New York’s efforts to reduce Medicaid costs statewide have brought two consequential programs to ACR Health and created new opportunities for some of the most vulnerable people in our community. Both grants seek to lower the cost of health care.

**Grant #1:** A five-year, $500,000 per year grant, beginning October 1, will allow ACR Health to provide housing for up to 65 homeless individuals per year. The housing program is funded through New York State Department of Health’s Medicaid Re-Design “Health Homes” program, and is designed to lower overall Medicaid costs. Qualifying individuals must have at least two chronic health conditions, in addition to being homeless.

“This opens up opportunities for us to serve people we’ve never before been able to help,” said Jen Cook, Director of Support Services. “Housing is a key factor in improving overall health care while lowering costs.”

Homeless individuals often consume significant health services through frequent trips to hospital emergency departments (ED), at many times the cost of an office visit. Homeless individuals can go to EDs as many as 100 times a year seeking warmth in the winter or basic medical services they could receive from a primary care physician at a fraction of the cost.

According to the National Health Care for Homeless Council: ‘When people have stable housing, they no longer need to prioritize finding a place to sleep each night and can spend more time managing their health, making time for doctors’ appointments, and adhering to medical advice and directions. In many ways, housing itself can be considered a form of health care because it prevents new conditions from developing and existing conditions from worsening.’

**Grant #2:** provides $500,000 funding for 18 months to provide comprehensive assistance for Medicaid eligible individuals who rely heavily on emergency department services.

ACR Health Care Manager Supervisor Linda Munson, a representative from Crouse, and a mental health counselor work one-on-one with patients to address their healthcare needs overall; within 48 hours of discharge the patient receives a home visit.

ACR Health has been working with Crouse Hospital to increase such patients’ access to care and decrease hospital utilization. Through this collaboration, we have found that those who over-utilize the ED have complex needs, very often unmet mental health needs. To that end, ACR Health has connected with Psychological Health Care to provide counseling for our clients. We have found tremendous success in being able to quickly connect clients to counseling, and are now applying this strategy to those we encounter who over use ED services.

This 18-month program is funded by Central New York Care Collaborative Innovation Fund whose main purpose is to reduce avoidable hospital use by 25% over five years.
SAV E THE DATE

Please join ACR Health on November 8, 2018 to celebrate 35 years of service to the Central, Northern, and Mohawk Valley regions of New York State.

Since 1983 ACR Health (AIDS Task Force of CNY, AIDS Community Resources) has worked diligently to stop the spread of HIV/AIDS. Looking back to the early years (1983–1993), there was nothing much to celebrate. Those who came to us either had HIV or loved someone who did.

With rare exception, everyone who got HIV, died within five years. By 1993 new cases of AIDS in New York State had reached their highest point: 14,666. In retrospect, I wonder how we kept it all together. It seemed that all the news was bad news. There were certainly no celebrations.

Over time, effective medications came on the market, condom use developed into accepted practice, syringe exchanges opened, and rates of HIV and AIDS were finally on the decline.

By our second decade we had Teen AIDS Task Force (TATF) chapters in 37 high schools; we were able conduct HIV testing in our offices; we had specialized support and education services for MSM (Men who have Sex with Men) and for LGBTQ youth; we had housing services for people living with AIDS. In that same decade, AIDS became the fastest spreading epidemic in the world and by 2002, there were 6 million cases worldwide.

Today in New York State, we have seen a 79% decrease in new HIV infections over the past 25 years. That certainly sounds like something to celebrate! Though, new HIV cases happen every day, New York is on target to End the AIDS Epidemic by 2020 (i.e. fewer than 750 new HIV cases per year statewide).

Because of our successful HIV programs, the state has expanded our mandate to include Hepatitis C prevention and array of support services to individuals with chronic diseases, as well as Navigators to help individuals and businesses make informed health insurance decisions.

We have Syringe Exchanges, a Drug User Health Hub, a network of Q Centers and support groups providing a safe place for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth, their families and allies to gather.

We still have work to do, but I believe it is indeed time to celebrate the good things ACR Health had been involved in all of these years. Like celebrating people who live long lives despite having HIV; LGBTQ youth who take pride in being who they are; substance users who find acceptance or freedom in their recovery, and thousands of individuals who have taken our prevention messages to heart. So, please join us November 8, 2018 at 5:30 to celebrate. We couldn’t have done it without you. Thank you!
Eight Q Center trans families traveled to the Philadelphia Trans Wellness Conference (PTWC) the first week of August where ACR Health’s Karen Fuller was one of the presenters. The Conference proudly offers a space for trans people and our allies, families, and providers to come together to re-envision what health and wellness means for trans people. Further, PTWC recognizes that accessible and quality healthcare is an integral part of self-determining our bodies and identities in the larger world. As much as possible, PTWC strives to ensure that the conference addresses the diverse needs of all people who identify as trans or beyond the binary gender system, as well as our partners, families, and allies.

Karen Fuller came to the Q Center 12 years ago looking for resources to help her family through her child’s transition, over the years has turned into one of the most valuable resources the Q Center has for families with trans children.

Karen’s first Q Center visit was when her child was seven years old. She was “following his lead.”

Her child gravitated toward male roles, had some minor behavior issues and then, in the summer before third grade, announced to extended family to call him “Jack.”

That was it for him – issue dispatched. Karen and her husband didn’t have a manual to follow, but they had good instincts and set out to make Jack’s transition as uncomplicated as possible. There were bumps along the way.

After doing research Karen and her husband knew that they had to take the opportunity while Jack was still young and had not entered puberty to put him on Hormone Blockers; doing so would not only give time to ensure that this is the correct path but also save on future surgeries such as breast removal. They knew that they needed a pediatric endocrinologist that understood how to treat transgender youth. They located one in Boston only to find out when they got there that there was a qualified pediatric endocrinologist in Syracuse.

Jack received appropriate medical care throughout his transition and now, at 19, he does not face some of the physical challenges he would have if he had gone through puberty before beginning his transition.

“Every family with a transgender child has a different story. As a Family Peer Advocate, I meet them where they are at and I share what I have learned through my own experience and my training to help them,” said Karen.
First Frost
Changes Course

Get up close and personal with the furry and feathery residents of the New York State Zoo at ACR Health’s 19th Annual “First Frost” Walk on Sunday, October 14, 2018 at the Thompson Park Zoo and Conservancy in Watertown.

The First Frost Walk has been changed to take place entirely within the grounds of the New York State Zoo. Enjoy new activities like Plinko, Elephant Slinky, and Match Game with a chance to win prizes. Stay for lively festivities and a delicious lunch. Make sure to leave your furry friends at home as only service animals are permitted inside. The First Frost Walk $25 registration fee will include a free full-day admission to the zoo.

Zoo Director Larry Sorel said the First Frost is a great way to make new friends for the one-of-a-kind zoo. “We are the only zoo in the world that exclusively features animals native to New York State. Some of them, like elk, are no longer found here, but they are alive and well at our zoo, and a great way to learn about conservation.”

Marketing Director Debbie Bleier loves events like the First Frost because they expose the public to this Watertown treasure of nature: reptiles, birds, cougars, ravens, and wolverines. “The First Frost is a great opportunity for us to partner with community organizations. Our goal is to increase these collaborations.”

100% of money raised at the First Frost Walk goes to support HIV/AIDS prevention and programming in Northern New York, and help ACR Health lead the charge for LGBTQ equality and the fight against addiction and poverty.

The First Frost, benefiting ACR Health, starts at 1:00 p.m. on October 14, rain or shine. Registration begins at 11:30 a.m. If you are interested in walking or forming a team, you can register online at ACRHealth.org or call 800.898.2599.
First-in-Nation Strategy to End Hepatitis C

On July 27, Governor Andrew M. Cuomo announced the nation’s first strategy to eliminate hepatitis C, aiming to stop the spread of the virus by increasing access to medications that can cure hepatitis C and expanding programs to connect New Yorkers with prevention, screening, and treatment services. Hepatitis C is a liver disease affecting more than 200,000 New Yorkers.

Hepatitis C-related deaths have exceeded HIV-related deaths in the state outside of New York City since 2007, and with injection drug use as the most common risk factor, the opioid epidemic has fueled a rise in new hepatitis C cases.

Hepatitis C Treatment Now Available

Two young men now residing in a Syracuse halfway house are among the first clients undergoing treatment for hepatitis C at ACR Health’s Drug User Health Hub. Though they are from different states and didn’t know each other before meeting at the halfway house, they share similar stories, similar struggles, and admit they have only their impulsivity to blame for getting hepatitis C.

DAMON’S STORY

“You can’t do heroin and walk away.” It took 26-year-old Damon, of Boston, a number of tries before he could free himself from heroin. Once he lasted two years before succumbing after winning $8,000 at a Vernon Downs slot machine.

“I was feeling fantastic! I latched onto the idea of shooting up and I just couldn’t let it go. You romanticize the euphoria and don’t remember the consequences.”

Consequences?

“Losing your family, your relationships, your house, your car. You forget all that.”

And he lost all that.

Damon overdosed more than once, and was brought back to life with the overdose reversal drug Narcan. Damon says the only thing that ever interrupted his drug use was being arrested and sent to rehab. That happened three different times.

Now he is drug free, living at a halfway house in Syracuse, and ready to come to terms with the hepatitis C infection he picked up four years ago.

“Losing your family, your relationships, your house, your car. You forget all that.”  

Continued on pg 6
BRYAN’S STORY

“Even as a little kid, I was always in a rush to go nowhere. I was nervous, timid, and afraid every moment that something bad was going to happen to me. I was suicidal. When I used heroin, all that went away.”

27-year-old Bryan found relief from his anxiety through OxyContin that he bought on the streets. In time he was hooked; had run through all of his money; and switched to heroin because it was cheaper.

Bryan has been in rehab numerous times. “It takes about a week to get the heroin out of your system. It takes about a month for the dope-sickness to go away.” Bryan now takes Suboxone, a daily medication assisted therapy he receives at ACR Health.

Both Damon (Massachusetts) and Bryan (New York) know exactly when they exposed themselves to hepatitis C. Each knowingly shared injection equipment with a person who had the hepatitis C virus. They just didn’t care at the time. The possibility of hepatitis was a far-off risk they were willing to take at the time they were so focused on getting heroin into their systems.

Today, they are each at the point in their recovery where they want to be healthy and are prepared to tackle the residual problem of hepatitis C. Damon and Bryan were familiar with ACR Health through its Syringe Exchange Program and are willing to come to the Drug User Health Hub expecting to be treated fairly and nonjudgmentally.

International Overdose Awareness Day

The opioid epidemic has become a global, national, and local crisis. In 2017, more Americans died from a drug overdose (72,000) than were killed in the entire Vietnam War. This epidemic kills more people annually than gun homicides and car accidents combined, and more than the AIDS epidemic did at its peak.

- In Onondaga County 2017, 91 people died from opioid-related overdoses.
- That represents an increase from the year before when 142 people died.
- In 1999, the number of people who died from opioids in Onondaga County was zero.
- In one year, ACR Health trained 2,002 individuals how to use Narcan, the opioid overdose rescue drug.
- 25 individuals have voluntarily reported reversals with the kits we provided.
- Currently, there are 21 million Americans who have substance use disorder, more than the number of cases of cancer in the US.

August 31, 2018, Syracuse - Family members who have lost loved ones to opioid overdose, mark International Overdose Awareness Day.
Rhiannon was thirteen years old when she used heroin for the first time, and it was her mother who injected the heroin into her vein. Now, at 32, an older and wiser Rhiannon said, “Mom was sick in the mind. She thought she was helping me, but gave me heroin instead of the help I needed.”

Rhiannon never finished high school; overdosed more than once; failed in repeated attempts at recovery; got her GED; attended college; stole a car; served two years in prison; and eventually ended up with a potentially fatal blood and bone infection which led, strangely, to two pieces of very good fortune.

Central New York hospitals have seen a 600 percent increase in endocarditis and blood infections among people who inject heroin and other opioid drugs. These patients often need six weeks of intravenous antibiotic treatment or heart valve replacement surgery to recover and at an average national cost of $120,000. In all, Rhiannon needed ten weeks of intravenous antibiotics to recover.

To help contain costs, the state awarded the Centers at St. Camillus in Geddes a $2.3 million grant to develop a nursing home program to care for some of these patients. The first piece of good fortune came when Rhiannon became ACR Health’s first client to enroll in the St. Camillus program.

When we first met her she had to use a walker to stay upright. She was frail, exhausted, and had lost all of her teeth.

Rhiannon has recovered her strength and received the medical, dental, and mental health care she needed; a very good example of how lives can be turned around with the right kind of support.

The second piece of good luck came to Rhiannon by way of being selected for the Road2RecoveryCNY program established by a Central New York couple whose son beat his opioid addiction by attending long term treatment. News of this placement has transformed Rhiannon. “This is unforgettable for me. St. Camillus, ACR Health, and Road2RecoveryCNY has completely changed my life and offered me a new beginning,” said Rhiannon.

“**It’s okay to change — to be somebody better**”

Rhiannon’s “road to recovery” is being funded by Darlene and Tim Endy. “The turning point for our son was the one year stay at BRC Recovery in Austin, Texas. We want to bring that kind of hope and healing to Central New York.” The cost for Rhiannon’s treatment is about $50,000.
Opening doors to create healthy communities

627 West Genesee Street
Syracuse, NY 13204

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Q CENTERS FOR LGBTQ YOUTH
Resources throughout Central, Northern, and Mohawk Valley regions.
For information call 800.475.2430 or email QCenter@ACRHealth.org
Group times listed ACRHealth.org/youth

TESTING SERVICES
HIV, gonorrhea, chlamydia, syphilis, and Hepatitis C. Testing@ACRHealth.org

NARCAN TRAINING
Monthly trainings at ACR Health offices. Appointments: Narcan@ACRHealth.org

SYRINGE EXCHANGES
• Syracuse: 637 West Genesee Street and Outreach Van at corner of Dudley & Fitch Street
• Utica: 287 Genesee Street
• Watertown: 135 Franklin Street
SEF@ACRHealth.org

DRUG USER HEALTH HUB
Provides onsite access to acute medical care, medication assisted therapy, and linkage to additional medical resources.

HEALTH INSURANCE PROGRAMS
Health insurance enrollment and advocacy. Navigator@ACRHealth.org

GET INVOLVED. JOIN THE TEAM.
Current positions listed at ACRHealth.org/careers.
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