

THE PUBLIC GOOD

WINTER 2023

A Biannual Paper of Progress

BUFFALO, NEW YORK

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PPG, Partners File Federal Complaint on City of Buffalo American Rescue Plan Funding Process and Allocations



Pastor James E. Giles, President/CEO of Back to Basics Ministries speaks at a press conference on the City's American Rescue Plan spending.

On July 24, 2023, Partnership for the Public Good and several of our partners submitted a complaint to the US Department of the Treasury Inspector General, asking for an investigation into the allocation of federal American Rescue Plan (ARP) funds by the City of Buffalo. Our complaint was based on a growing body of evidence that this process was mismanaged and in violation of the federal procurement rules that the City was required to follow. In late July, the Administration's request to move an additional \$60 million of ARP funds to revenue replacement, without explanation, violated the spirit of and guidelines for this federal COVID recovery funding. The Common Council expressed frustration at the delayed process and the drastic reduction in community project funds, but still approved the Administration's request.

The City of Buffalo received \$330 million in federal ARP dollars to be used for COVID-19 relief and equitable recovery. Following extensive advocacy and direct negotiation with PPG and more than 25 of our partner organizations, in August 2021, the City adopted an ARP Spending Plan including project funds for water debt forgiveness, frontline arts, restorative justice and public safety, greening vacant lots, and more. Instead, this July, the Administration requested to cut these funds by more than \$60 million, without explanation

or transparency as to why this amount was needed for revenue replacement. The City's ARP spending plan included \$100 million in revenue replacement, to cover what the city had borrowed during the first year of the pandemic, to ensure no COVID-related City layoffs, and to offset COVID-related revenue loss. With an additional \$60 million moved to revenue replacement, nearly half of the City's American Rescue Plan funds will be used for general revenue replacement. The City has not provided a public answer to these key questions: What additional revenue replacement needs arose since the August 2021 approval of the American Rescue Plan spending plan by the Council, which includes \$100 million? What are the specific budget gaps that add up to a new \$60 million deficit?

In July, PPG and partners held a press conference to highlight our complaint and ongoing concerns about ARP funding. We were joined by leaders of Back to Basics, Stop the Violence Coalition, Grassroots Gardens of WNY, Frontline Arts Buffalo, the WNY Women's Foundation, and others. Pastor James Giles, President of Back to Basics Ministries, highlighted the community's anticipation of the promised funds to address violence-related issues. He emphasized the lack of information sharing, stating that community members had navigated a challenging application

American Rescue Plan Spending Plan Project Fund	Adopted, August 2021	Reduced Total, July 2023	Amount of Cut	Percent of Cut
Public Health Equity Initiative	\$9,000,000	\$1,680,150	\$7,319,850	81%
Community Food Security	\$1,500,000	\$750,000	\$750,000	50%
Wraparound Services Support for Job Training Program Enrollees	\$20,000,000	\$5,700,000	\$14,300,000	71.5%
Skills Based Job-Training	\$7,000,000	\$3,550,000	\$3,450,000	49%
Neighborhood Improvement Corps	\$9,000,000	\$1,000,000	\$8,000,000	89%
Frontline Arts Organizations Fund	\$2,500,000	\$550,000	\$1,950,000	78%
Neal Dobbins Restorative Justice and Public Safety Fund	\$6,000,000	\$2,604,658	\$3,395,342	56.5%
Community Center Renovations	\$20,000,000	\$10,000,000	\$10,000,000	50%
Smart Sewer	\$40,000,000	\$25,915,192	\$14,084,808	35%
Totals	\$115,000,000	\$51,750,000	\$63,250,000	

Source: PPG's Complaint Letter to the US Treasury Inspector General, available at www.ppgbuffalo.org.

process without receiving any updates.

As of November 1, no funding awards have been made through the application process, with organizations now waiting nearly one year for the outcome of their applications to the City's project funds. Several organizations reported highly inappropriate comments during their application interviews and subsequent conversations with City staff. Discussions on the record in Common Council, with the City's Finance Commissioner, raised similar concerns.

The City's allocation of \$331 million in American Rescue Plan dollars was described as a transformative, "once-

in-a-lifetime" opportunity to address our most urgent needs. Working with many community partners and residents, the City adopted the Spending Plan to advance the specific list of project funds above, to address poverty, safety, health inequity, etc. None of these problems have been alleviated. Yet, none of the funds have been released. Readers can call the Mayor, the Commissioner of Finance, and their Common Council members to urge them to distribute these funds to organizations doing critical work at the neighborhood level. Visit our website, and read our weekly Common Council summaries, for updates on ARP spending.

PPG Helps Partners and Residents Better Understand Buffalo Common Council Procedures

The Buffalo Common Council is the legislative branch of the City of Buffalo. The Council meets every week to discuss city matters, including resident concerns. At PPG, we want you to know how the Council works so you can feel confident making your voice heard in Council chambers. Residents and community organization leaders can advocate with the Council Members for changes that will improve our neighborhoods and city.

On July 31, 2023, PPG published a new fact sheet, “Buffalo Common Council Procedures and How You Can Get Involved,” which explains the Council’s schedule and meeting types, how residents can interact with the Council by filing and speaking on items, and how the Council can change local policy through ordinances and resolutions. It includes a sample letter to the Council and a glossary of terms residents should know when working to advance an issue or policy change through

the Council. The fact sheet was written by Sarah Wooton with contributions from Nina Raj, Orlando Dickson, and Jim Montour (Chief of Staff to the Common Council who answered our many questions and reviewed drafts of the fact sheet).



Sarah Wooton, Director of Community Research at PPG, presents during the Buffalo Common Council Procedures workshop on September 27, 2023.

On September 27, 2023, PPG hosted a public workshop on Buffalo Common Council procedures, with nearly 30 partner representatives and residents attending to learn more about how to interact with the Council. PPG Director of Community Research Sarah Wooton and PPG Executive Director Andrea O Suilleabhain presented our guide to the Council, with local legislative staff Sean Mulligan and Rebecca Castañeda joining the panel to offer insights and advice.

The fact sheet and video of the workshop are available on our website, www.ppgbuffalo.org. PPG will host the workshop again in late January, as our first workshop filled up quickly. For those interested in following the Common Council and the issues local advocates bring to it, PPG publishes a weekly Common Council Summary on our website and social media. These summaries cover general council meetings, as well as the work of the finance,



Donna Robinson of Release Aging People from Prison speaks about her experience with Common Council advocacy during the Buffalo Common Council Procedures workshop on September 27, 2023.

education, civil service, community development, claims, legislation, and police oversight committees.

“The Public Good” Radio Show Launches a Podcast with New Host Deja James

For more than a decade, PPG has hosted The Public Good, a weekly 30-minute radio show broadcast on Power 96.5 FM/Mix 1080 AM. On the show, we discuss community issues with PPG partners, other local leaders and advocates, and elected officials. Our partners can join the show to promote local events or call for residents to join their advocacy efforts.

In a significant development this June, The Public Good made its debut as a podcast. The podcast’s first episodes tackle a wide range of subjects, such as the campaign to raise the minimum wage in New York State, the play “Cullud Wattah” at Ujima Theatre, the work of the student organization Black Men in White Coats at the Jacobs School of Medicine, and

gardening and holistic education for young people with community organization Home Beneath Our Feet.

Listeners can access The Public Good on Apple Podcasts and Spotify. Full video of each episode is also available on PPG’s YouTube channel at the handle @ppgbuffalo. New episodes are uploaded weekly. And of course, listeners can keep tuning in to the show when it airs on Power 96.5FM/Mix 1080AM every Tuesday at 10:30am.

Want to learn more or be a guest on The Public Good? Reach out to Deja James, PPG’s Policy Advancement and Media Manager and host of The Public Good at dejia@ppgbuffalo.org.



Deja James hosts guests from the UB Jacobs School of Medicine Chapter of Black Men in White Coats. Left to right: Hendrick Francois, Nana Aikins, Deja James, Kaswana Phiri, and Shyon Small.



Bridging Identities: The Afro Latinx Experience with Dr. Steve Peraza, Cornell ILR Buffalo Co-Lab.



The Ground Beneath Our Feet with Theo Bellavia-Frank, Kiera Van Der Beck, & Robin Jordan, Just Buffalo Literary Center.



Environmental Justice: Reclaiming Communities and Empowering Youth with Dr. Monica Miles, Mother Earth Literacies.



The Boys and Men of Color Initiative and Breaking Barriers with Daniel Robertson, Say Yes, and Seth Viera, High Road Fellow.

Advocates Continue to Advance the Erie County Language Access Act

On Thursday, November 9, the Erie County Language Access Act took one more step toward adoption with a discussion of the bill in the County Legislature’s Health and Human Services Committee. Dejjia James and Regine Ndanga of PPG and Hagar Hafez of the New York Immigration Coalition testified during the meeting, explaining the importance of language access and the potential impact of the draft law.

Language access means providing spoken interpretation or written translation, free of charge, to people who have Limited English Proficiency, so that language is not a barrier to receiving public services or participating fully in civic life. The proposed law would require all public-facing Erie County departments and agencies to adopt a language access plan, the translation of vital documents in the County’s top six spoken languages, provide live interpretation in all languages (including American Sign Language), and the creation of an advisory committee to monitor planning and implementation.

The law would also require a uniform training plan on language access and annual training for county agency employees. As Dejjia James, PPG Policy Advancement and Media Manager, explained to the committee, “Our goal is to standardize language access across all county departments that serve the public, including essential emergency services, social services, and the DMV, for example. Our group drafted this law in response to language inaccessibility to things as simple as identification cards, driver permits and licenses. Currently, to access proper assistance and services, our communities have to patch work interpretation from family, friends, or even children.”

In Erie County, language access services are piecemeal across county departments. Some departments have complete language access plans that set clear guidance on how to provide language services, while others provide some form of language access but no plan, and still others provide no language access at all and require customers to manage on their

own. This results in unsuccessful attempts by residents to access needed services, making the resident come back for multiple visits, rely on a friend for interpretation, or attempt to communicate with limited English, resulting in miscommunication and errors. The current system is inefficient, frustrating and wasteful of residents and county workers’ time. Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties have all passed county-level laws or executive orders mandating comprehensive language access in order to rectify these issues.

“Language access is a necessity, not a luxury,” said Regine Ndanga, a New York State Public Health Fellow, working at Partnership for the Public Good, who is also a licensed social worker and mental health provider, and a member of the Erie County Language Access Working Group. “It provides universal access to critical information, regardless of individuals’ language backgrounds. Two members of the Congolese community died tragically during the recent blizzard in Buffalo as a result of their inability to obtain vital information and services. This underscores the critical requirement for language access, particularly in public services such as emergency support, senior care, and disability services. We cannot afford to permit another preventable tragedy,” she said.

“There is nothing more disempowering and helpless than feeling voiceless. I ask you to imagine how different your day-to-day life would be if you were unable to read your own mail, or even express your basic needs,” said Hagar Hafez of the New York Immigration Coalition. “Through my work I have seen children recuse themselves from days of school so they can interpret for their parents’ appointments and driving permit tests. Every day, our community suffers because we lack the ability to navigate even the most basic



(L to R) Hagar Hafez, Dejjia James, and Regine Ndanga holding up the Erie County Language Access Act following a discussion of the bill in the Erie County Legislature on November 9, 2023.

systems, despite being diligent workers, business owners, taxpayers, contributors to our community, and active constituents,” she said.

PPG and the Erie County Language Access Working Group have been working toward the adoption of this law since 2020. The bill was drafted by PPG and the group, championed by County Legislature Chairwoman April Baskin, and is currently co-sponsored by Legislators Baskin, Meyers, Johnson, Vinal, Gilmour, and Bargnesi. The next step is a public hearing, likely to be scheduled for December, before the full legislature votes on the law.



(L to R) Regine Ndanga, Hagar Hafez, and Dejjia James testify on language access in the Erie County Legislature on November 9, 2023.

PPG Renews Our Founding Principles

PPG’s principles are an asset-based analysis of Buffalo Niagara, describing strengths to build on and challenges to address in our collective policy change work. It is these principles that a partner endorses in order to join PPG.

Over the last six months, PPG convened a Principles Committee of staff, board members, and partner representatives to lead a participatory process to refresh our principles, as they had not been updated since PPG’s founding in 2007. The process collected priorities and feedback from more than 100 of our partners through surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one meetings.

On December 1, PPG held a Renewing Our Principles celebration with our partners to unveil our updated principles. We are grateful to our Principles Committee for making this work possible: from our board, Lou Jean Fleron, Devonya Havis, Ben Kerman, and Susan Thomas; from our staff, Keelan Erhard, Caitlin Crowell,

Dejjia James, Regine Ndanga, Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and Sarah Wooton; and from our partners, Steven Haagsma of Housing Opportunities Made Equal, Grace Karambizi of the Buffalo Immigrant Leadership Team, Joe Kurtz of Massachusetts Avenue Project and Greater Buffalo Urban Growers, and Jerome Singletary of the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County.

Our renewed principles are on pages 4-5 of this newspaper. As you read and consider them, we offer the following introduction:

PPG’s work is rooted in our partner organizations and the urgent needs and systemic challenges they address every day. These community groups make Buffalo Niagara more equitable, sustainable, and culturally vibrant; they take the lead in times of crisis, fill gaps in our public systems, and provide critical local leadership. Our work for policy change centers their knowledge, experience, and expertise.

Our democratic Community Agenda process ensures that our partnership’s collective vision for Buffalo Niagara drives our work. Together, we see a revitalized Buffalo Niagara in which community groups and residents have a stronger voice in public policy and are better able to promote the public good. We see a community building on assets such as diversity, historic neighborhoods, and ecological resources, making progress on problems such as segregation, inequality, and poor housing conditions, and finding solutions that bring greater accountability and democracy to local government.

In addition to our partners’ annual priorities, PPG’s principles guide our work. It is these principles that a partner endorses in order to join PPG. We believe that building a better Buffalo Niagara means cultivating our region’s existing assets while addressing our most serious problems at their roots.

2023 FUNDERS AND SUPPORTERS

Cameron and Jane Baird Foundation

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Chorus Foundation

Creatives Rebuild New York

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M&T Foundation

National Collaborative for Health Equity

National Employment Law Project

New York State

Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation

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Western New York Foundation

And many individual donors

Our Principles

OUR COMMUNITY'S ASSETS

1. Tradition of activism, abolitionism, organizing, and resistance.

Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Buffalo Niagara was at the center of social movements including abolition, the Underground Railroad, labor organizing, civil rights, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, environmental justice, and many other forms of grassroots activism. Residents and community groups continue to resist injustice and organize for a better future. Extensive work in and with local communities, including Indigenous, Black and immigrant communities fighting systemic oppression, continues this legacy. A robust ecosystem of nonprofit, community, labor, and faith-based organizations work together to provide mutual aid and advocate for meaningful change.

2. Diversity.

As the second largest metropolitan area of New York State, Buffalo Niagara's population is ethnically and racially diverse. Our strength is rooted in many groups' cultures, including the Native American communities of the Haudenosaunee, immigrants who arrived during Buffalo's industrial expansion, Black participants in the Great Migration, migrants from Puerto Rico to the mainland, and refugees from around the world.

3. Historic architecture, urban fabric, and the Olmsted Park system.

Buffalo's economic history as an international trading hub and center of industry created the "good bones" of a well-planned, vibrant, and prosperous city. The legacy of this period remains in our urban fabric, landmark buildings, beautiful parks and parkways, and architecturally diverse homes.

4. A wide-ranging, vibrant cultural scene.

Buffalo Niagara has an expansive presence of musical, theatrical, visual, literary, and other artists and arts organizations. Buffalo has grown significant artistic movements in areas like jazz, literature, and hip hop. Our museums, public art, and cultural festivals are flourishing.

5. Abundant natural resources and the Great Lakes.

Buffalo Niagara has an abundance of natural resources that prime the area for sustainable green energy, resilience, and ecological regeneration, centering on the Niagara River corridor and the Lake Erie watershed. Our geography means that the region has rich biodiversity and excellent farmland for fruits, vegetables, and dairy. Extensive civic work has preserved, renewed, restored, and reclaimed many of these resources.

6. Many colleges and universities.

Buffalo Niagara is home to twenty institutions of higher learning, which bring diverse educational opportunities to students, serve as major employers in the local economy, and offer extensive research facilities and resources for community partnerships and projects.

7. Many local, independent businesses and support for entrepreneurship.

Buffalo Niagara has a strong presence of small shops, locally-owned restaurants, and independent businesses. There is increased training and support available for community members to develop, expand, and sustain small and cooperative businesses. These are important pathways to economic independence, mobility, and a democratic economy that works for all residents.

8. A skilled and organized workforce.

Buffalo Niagara features an educated, skilled workforce with high graduation rates. One of the most unionized regions in the nation, it has a rich history of labor organizing, innovative workplace practices, labor-community collaboration, and advocacy for economic democracy.



OUR COMMUNITY'S CHALLENGES

1. Economic inequality.

Economic inequality is the worst problem affecting Buffalo Niagara. Forty percent of households do not make enough to afford the cost of living. Yet, New York state is home to the largest concentration of the nation's wealth. Due to systemic racism, economic inequality disproportionately impacts residents who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color. Effective poverty-fighting tools include minimum and living wage policies, progressive tax policies, support for labor organizing, well-funded public assistance programs, and protection from predatory lending and other exploitative practices.

2. Discrimination and segregation.

Buffalo Niagara is one of the most racially segregated regions in the nation. A long history of racist land policy and ongoing discrimination contribute to a lack of housing choice and inequitable neighborhood investment. Illegal discrimination based on race, source of income, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, and other classifications is also rampant in crucial areas like employment and banking. We must prioritize making quality housing, jobs, and other economic opportunities accessible to all.

3. Education.

The most severe problems in our public schools are symptoms of the extreme inequality described above. For example, far too many students were recently evicted, were exposed to lead in their home, or have an incarcerated parent, and live with trauma as a result. That being said, major improvements in public education are possible, starting with universal, quality pre-kindergarten, enhanced after-school programs, more equitable financing for high-needs schools, expanded literacy programs, improved workforce training, and more affordable higher education. Language access, trauma-informed services, and performance-based assessment are particularly critical areas for improvement, given the large numbers of refugees and Limited English Proficiency students.

4. Environment.

Buffalo Niagara has major environmental problems with sprawl, air quality, water quality, and brownfields. We are experiencing the negative impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events. However, with our abundant water, wind, and solar resources, our region can be a refuge for climate migrants and a major hub for clean, green energy. We must ensure the safety of our residents and ecosystems by promoting green infrastructure, restoring our waterways, and protecting our biodiversity.

5. Housing.

High rents, inadequate wages, and poor housing quality mean that many residents can't afford their housing costs, live in unsafe housing, or end up unhoused. Everyone deserves access to safe, affordable housing. Top housing priorities should be de-commodifying housing to ensure that it remains affordable, limiting rental costs to prevent further displacement, providing lead remediation, and improving housing quality. Any new housing units should be sustainably built to reduce energy costs, decrease pollution, and withstand extreme weather events.

6. Health.

Buffalo Niagara suffers from unusually bad health outcomes closely linked to poverty, segregation, disinvestment, and environmental problems. Examples include lead poisoning and asthma, which disproportionately affect people of color and people with low incomes. Within the City of Buffalo, the life expectancy of Black residents is 12 years shorter than that of white residents. There is an urgent need to eliminate these racial, economic, and geographic-based health inequities.

7. Community safety.

Local governments over-rely on policing while underinvesting in public and behavioral health. This makes our communities less safe and particularly harms residents who are Black, Indigenous, and people of color, with persistent racial disparities in arrests, sentencing, and incarceration. Investing in alternatives to policing, such as the use of civilian responders for incidents involving mental health and other nonviolent situations, can reduce unnecessary interaction with law enforcement. Funding should be redirected from responding to violent crime to preventing it. Community-led safety initiatives, including parent networks, violence intervention, drug user health, and restorative justice, should be recognized as proven building blocks of public safety, worthy of significant public investment.

8. Development.

Our region's economic future lies in sustainable, community-controlled development that supports local, independent businesses, living wage jobs, and environmental responsibility. Development resources should be concentrated in high-need areas where they will have the greatest impact, not squandered on greenfield sites in areas experiencing development pressure. Municipalities and developers should center residents as experts and decision-makers in their own neighborhoods.

9. Transportation.

Buffalo Niagara lacks accessible, timely public transportation. One in every four households in the city of Buffalo does not have access to a car, and they often miss out on quality job opportunities, housing, education, and healthcare due to lack of accessibility. As a state and region, we must reorient our policy decisions to prioritize public transportation, which is more equitable and sustainable than private vehicle use. This includes creating robust dedicated funding sources for public transit, investing in electric buses, increasing bus service, expanding the metro rail system, and incentivizing use of public transit.

10. Cultural support.

Arts and culture organizations are critical community assets in Buffalo Niagara. They provide neighborhood services and spaces of belonging for children and adults, drive economic and tourism activity, and create a vibrant quality of life. The arts and culture sector, however – especially small and medium organizations and those serving people of color – has been severely under-funded. Smaller and "frontline" groups in particular need transparent, equitable, and sustainable government funding. In addition, local governments should support Buffalo Niagara's cultural history by moving quickly to preserve landmark architecture and by valuing Native American historical sites and culture.

11. Taxes and government revenue.

Major reform is required to (i) reduce the tax burden on people with low incomes; (ii) increase taxes on products and activities that cause pollution in order to reflect their true social and governmental costs; (iii) reduce wasteful corporate tax subsidies; and (iv) provide greater, more equitable, and more predictable support to high-poverty cities and counties.

12. Representative, accountable, and transparent government.

Making state and local government more democratic, efficient, and accountable will require campaign finance reform, the curtailment of independent authorities, and increased regional cooperation, along with close attention to issues of patronage, contracting procedures, ethics, public input, transparency, and the enforcement of existing laws and regulations. Elected officials and government offices should recognize the value of public participation. Broad resident input results in better policy that is more likely to be implemented successfully. To strengthen local democracy, residents' voices should be heard and valued by the elected officials that represent them.

6 BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY RESPONDERS

-  **Right response**
Teams meet health needs with appropriate, timely health care
-  **Reduces harm**
Teams reduce the likelihood of negative police encounters
-  **Person-centered**
Involving peers creates rapport and mutual trust
-  **Saves time & money**
Allows other first responders to focus on higher priority calls
-  **Prevents crises**
Teams can address issues before they escalate into crises
-  **Builds community**
Community members feel safe calling for help when needed

Community Responder Coalition Works Toward a New Response to 911 Calls in Erie County

Surprisingly, most calls to 911 are not about emergencies or crimes. In 2019, over 95% of 911 calls handled by the Erie County Sheriff were noncriminal calls for service (such as accidents, alarms, nonviolent disputes, etc.). Violent crimes made up just 1.3% of calls.

Right now, police officers respond to nearly all calls in Erie County—even when no crime has occurred. Instead, public health-related calls should be handled by healthcare professionals. When someone in desperation calls 911 due to mental health, substance use, homelessness, poverty, or other social or health needs, a community responder team of health professionals and peers should be dispatched.

The Community Responder Coalition for Erie County is working to bring this model to our region. Each community responder team will include a paramedic, mental health clinician, and trained peer worker, who can assess, de-escalate,

problem solve, and provide services when responding to 911 calls that do not involve violence, threats, weapons or alleged crimes. They will also link and/or transport people to appropriate services for longer-term care.

This approach adds a new layer of first responders, which is an increasingly common program in other communities across the US. As Colleen Kristich, PPG's representative on the Community Responder Coalition shares, "Community responder teams across the country have connected people living on the street with permanent housing, helped people with addiction access treatment, provided for people's basic needs, and talked people through some of the worst moments of their lives. When people in the community call 911 for a health or social need, they deserve an immediate, caring, effective response."

PPG's partners voted this policy change priority to the second spot on our 2023

Community Agenda. The Coalition—made up of nine organizations working in racial justice, criminal justice reform, restorative justice, and health services and case management—are advocating for Erie County to fund and launch a pilot program. To advance this model, the Coalition has met with mental health service providers and groups, government officials in mental health and law enforcement, community organizations and local residents likely to be affected by the program, and distributed brochures and fact sheets that outline the structure and benefits of a Community Responder Team. They are advocating for Erie County to include \$500,000 in its 2024 budget to implement a pilot program.

A fact sheet on Community Responder Teams is available on our website at www.ppgbuffalo.org. For updates on upcoming community meetings with the Coalition, email Colleen Kristich (colleen@ppgbuffalo.org) or check our website.

PPG, Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance Work to Re-Establish Annual Funding for the Arts in the City of Buffalo

The Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance (GBCA), an advocacy group made up of dozens of arts and culture organizations, brought a clear policy change priority to PPG's 2023 Community Agenda: "re-establish an annual process for arts and cultural funding in the City of Buffalo with a designated budget line item of at least \$500,000." The process should prioritize small and mid-size grassroots arts organizations, and be transparent, clear, and accessible.

Earlier this year, the City adopted its annual budget with \$400,000 in grant funding included for "cultural and anti-violence" organizations. However, no application process has been launched to distribute this funding to arts and community organizations. In recent years, only a small percentage of the adopted amount for this funding line has been

distributed, as shown in the table below. For example, in fiscal year 2021-2022, the \$465,000 adopted budget was revised down to \$305,000, and only \$6,500 was actually disbursed. This is 1.4% of the originally adopted budget. In 2022-2023, again with an adopted budget of \$465,000, only \$39,000 made it to arts organizations as grants. This is 8.4% of the originally adopted budget.

PPG and GBCA have spoken in Common Council committee meetings in February and in September to urge the City to open an application process and move these funds. The City Charter mandates that the Buffalo Arts Commission shall annually accept "applications for arts and culture funding, on forms approved by the Commission and supplied by the City Department of Administration and Finance..." The Charter then lists the

criteria that should be considered in annual arts funding decisions: "service provided to the public, enhancement of the cultural life of the community or contribution to a particular field or artistic discipline." The Charter states that the Commission is then empowered to submit a list of recommended recipient organizations to the Mayor, the Commissioner of Finance and Administration, and the Common Council.

In recent years, any decisions on the small amounts disbursed from this funding line were ostensibly handled by the City's Law Department. As Council Member Wyatt asked in February, "Why would we have attorneys trying to vet these, when we actually have a commission that's chartered to do this work?" We agree that the Buffalo Arts Commission should receive the applications and make funding

recommendations, as mandated in the City Charter.

The absence of a clear process for applying for and accessing arts funding has persisted for over a decade. Maria Ta, Interim Executive Director of Buffalo String Works, reflected on this in the Common Council's Community Development Committee in September. She said, "Without a process--without any way to know how to even ask for funds, or what are the criteria used, or who's making decisions--smaller and often frontline arts organizations cannot access support from the city. As a committee member of Frontline Arts Buffalo, I too often hear the struggles the organizations we represent face when it comes to accessing public funding. That means our work and the people that we serve see themselves in their own city as unworthy of investment in, as subject to the whims and prejudices of the city's operating mechanisms or lack thereof." Maria joined our call for the Council to urge the administration to implement a fair and open arts funding process.

PPG and GBCA's August 2023 memo to Common Council on arts funding is available on our website. In January 2024, PPG will release a policy report on the state of arts funding in the City of Buffalo. For updates and further information, visit ppgbuffalo.org.

Grant in Aid for Cultural and Anti-Violence Funding: Expenditure Detail, 2019-2023

Budget Year	Adopted Budget Amount	Revised Budget Amount	Total Expenditures	% of Adopted Budget Disbursed
2023-2024	\$400,000	\$395,500	\$59,900	14.95%
2022-2023	\$465,000	\$76,500	\$39,000	8.4%
2021-2022	\$465,000	\$305,000	\$6,500	1.4%
2020-2021	\$280,000	\$117,000	\$17,500	6.3%
2019-2020	\$1,110,000	\$1,047,000	\$50,250	4.5%

Source: Total Expenditures reported by the City in the Open Book Buffalo dataset available at Open Data Buffalo (<https://data.buffalony.gov>).

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PPG Releases Reports on Publicly Owned Vacant Land and Water Equity

PPG released two major reports on issues affecting the Buffalo region this year. First, “Using Publicly-Owned Vacant Land to Advance Sustainability and Equity in Buffalo, New York,” released in February, explores options for the nearly 8,000 vacant lots owned by the City of Buffalo and urges the city to work with residents and community groups to create a plan for its vacant land focused on equity and sustainability.

As the report explains, these vacant parcels are primarily the result of historic discriminatory land policies, which encouraged white flight and left thousands of empty homes vulnerable to demolition. Right now, these 3,000 acres of land sit empty. Still, local and international examples prove vacant urban land can be repurposed for affordable housing, urban farms, parks, playgrounds, trails, public art, and more.

Second, “On the Edge of Abundance: Water Affordability and Equity in Buffalo,” published in November, sheds light on the pressing issue of water affordability in the city. Rising living costs and minimal income increases have made necessities, including water, unaffordable for many households. The report dives into 2019 shutoff data, revealing over 2,518 occupied properties experienced water shutoffs that year. Nearly half of these owed less than \$1,000 at the time of shutoff.

The report offers ten recommendations, emphasizing the need for the City of Buffalo to explore income-based water rates, re-evaluate water shutoff policies, and improve billing transparency. Additionally, the report implores the City of Buffalo to follow through with its plan to use American Rescue Plan funding to forgive all existing water debt and continue a community-driven and collaborative approach to enhance water equity and justice.

For more details and the complete reports, visit our website, ppgbuffalo.org.

PPG Welcomes Three New Staff Members in 2023

This year, PPG welcomed three new full time staff members to advance our work:



Dejiya James

Dejiya James joined PPG in May as our Policy Advancement and Media Manager. She is a native Buffalonian whose family emigrated to the city from Havana, Cuba in the 1960s. As a Black feminist and African American/Afro-Cuban, she is dedicated to advocating for underrepresented communities and creating autonomous spaces for constructive support of marginalized people. Prior to PPG, Dejiya worked closely on immigration advocacy, refugee resettlement, and childcare small business training. She also coordinated for racial equity initiatives at a local foundation. Dejiya’s current work at PPG focuses on managing the annual Community Agenda process, advocating for language access in local government services, advocating to support youth who have aged out of the foster care system, and hosting PPG’s weekly radio show and podcast, *The Public Good*.



Keelan Erhard

Keelan Erhard joined PPG in June as our Organizational Development and Partnership Manager. Keelan worked for over six years with Habitat for Humanity, where they served in a variety of capacities including AmeriCorps fellow, Operations Manager, and Family Services & Loan Manager. They are particularly interested in research and policy regarding housing, urban planning, and the built environment in Buffalo. Keelan’s current work at PPG centers around PPG’s partners, coordinating our 15-year anniversary principles refresh, and deepening PPG’s relationships with and commitment to our partners. Keelan is also managing PPG’s finance, bookkeeping, events, and other operations.



Caitlin Crowell

Caitlin Crowell joined PPG in August as a Community Researcher. Prior to this, she worked as a teacher for many years. She is also a longtime community activist and volunteer, particularly in the fields of racial justice, migration, peace, poverty, LGBTQ+ issues, arts, and AIDS. Currently, her work at PPG focuses on foster youth transitions, city arts funding, affordable housing, and the work of the Buffalo Common Council. Caitlin studied Women’s Studies at the University of Buffalo, and her graduate work was done at University of South Florida and Yale University. Her areas of focus were Black women, international feminist activism, and the history of sexuality.

PPG is grateful to have added capacity in 2023 through the New York State Public Health Corps, with two fellows placed at our organization, Regine Ndanga and Enjoli Hall. We are also grateful to our 2023 interns, Rose Thomas (2022-2023 UB MSW Intern), Hannah Gabelnick (Summer Intern), Adam Senzon (High Road Fellow), Enjoli Hall (MIT Summer Public Service Fellow), and Megan Battista (2023-2024 UB MSW Intern).

PPG and Cornell Celebrate 15 Years of Summer Fellows in Buffalo



In June and July 2023, the Buffalo High Road Fellowship welcomed 21 incredible Cornell undergraduate students to work with PPG partner organizations. This summer marked the fifteenth year of the High Road Fellowships (with over 278 alumni!) and the fifth year for the Democracy Summer Fellowships.

Fellows are paid by Cornell University and paired with a PPG partner for eight weeks over the summer. Many fellows had hands on projects including labor organizing with 1199 SEIU, supporting and mentoring young people with Say Yes to Education’s Breaking Barriers, developing training modules with the

Center for Self-Advocacy, and market gardening work with the Massachusetts Avenue Project. Other fellows supported vital research including The East Side History project with Preservation Buffalo Niagara, understanding housing values and residential segregation with the Center for Urban Studies, and laying the foundation for the Theater Behind Bars program with Ujima Company, Inc. Every Friday throughout their placements, the student cohort immerses itself in the city’s vibrant life, with neighborhood walking tours, field trips, cultural experiences, and issue-based panel discussions with guest experts and civic leaders.

Reflecting on the program, one 2023 supervisor said, “We hope this summer has been as inspiring and fun for our fellow as it has been for us. His demonstration of solidarity to the working class and his commitment to justice on various campaigns this summer have brought us success and joy in the weeks he has been in Buffalo.”

Each year, any PPG partner may apply to host a fellow for a particular project. Applications are due in November each year. If you or your organization are interested, reach out to Kricky Ksiazek (ks844@cornell.edu).



Join us for a fundraiser to support Partnership for the Public Good.

The Buffalo History Museum
April 11, 2024 at 7:00 PM

Tickets will go on sale in January.
Mark your calendars!

Policy Advocacy in Pictures

Throughout 2023, PPG and our partners organized press conferences and community events to advance our collective policy priorities. The photos below capture moments in our work to win greater support for foster care youth and young adults, raise the minimum wage in New York state, improve the City's Office of New Americans and language access in City Hall, re-establish city arts funding, and create a sidewalk snow removal pilot program. We are grateful to our partners for their enduring advocacy to build a better Buffalo Niagara, on these issues and many others.



Leah Angel Daniel, Executive Director of Fostering Greatness, Inc. advocates for increased funding, services, and support for foster care youth as they transition out of the foster system in Erie County. Next to Leah is Erie County Legislator Howard Johnson, who expressed his support for this advocacy priority on our 2023 Community Agenda, at a foster alumni Story Lab event at Northland on May 22, 2023.



Foster care alumni join Leah Angel Daniel, PPG's DeJia James and Andrea Ó Súilleabháin, and other advocates at the foster alumni Story Lab event on May 22, 2023. The event was hosted by Fostering Greatness, Create Forward, and Partnership for the Public Good, with support from the Redlich Horwitz Foundation.



Andrew Delmonte of Cooperation Buffalo advocates for New York State to adopt the Raise the Wage Act, raising the minimum wage and then indexing it to inflation and productivity, at a press conference at FITZ Books & Waffles on April 14, 2023.



Da'Von McCune, owner of D Real McCoy Entertainment, speaks in support of the Raise the Wage Act at FITZ Books & Waffles on April 14, 2023. Organized with the New York Business for a Fair Minimum Wage Coalition, PPG, and other partners, the press conference announced that more than 50 Buffalo businesses had signed on in support of the Raise the Wage Act.



Dao Kamara, Community Engagement Coordinator at Providence Farm Collective, speaks at PPG's press conference on our City budget priorities on May 8, 2023. Dao called on the Mayor and Common Council to fund additional staff for the Office of New Americans and more language access across City departments, a priority on our 2023 Community Agenda.



Richie Wills, Teaching Artist at Just Buffalo Literary Center, calls on the Mayor and Common Council to re-establish arts and cultural funding for small and mid-sized arts organizations in the 2023-2024 City budget. Simon Husted of Buffalo Transit Riders United, in the background, also advocated for the City to fund a sidewalk and bus stop snow removal pilot program. Both budget requests are priorities on our 2023 Community Agenda.

Photo credit: Unai Reglero, Art and Cultural Organizer, PPG and Anna Blatto, Research Associate, PPG.