



After the development of a new website and mobile application, people can now keep track of their appointments and more at no cost. (Photo by Zachary Meseck)

CHENANGO COUNTY - Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated, previously known as Opportunities For Chenango (OFC) went through some major changes in 2020, most importantly their merger with the former Opportunities for Broome in July.

According to Greater Opportunities Deputy Director Kelly Robertson,

“The former OFB and OFC were both community action agencies, and merged into Greater Opportunities for Broome and Chenango Incorporated because we wanted to provide more comprehensive services to the people of both communities” said Robertson. “We wanted to make sure we were taking two strong agencies to make an even stronger one, and fortunately that’s what we did.”

Robertson said the merger has been in the works for approximately three years, and that the process was made even more difficult by the coronavirus.

“The merger was in the works far before COVID-19, and the fact that we were able to accomplish it even with COVID is great,” she said. “We were able to keep our services going during the pandemic by transitioning everything to a virtual format.”

“Unfortunately, we did have to temporarily close our Head Start Centers and Main Offices to the public for a period of time during the start of the pandemic, but we never closed for services as we were still able to provide services virtually. In May, we were able to re-open our offices to the public.”

She added that the coronavirus forced Greater Opportunities to take on a unique perspective on education, and the creation of a new phone application was part of their plan to help feel the void.

"Starting this year, individuals can download the Greater Opportunities app to see what services are available, receive notices from the agency, and apply for services," said Robertson. "It's another way for us to communicate with our clientele and our community."

Robertson said the Greater Opportunities phone application took about six months to develop, and it will allow people to check on available programs along with a variety of other functions.

In addition to the phone application, the organization has also continued to write for grant funding and provide services, along with the total rebrand and new website.

"We wanted to make sure that both communities understood that the services we provide would continue, and that we would be able to expand on our services with the merger," Robertson said. "We know people were worried about the merger, and we heard concerns that Greater Opportunities would not provide our current programs and services to both Broome and Chenango."

"The combination of the two agencies increases our ability to provide services, and it also makes it so people have more options for where they receive services."

She said for people living in Greene, it might be easier for them to go to the Broome County Office instead of the Norwich Office. She added that with their combined resources, Greater Opportunities can provide a continuum of services to their clientele.

"Within one agency, we can now take an individual from homelessness to homeownership through our variety of programming," Robertson said. "That's one of the huge benefits of the merge, and we're happy that it was able to happen despite the pandemic."

Robertson added Greater Opportunities was very fortunate that it didn't have to make staffing cuts, and it only had to close for a limited amount of time while still providing services remotely.

She said Opportunities for Chenango had grown a considerable amount in the past five years, expanding the services offered even before the merger.

"We're fortunate to have been able to work with our communities and identify their needs and what kinds of programs they'd like to see, before and during the pandemic," she added. "For example in our Head Start programs, a lot of parents were having

trouble with the children not falling asleep at night. So the Head Start staff developed the Pajama Program, which provided parents with resources and skills need to develop a healthy bedtime routine with their child.”

Listening to the needs for the community and responding to those needs is at the core of Greater Opportunities’ mission.

“We’re definitely listening, we’re definitely trying to meet the community where it is, and we’re looking to expand our services in ways to help meet that need,” said Robertson. “We have a wonderful working relationship with local government and other community agencies. We work in conjunction with them to collaboratively serve the people in our community.”

Robertson said working collaboratively with other nonprofits, and knowing where to refer clients in need was also a huge part of helping others during the pandemic. She said looking at all of the needs of a person is vital when trying to help them through a crisis.

“Non-profit agencies have to work together in order to serve a client holistically and meet the client where they are,” she added. “For instance, we’re not experts in banking, so we’re not going to try and take on banking; so we’re going to refer them to local banks.”

“There’s no need to repeat what another group is already doing, it’s working collaboratively to make sure the client gets what they need.”

She said while the merger did have several benefits, the major challenge for staff was the considerable increase in size of the agency and working within a two-county region.

“I think in the beginning people worried that everything would change here or that we would move everything to Broome,” said Robertson. “We still have the same services in both counties, and all of our programs are going forward as usual.”