



THE PROMISE OF SYSTEMS INTEGRATION

Statement of  
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at the  
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ENDING HUNGER IN AMERICA:  
LOCAL INNOVATIONS TO INFORM A NATIONAL STRATEGY

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Thank you, Chairman McGovern, Ranking Member Cole, and distinguished Members of the House Committee on Rules, for hosting this panel on local innovation, and providing me with the opportunity to speak on behalf of my community and our collective, ground-breaking work. My name is Laura Gustin, and I am the Director of the Monroe County Systems Integration Project, a multi-year initiative tasked with creating a transformed, person-centered system of service delivery in New York State that connects Monroe County's health, human service, education, and public sectors.

### **The Burden of Poverty and a Misaligned “System”**

As a matter of introduction and context, Monroe County's narrative mirrors other rust belt communities. Once the booming home of corporations such as Eastman Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch & Lomb, today 15% of Monroe County residents live in poverty. The poverty rate within the city of Rochester, Monroe County's urban center, is 33% - highest in the nation among like-sized cities. Rochester also has the second-highest rate of childhood poverty in our nation at 50.5%. Sixty-eight percent of Rochester's below-poverty households are headed by women. Eighty-one percent of all poor children in the city of Rochester (21,000) live in female-headed households.

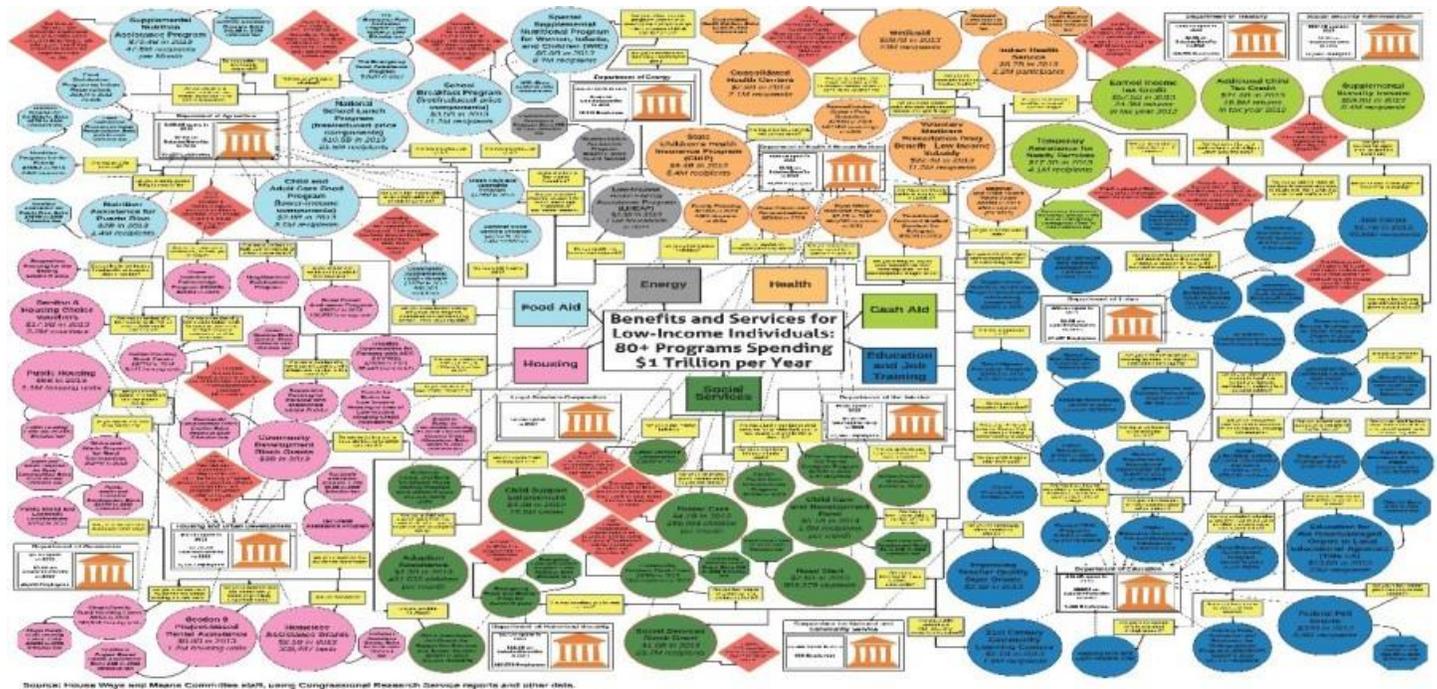
This frame of poverty is essential to the work of Systems Integration, because those with limited financial resources must navigate a complex, irrational, highly prescriptive system of federal, state, and local programs in order to receive basic supports such as food, childcare, affordable housing, adequate education, healthcare, and transportation. Every day, hundreds of individuals and families fall through the cracks, get lost in this “system”, and spin in a perpetual cycle of crisis and vulnerability. This statement is not a reflection of community commitment or expertise, but rather the constant struggle to coordinate and deliver interventions that bridge institutions and sectors. At present, the services provided to those in need are inherently siloed due to decades of isolated funding streams, sector-specific regulation, and an absence of robust digital tools or usable business intelligence that might generate systemic improvements.

In 2015, the House Committee on Ways and Means examined the service delivery system created under Federal safety-net programs (Figure 1). In the words of committee member, Congressman Charles Boustany (R-LA): *This*



system may have started out with good intentions, but it has become a confusing maze of programs that are overlapping, duplicative, poorly coordinated, and difficult to administer. I defy anyone to say this is the best way to address the human tragedy so many of our fellow citizens experience.

**Figure 1: Federal Benefits and Services for Low-Income Individuals, 2015**



**Source:** House Ways and Means Human Resources Subcommittee, November 3, 2015.

Our current system is not helping those who need it most. The impact of this broken system is well substantiated by community members. “Falling through the cracks” is a documented norm, not an exception, and many are cycling in and out poverty every five years. Our community in Monroe County is said to be program rich, but outcome poor. For those working every day to serve people in need, this was hard to hear, but it is true. For example, we have dozens of food pantries, curbside markets, and soup kitchens, as well as innovative food distribution and feeding programs, yet in many Rochester zip-codes, 40 percent of the population are food insecure and hunger persists. As abundant as the food programs in our community may be, the barriers to food stability are systematic and multi-sector. Systemic failures are demonstrated in the story of a single mother in



the city or Rochester, who takes two hours and two bus transfers to get to her “local” food pantry, an enormous burden when working two jobs and raising three children.

The reality is that no single program or service can counteract the undue burden caused by a misaligned system. Those who are vulnerable or in crisis require support that simultaneously touches multiple parts of their lives. People don’t operate in silos, and yet we serve them that way. We see situations like this far too often in our community. One example is a “high-risk” Rochester family with six care coordinators, all assigned by different providers, each acting as independent band aids over a misaligned and dysfunctional system.

### **The Model of Systems Integration**

It is with this lens that the Systems Integration Project began in 2017. At the request of Congressman Joe Morelle, over 40 local leaders from Monroe County’s health, human service, education, public, and philanthropic sectors came together to discuss the current state of disconnected services, the poor outcomes that result, and whether a single integrated solution could be both feasible and responsive to community need. Four years later, the Systems Integration Project maintains a robust collaborative, now 300 partners strong, working to implement a common vision for integrated service delivery that was developed using program piloting, community input, and a consensus framework.

The Systems Integration Project includes three core strategies: Cross-Sector Data Sharing, Integrated Service Delivery, and Human-Centered Design. First, to combat misaligned services and programs, we are connecting providers and community by implementing a unified information platform that offers a 360-degree view of an individual’s needs, as well as their interactions with the system. This digital solution, with customizable user privacy controls, will allow a parent to locate the best behavioral health services for their struggling teen, a teacher to see that her student was recently evicted, a pediatrician to know if a child’s schools attendance is becoming abnormally high, and a food pantry worker determine if a family qualifies for SNAP. This technology implementation also establishes a shared language for communicating across a diverse provider network, and a common measurement system that offers new and necessary business intelligence to sustain both integration and system improvement.





Second, in order to build an efficient, proactive, and integrated service delivery system, the Systems Integration Project is designing new, coordinated workflows that transform the way that people move between institutions and sectors. We emphasize the system fully supporting the person, instead of a person adapting to a disconnected system. Key areas of focus include common “front-door” protocols that normalize the experience of entering the system, shared processes for referral management, and journey maps that document how a person navigates the system as they transition from crisis to stable to thriving. Systems Integration is currently deploying pilots in the areas of Eviction Prevention, Youth Behavioral Health, and Employment Pathways. Learnings from each pilot are applied to a growing set of business requirements that we will then use to transform service delivery at scale.

Finally, poverty is most acutely experienced by Monroe County’s Black and Latino residents, who largely reside in urban zip-codes with long histories of racism and suppressed socio-economic opportunities. The status quo was created with little input from these communities, so it is unsurprising that system interactions are filled with mistrust, disconnects, and missed opportunities. For example, one community member recently shared his experience with a local housing provider, who offered him yet another case manager and four unsolicited referrals to additional services. While the provider had good intent, the community member left his appointment feeling like a commodity, used by system to bill for services and make the provider money.

A person-centered system must be trusted by those who use it. The user experience should be exceptional. In response, the Systems Integration Project is committed to engaging community members 10,000 times in our redesign effort. We have robust community engagement and diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies, and have established an Equity Review Board to monitor and provide input into our transformation efforts. In addition, borrowing from the private sector, the Systems Integration Project applies human-centered design to every aspect of our work, and we have just trained over 400 service providers and community members as human-centered design practitioners. As a result, the process of building a data system, developing new workflows, and documenting cross-sector journeys includes constant engagement with system-users via empathy interviews, prototyping, and piloting.





We believe that when individuals and organizations actively use the tools and resources we are creating under the Systems Integration Project:

- Individuals and families will be more empowered to advocate for their wellbeing
- Information will be shared thoughtfully and confidentially, so multi-sector care teams can better and more holistically respond to an individual's needs
- Community trends will be better identified to shape programs and services that are responsive to our local environment
- Services and programs will be more aligned and coordinated across all aspects of our community
- Investments in our community will be better spent, allowing more individuals and organizations to thrive.

### **Success Story: Eviction Prevention Through Collaboration**

The COVID-19 pandemic increased demand for health and human services throughout Monroe County, and the Systems Integration Project supported pandemic response by breaking down silos and improving collaborative workflows to better serve those in need. For example, confronted with the expiration of eviction moratoriums, and knowing that thousands of families could face homelessness, the Systems Integration Project implemented the Eviction Prevention Pilot Initiative (EPPI) in the fall of 2020, in partnership with Monroe County Department of Human Services (DHS), 211, and non-profit human service providers.

Before EPPI, the process of applying for emergency rent assistance was cumbersome, at best. Whether or not they were eligible, community residents had to first apply for services with DHS, filling out a 25-page application for public assistance. Once denied, the applicant could then take the denial-notice to one of many local human service organizations, complete organization-specific application processes, and ultimately be denied again and again until encountering a program with eligibility requirements that perfectly matched their life scenario. We learned from our work with EPPI that this DHS denial requirement was a process assumption and not actually a requirement at all. A roadblock to support was systematized!





Under EPPI, partner organizations created an intake workflow with 211 as its main point-of-entry to the eviction prevention system. Intake data collected at 211 was used to schedule an appointment with the most appropriate community-based program. Once the community member arrived at the community-based program, they worked with staff to complete a digital universal application, which was already started using the intake information collected by 211 operators. If the client was eligible for DHS services, all digital information was forwarded to DHS for follow up. Under this redesigned workflow, the eviction-prevention process was reduced from 8-10 hours to less than 30 minutes. The person-centered application process was transformative in that it removed guesswork and variability, while concurrently improving accessibility to other resources such as legal counsel, financial counseling, and basic needs.

Also, under EPPI, Systems Integration established additional neighborhood-based front-doors to eviction prevention services including churches, barbershops, and the Monroe County Hall of Justice. Staff at these front doors were trained in the universal application process, thus expanding the reach of the program. Ultimately, EPPI helped keep more renters safe from eviction, and minimized COVID-19 hardships being passed on to their landlords. Over a three-month period, all \$4.3M of the CARES Act funding dedicated to direct rent was distributed, preventing eviction for 1,900 households. Today, EPPI is in its second phase, expanding coordinated eviction-prevention services across our community, at scale. Further, based on the success of EPPI, Monroe County DHS is now partnering with the Systems Integration Project to integrate even more public services into community-based settings. As one EPPI service provider noted in the midst of implementation: *This is a small pilot... and it will be rocky the first week or two but I'm confident that this effort will grow! The folks we serve will benefit tremendously from a simpler process with just one front door. No more bouncing around from place to place wondering whether or not they can get help in time!"*

### **Recommendations for Policy Makers**

As this committee works to identify solutions to alleviate hunger, we believe there are several key learnings from the Systems Integration Project that can be addressed at the Federal-level. First and foremost, adopt a systems mindset. Identify opportunities to address broken interactions and behaviors that reside far upstream from their impact. We adamantly believe that it is impossible to simply program our way out of poverty, and we





would argue that the same holds true when combating hunger. Second, champion integration across federal departments and agencies. For example, the federal government should adopt common definitions for hunger and homelessness that can be used as providers communicate across sectors, and federal reporting systems should move towards integration, with common data dictionaries that can be mirrored by local communities. Finally, don't over-prescribe solutions from Washington. Transformation requires time, trust, and flexibility. Systems Integration is funded through 2024 with a project design that allows our community the space to be creative with flexible dollars, local expertise, robust community input, and an agile project management framework.

### **Concluding Remarks**

New York State invested in the Systems Integration Project as a pilot solution for integrated service delivery, which might be scaled to other counties and regions. Systems Integration is innovative in both concept and approach, as it offers a potential model for systemic change at scale, with a particular focus on integrated service delivery across social programs, designed with the input of community, and using digital infrastructure as a tool for connection, monitoring, and improvement. As such, the Systems Integration Project has the potential to be a cutting-edge, replicable path to improved health and wellbeing, while concurrently creating efficiency and cutting cost. Thank you again for the opportunity to share this important work, and we hope you will consider the impact and opportunities for systems transformation as you combat hunger across America.

