelevant.

The secondary difficulty and one that is almost inseparable from the primary one is their definition of need. There is a very real sense of community here and a genuine willingness to be of service to the common good. However, the bellwether of need for these volunteers does not lead to a point that lies within the outer markers of the new paradigm. This is a rural county, both in its makeup and in its outlook. People listen to the opinions of people they know and with whom they share a common point of reference. The membership of these two stations will be vocal and the vocalization will not be supportive. Still, the effort to mitigate this eventuality must be undertaken in the service of another greater good and the best way to do that is face to face.

Over the next six to nine months RSVP will set up meetings with the two earmarked stations. Following those preliminary conversations meetings will be set up with the RSVP volunteers themselves. The plan is to arrange the meetings at regular station gatherings so the largest possible number of volunteers hear the message at the same time. There is one aspect to this endeavor that is in our favor. The 334 volunteers currently active in the Chenango County RSVP hold 1,723 placements. Granted, a lot of those placements represent only a small portion of any given volunteer's total time but that does not negate the fact that there is a substantial amount of volunteer "cross-over". Allies will be sought out and their help solicited in spreading the word that this change is not an end but a chance at a new beginning, an opportunity to energize volunteers by bringing a new focus to their efforts in addressing the greatest needs in the county.

Program assessment is accomplished in a number of ways. One way is through informal conversations with the station during the annual check-ins, at least one of which is face to face. During this face-to-face meeting the station's job descriptions and training procedures will be

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reviewed. The station will be also given the opportunity to evaluate RSVP and RSVP volunteers and to discuss how the partnership is working for them and how the program could be improved.

Other assessments are more formal in nature. For example, surveys are distributed to a sampling of food pantries and thrift stores each year. The purpose of the survey is to evaluate the extent to which the programs are meeting the needs of the clients they serve. Each year an assessment of the RSVP program is conducted by either the Advisory Committee or by a sampling of the volunteers. The purpose of the alternation is to get fresh eyes on the program and to judge its continued effectiveness in mobilizing seniors to address community needs. Quarterly Community Service Block Grant (CSBG) reports to New York State, semi-annual reports to Chenango Unite Way and annual progress reports to the Corporation are additional methods by which program productivity is evaluated.

The Advisory Committee is currently in the process of being rebuilt. Over the past year 60% of the council have either died, moved away, or become too infirmed to be an active participant under the new CNCS paradigm. The program faces the same challenge in finding volunteers capable of the necessary level of leadership as it does finding volunteers amenable to working within a prescribed focus area. Going forward there will be a concerted effort to recruit council members who will bring to the table specific skill sets. The RSVP Advisory Council needs to recruit volunteers with skills such as fund raising, business acumen, and strategic planning, and that have connections in education as well as government at both the local and county level.

RSVP has begun to work on a multi-agency initiative with the local Literacy Volunteers of America (LVA) program, as well as another local welfare-to-work style program "Back on the Rack" (BoTR). LVA and BoTR have been approached by a local funding source interested in developing a program which will be successful in solving the unemployment situation in the 17 to 21 demographic in Chenango County. LVA and BoTR will help RSVP recruit volunteers in the retired teacher and retired business owner communities, two segments of the population that are currently not well represented within RSVP.

The responsibility for financial oversight rests with the grant accountant that works for the sponsor OFC. Programmatic expenditures are approved in advance via a purchase order system that ties expenditures to budget line item totals. Budgets are reviewed quarterly as well as on an as-needed basis to ensure that expenses are in line with budget limitations. From time to time it is necessary to reduce expenses in one line item to cover unexpected increases in another, such as reducing printing costs to cover increases in postage. Adjustments are never made to salary or benefits line items.

### **Organizational Capability**

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Chenango County RSVP has been a sponsored program of OFC since 1995 and currently has only one paid staff position: the project director. The director is responsible for the day to day operations of the program, and is accountable for maintaining all financial, program records, and reports required by the grant funders and OFC. Record keeping and volunteer time reports, which allow RSVP to keep accurate documentation needed to track outcomes and performance measures, is also the responsibility of the program director. Volunteers have been trained to enter data into the volunteer management software, Volunteer Reporter; and the sponsor's telephone receptionist has provided intermittent clerical support as well. The current program director has been in this position since September of 2012 and brings with him 20 years' experience in nonprofit management at both the program and executive director levels. The RSVP Advisory Council provides counsel and direction. One volunteer has been trained in data entry and inputs the volunteer time sheet information into the database and has been volunteering in this position for a year and a half. This volunteer also contacts volunteers after three consecutive months without hours to determine the reason for the inactivity. This RSVP has many volunteers who relocate down south generally between November and April. Another reason for a lapse in hours is temporary illness. If the lapse is due to disinterest the director contacts the volunteer directly to find out why. If the reason is moving or death the volunteer is eliminated from the system. There are reliable volunteers who help out with mailings and the sponsor's receptionist is also available for extra assistance with clerical jobs from time to time. The program director sits on several professional committees where discussions are held surrounding community needs. One such group is the recently convened Chenango United Way Community Impact Committee on Health. The membership consists of representatives from agencies across Chenango County concerned with health: Area Agency on Aging, Chenango Memorial Hospital, Chenango County Public Health Department, YMCA, and Planned Parenthood, to name a few. The purpose of the committee is to work together to define and prioritize community needs and then to figure out what it would take to address those needs. Whereas this committee is concentrating on needs only from the point of view of health issues, other committees are formed along other lines such as education and finances. The results of those discussions are relayed to the committee as well. Information learned assists with identifying priority county-wide needs and how RSVP volunteers can help address these needs. The project director is also a member of the National Senior Association and the New York State Senior Service Corps as well.

Opportunities for Chenango, Inc. (OFC) was chartered as a Community Action Agency for Chenango County in 1974. It is the mission of OFC to support families and individuals to:

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recognize their strengths, set realistic goals, make responsible choices, and become successful, self-sufficient members of the community. The programs of OFC focus on child and family development, housing services and heating assistance, life skills training, transportation, education, literacy, support for seniors, health and nutrition, community employment, economic development and an array of many other services designed to address the economic needs of the community. As a Community Action Agency, all programs associated with this agency work toward impact-based programming to ensure that the programs are fulfilling a community need and can have an impact on the community.

OFC is a leader in the coordination, integration and delivery of life skills building. As the largest non-profit agency in Chenango County, OFC employs over 100 full time and 22 part time staff and offers volunteer options for 865, both for RSVP and others below the age limit.

OFC acts as a fiscal conduit for, and maintains financial oversight of all RSVP program dollars. Purchasing procedures, personnel management support and administrative support are provided by OFC as the sponsoring agency. These procedures are clearly defined in the agency policy and procedures manual. OFC's chief financial officer and grants accountant work closely with the RSVP director in all matters involving budgeting and review of all financial reports. OFC has in place internal controls, an active finance committee, a board of directors, and this, combined with yearly independent audits, insures fiscal responsibility, stability, and compliance with all funding guidelines and regulations.

### Other

None

### PNS Amendment (if applicable)

N/A