# *Community Conversations: Returning to Work in 2021*
A report released by the Syracuse Rapid Re-Employment Taskforce

25 January 2021

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*"Almost 20,000 people are out of work in the Syracuse area, with higher rates of unemployment within the City of Syracuse than in the surrounding areas. At the same time, we have almost 25,000 open jobs in our area."* Syracuse MSA Workforce Data Report, December 2020.[1]

*"There's work out there but people are shutting doors, it's hard."*
Quote, *Community Conversations* Participant.

*"Social dialogue, engaging with workers and employers and their representatives, is vital for building public trust and support for the measures that we need to overcome this crisis."* International Labor Organization (ILO), a specialized Labor Organization of the United Nations.[2]

## I. Introduction. Summary of *Community Conversations: Returning to Work in 2021*

As indicated by the quotes above, the COVID-19 Pandemic has disrupted Central New York's workforce networks. Likewise, the pandemic has forced us to rethink how the many interests belonging to this ecosystem communicate and collaborate with one another, especially employers, education and training sectors, human service providers, and potential employees themselves. Viewing the pandemic as both crisis and opportunity for change, members of the Syracuse Rapid Re-Employment Taskforce surveyed 16 unemployed and underemployed Central New York residents at the end of September 2020. The results of these focus groups -entitled *Community Conversations: Returning to Work 2021*- are presented here. In sum, the report is,

> **A Chronicle.** The report explores how unemployed and underemployed Central New York residents have thought about work before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also outlines the journey pursued by the Taskforce to better understand the needs and desires of potential employees.

> **An Analysis.** With 6 Primary Takeaways, the report attempts to raise the voices of unemployed and underemployed residents in Central New York.

> **A Call to Action.** The report outlines a number of real steps for inclusive change, wherein "the communities and people we seek to help, especially those whose voices are least heard, will be better off in ways they define for themselves."[3]

As revealed by the *Conversations*, the majority of those surveyed wish to work. Still, barriers revolve around:

> **Basic Needs.** For many of the *Conversations'* participants, an interest in work is complicated by a) a desire for work that can lead to a career, can be meaningful, and/or can be dignified; b) the financial and emotional stability of one's family and self; and c) the physical health and safety of one's family and self. These latter concerns about health and stability were expressed as both long-term and pandemic-related problems. Among those surveyed, COVID-19 only

[1] "Syracuse MSA Workforce Data Report, December 2020," *CenterState CEO*, Dec. 2020, www.centerstateceo.com/sites/default/files/Work%20Train%20Workforce%20Data%20Report%20Dec.%202020.pdf.

[2] "Almost 25 Million Jobs Could Be Lost Worldwide as a Result of COVID-19, Says ILO," *International Labor Organization*, 18 Mar. 2020, www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_738742/lang--en/index.htm.

[3] "What We Do," *Fund for Shared Insight*, 2020, www.fundforsharedinsight.org/what-we-do/.

intensified and deepened participants' beliefs that work is one of multiple basic needs concerns. A more holistic approach towards work appears in order.

**Systems-related Barriers.** Evidence from the *Conversations* exposes longstanding systems-related barriers that have only been intensified by the pandemic. Those surveyed frequently cited a lack of a) understanding about and/or access to available workforce and basic needs resources; b) transparency on the part of employers and knowledge among those looking for work about hiring processes; c) access to technology as well as computer literacy/competency; d) quality public education within the city of Syracuse (both for themselves and youth); and e) equity, especially for New Americans who are well-educated and hold certifications from foreign colleges and universities.

To unpack these claims, the report presents the context for *Community Conversations*, the project's design, the thoughts and ideas of participants, and the potential next steps to enact change. The report similarly uses the *Listen4Good* method to provide structure, to foster an equitable design, and to ensure responsiveness. In this respect, it's not only the findings but the process of creating the *Community Conversations* that can yield reforms.

## II. Context: Origins of *Community Conversations: Returning to Work 2021*

*Community Conversations* originated out of the COVID-19 pandemic and from *CenterState CEO*'s convening of human service and workforce development providers at the start of April 2020. Representatives from these fields met virtually each week and exchanged updates about their respective agencies, programs, and clients during "New York State on PAUSE."[4] They also discussed present and potential barriers for employment, training, and education that were created by COVID-19. Following "New York FORWARD"[5] and the phased reopening of the Central New York economy on 15 May 2020, the workgroup transformed into the "Syracuse Rapid Re-Employment Taskforce." Complimenting these previous tasks, the Taskforce looked to combat unprecedented unemployment and to better coordinate services for those people who desired to reenter the workforce. A multi-sector affair, the Taskforce consisted of administrators and support staff from:

- *CenterState CEO*
- *Childcare Solutions*
- *The City of Syracuse's Financial Empowerment Center*
- *CNY Works*
- *JOBSPlus!*

- *People's Equal Action and Community Effort, Inc. (PEACE, Inc.)*
- *Syracuse Community Center Collaborative*
- *Syracuse Financial Empowerment Center*
- *SUNY EOC*

Throughout the Summer of 2020, unemployment rates remained high despite the fact that many unemployed and/or underemployed Onondaga County residents were looking for work. Equally surprising, local businesses -especially within the manufacturing and health care sectors- were reportedly struggling to fill open positions. Workforce development agencies also expressed difficulties in recruiting participants despite offering more flexible, online training opportunities. Seemingly at odds, the concurrence of these 3 conditions produced more questions than answers. To better identify relevant problems as well as solutions, the

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[4] "New York State on Pause" was an Executive Order signed by Governor Andrew Cuomo that temporarily banned all non-essential gatherings of individuals and closed all non-essential businesses statewide. For more information, visit "Governor Cuomo Signs the 'New York State on PAUSE' Executive Order," *New York State Governor Andrew M. Cuomo*, 23 Mar. 2020, www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-signs-new-york-state-pause-executive-order.

[5] For more on the phased reopening of "New York FORWARD" as well as its later COVID-19 Micro-Cluster Strategy, visit "Moving New York Forward," *New York Forward | Empire State Development*, 8 Oct. 2020, https://forward.ny.gov/.

Taskforce sought greater information about the statuses, mindsets, and goals of those unemployed and/or underemployed during the pandemic. It's here wherein the *Community Conversations* project was born.[6]

## III. Design. Goals and Execution of *Community Conversations: Returning to Work in 2021*

In August 2020, *CenterState CEO* approached Taskforce member *PEACE, Inc.* about the feasibility of focus groups. Experienced with such assignments, members of *PEACE, Inc.'s Community Engagement Department* agreed to provide an in-person "recorder" of the *Conversations*, to analyze focus group transcripts, and to generate a final report.[7] A highly-qualified facilitator, Chol Majok, (Director of Workforce Development for the *Syracuse Community Center Collaborative; Syracuse Common Councilor* for District 3) volunteered to lead the focus groups. Mr. Majok also secured an eventual space for the Focus Groups, the *Marriott Syracuse Downtown*. Finally, *CenterState CEO*'s Alissa Tubbs (Strategic Operations Manager for *Work Train* and the convener of the Rapid Re-Employment Taskforce) provided oversight, technical support, and additional research throughout the entire process.

Critical for the success of *Community Conversations* was the broader Taskforce itself, as it sought and created a design that was:

**1) Informative.** At its core, the Taskforce sought more information about a number of work-reported issues during the pandemic. Initial ideas included "transportation," "work and family balance" (in particular childcare and remote schooling), "hard and soft skills," and the ability "to find and to apply for jobs" (with specific concerns about technology/digital divides). Through group brainstorm, research, and study of best practices,[8] the Taskforce drafted 5 primary questions, including:

> **What is your Ideal Job?** *(Rationale for the Question: To better understand a participant's values related to work)*

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[6] Among the Taskforce members, the aforementioned *CenterState CEO* study from December 2020, "Syracuse MSA Workforce Data Report," summarizes nicely the economic impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Central New York. *PEACE, Inc.'s* "COVID-19 Community Needs Chronicle and Assessment" from June 2020 includes qualitative and quantitative data about the effects of COVID-19 on CNY workers. See "COVD-19 Community Needs Chronicle and Assessment," *PEACE, Inc.,* June 2020, https://www.peace-caa.org/about-us/covid-19-community-chronicle-and-needs-assessment/.

[7] For PEACE, Inc.'s various public research efforts and those documents that include focus group/qualitative-based research, specifically the agency's standard and COVID-19-related *Community Needs Assessments* as well as Research series with Ocesa B. Keaton, visit www.peace-caa.org.

[8] Regarding the conducting of Focus Groups and "Best Practices," Taskforce facilitator Alissa Tubbs uncovered a host of critical resources, including the *United Way of Portage County*'s excellent study, "United Way Community Conversation Workbook on Creating Opportunity." *The United Way of Portage County*, www.uwportage.org/sites/uwportage.org/files/UWPC%20Community%20Conversations%20Guide_0.pdf, and the *Listen4Good* initiative through the *Fund for Shared Insight,* https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/.

Related to Workforce Development, the Taskforce drew heavy inspiration from 3 previously released, national studies previously used by *PEACE, Inc.'s Community Engagement Team*. See especially the Appendix in Erica Tate, "Workforce Development | Focus Group Summary Job Seekers and Small Businesses in Savannah, Georgia," http://www.bluknowledge.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Final_WorkforceDevelopment_FocusGroupSummary_v2.pdf. A second relevant study -one that was also generated in a crisis- reported on a series of focus groups addressing dislocated workers from 9-11, their participation in an Employment Assistant Program, and their current employment barriers and statuses. "Employment Assistance Program Focus Group Report." *John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development. Rutgers University*. https://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/products/uploads/911_Focus_Group_Report.pdf. A third study, "Workforce Development Listening Sessions in Pennsylvania." *Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia.* https://www.philadelphiafed.org/-/media/community-development/publications/conference-summaries/Workforce_Development.pdf.

**What is a step that you need to take in order to gain your Ideal Job?** *(Rationale for the Question: To better understand a participant's past workforce experiences and the supports that might be necessary for the participant to gain one's ideal job)*

**What is a challenge for gaining your Ideal Job?** *(Rationale for the Question: To better understand some of the barriers that a participant faces when seeking employment)*

**What programs, skills, and/or qualities have helped you gain Employment?** *(Rationale for the Question: To better understand the perceived strengths of a participant; the programs used in the past)*

**What is a new service or program that could help you gain your Ideal Job?** (*Rationale for the Question: To better understand services and programs that could be truly responsive to the needs/desires of a participant)*

*\*Note: The facilitator led each focus group with a second icebreaker, "Who is the Most Important Person in your Life?" Second, the facilitator asked variances of these questions according to the responses of participants and the "flow" of the conversations.*

By design, the questions were intentionally broad and framed as "ideal" to follow focus group "best practices," to spark discussion, and to allow freedom of thought among participants. In so doing, participants were encouraged to share an answer rather than be led to one. The Taskforce also prepared "secondary" questions that either were asked by the facilitator or were raised by the participants themselves. Often unsolicited, for example, were participants' views about the pandemic. Additional topics thus included:

**COVID-19:** The challenges faced by the *Conversations'* participants during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**School:** The effects of school and shifting schedules on work and families.

**Technology:** Technology and its place when searching for work.

**Strengths-based:** Work-related strengths of the *Conversations'* participants.

**Health and Safety:** Concerns about health and safety, especially related to schools, daycares, and the workplace.

The Taskforce also agreed that quality information would be gained through,

**2) A Respectful and Inclusive Design.** From the beginning, members of the Taskforce looked to create a welcoming environment for potential participants. For example, the sessions became *Community Conversations*, a potentially more inviting and less intimidating title than the more academic term "focus group." The plural *"Conversations"* also reflect the desire to continue dialogues among members of the Taskforce and the community. Further steps to honor the *Conversations* and its participants involved:

**Securing a Safe and Accessible Location.** The pandemic prevented the convening of a large conversation. While outdoor spaces were considered, the *Marriott Syracuse Downtown* was selected for its proximity near the *CENTRO Transit Hub* and its ability to socially distance up to 10 participants at a time in a banquet room. As an added safety precaution, the Taskforce hosted 3 sessions with a maximum of 8 participants on September 21, 22, and 24.

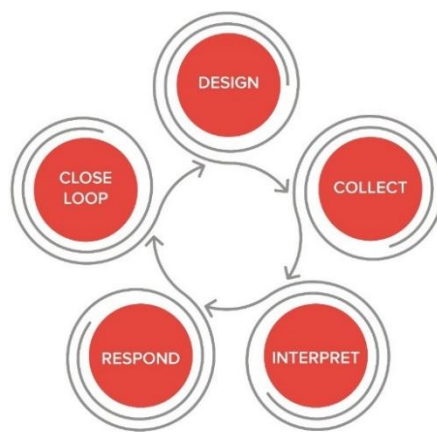**Showing Appreciation for the Participants.** To express gratitude for their time and insights, each participant received a $25 gift card, a bagged lunch, and PPE. Bus passes were provided for those who needed them as well.

**Recruiting a Broad Cohort.** To ensure that feedback was varied and not limited to a particular agency or clientele, each Taskforce member identified potential participants for the

*Conversations*. In sum, 16 individuals participated. 6 were male. 10 were female. Those surveyed also represented a variety of employment statuses and professional experiences. Past and present occupations included 1) a Mason, 2) a Carpenter, 3) a Translator, 4) A Mathematics Teacher, 5) a recently Incarcerated individual, 6) a Temporary Nurse's Assistant (TNA), 7) a Baker, 8) a Woman with a Culinary Arts Degree, 9) a Computer Repair Technician, 10) a housekeeper, and 11) a number of self-described "stay-at-home" moms. Many identified themselves as "mothers," "grandparents," and "parents." Following introductions during the second session, multiple participants identified themselves as "ready to work." In the third session, all 4 participants identified as "New American."

**Confidentiality and Transparency.** Recording software was used to produce transcripts and to better analyze the *Conversations*. An in-person "recorder" took formal notes in case there were technical difficulties. When recruited, participants signed agreements that the *Conversations'* recordings would not be released to the public. Additionally, participants were told that they would be provided service referrals if necessary, would receive formal copies of the *Conversations* report, and could potentially be asked follow-up questions. All are critical steps for honoring the experiences of the participants, securing their trust, and ensuring the "closure of the feedback loop." Regarding this latter point, the *Conversations* were to be…

**3) Equitable and Responsive.** Soon after the completion of the *Community Conversations*, the Taskforce began brainstorming "what to do" with the session findings. The *Listen4Good* method was soon embraced. An initiative for the *Fund for Shared Insight*, *Listen4Good* relies on "feedback to bring about positive changes in the ways" direct-service nonprofits and government agencies "make decisions, deliver services, and partner with clients."[9] Rather than simply ask clients to complete surveys or offer their opinions, *Listen4Good* champions equity by asking administrators, planners, and support staff to do something with said opinion.  Thus, after designing, collecting, and interpreting the evidence, planners should not only share but also respond in action to "close the loop." On its website, *Listen4Good* visualizes these principles well.[10]



"Closing the loop" will be discussed shortly and be used to frame the report's conclusion. Having outlined the design and collection processes of the *Conversations,* attention can now be placed on interpretation.

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[9] "What is Listen4Good?" *The Fund for Shared Insight,* 2020, https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/listen4good/.

[10] "What is Feedback?" *The Fund for Shared Insight, 2020,* https://www.fundforsharedinsight.org/learn-more/what-is-feedback/.

**IV. 6 Takeaways from *Community Conversations: Returning to Work in 2021***
In total, 6 primary takeaways were drawn from the *Conversations*. Supporting each takeaway is a mixture of summaries, quotations, and analysis that capture the ideas and emotions displayed during *Conversations*.

**Takeaway 1) Communication Needs to Improve Around Resources and Training Opportunities**

- Throughout the *Conversations*, many participants conveyed <u>a lack of awareness about supports and training opportunities throughout the community</u>. One participant, for example, wished that the youth employment program from the 1980s, "Dunk Your Junk," remained today, even though *PEACE, Inc.* rebooted the program in the Spring of 2019. Another participant thought *"The Community needs a bigger voice for women, single women, and females."*

- Throughout the *Conversations,* participants wondered<u> why certain questions are asked and information is requested by a potential employer.</u> Concerns raised included *"I don't like giving jobs online my social security number. Why do you need this for a job application? We can talk about social security number when I get hired." "Why would I sit here and watch somebody steal and just be quiet about it? Come on. Just ask me about the position."*

- Several participants expressed <u>frustration over not receiving a follow-up call</u> after an application. As one person shared, *"Every job fair, I never get a call back from a new job."* At one point, the facilitator asked, *"When you apply for a job, did anybody call you for an interview?"* The participants gave a resounding *"No."*

- One participant was scheduled for their GED in April which was cancelled during the pandemic. Now they don't know how to take it.

- Multiple people <u>wished to start their own business but did not know how to do so.</u> Multiple people also shared that <u>they had savings</u> but were apprehensive about spending them. One woman remarked, *"I have to be a stay-at-home mom and try to get into the business class [at Bryant and Stratton College]."* Another participant was prequalified for a business loan but did not pursue it, as he was concerned about failing and acquiring debt. In his words, *"They want me to take out a very large loan and I didn't want to get into that because that would be a financial set back." "There's a thing called the fear of success. I'm very fearful to take that next step out financially and putting your heart and your soul and everything into it and things don't go right."*

- When asked how one could apply for a job or seek support, participants said they used the Internet, Indeed.com, or the newspaper. Some mentioned *JOBSPlus!* One participant responded, *"Besides the Internet, newspapers, organizations like churches…flyers in the supermarket – some don't have that anymore."*

**Takeaway 2)** Connected to the previous point, **Processes Relating to Hiring, Decision-making, Qualifications, and Certifications Need to be More Transparent and More Accessible.**

- A number of participants shared how<u> it is difficult to overcome "gaps" in one's resume.</u> Incarceration and caring for children were cited. *"I try to get into food service at like Taco Bell, Burger King…I should be able to do that but they want to look at the gap."*

- While no one outwardly stated that they lacked access to the internet or a computer, many spoke about how <u>online platforms/technology made it difficult to apply for work</u>. There were participants who applied online but shared how websites and online applications are difficult to understand and to navigate. One person commented, *"My phone is loaded with indeed.com…I get so many notifications…I shut them off…So many notifications and nothing paying off."*

- Other statements alluding to <u>technology as a barrier</u> were made. A New American expressed how *"you have to be updated on all technology, software. If you don't know this you won't get a job."* Another participant, *"I have to learn how to attach something to email and that gets frustrating."*

- *SUNY EOC* was recognized by multiple participants for its hands-on care. A *JOBSPlus!* coach was also praised for their counsel. Conversely, one client stated that, *"This is a big frustration for me working with organizations here-Everyone just wants me to sign up for something…It looks like your organization is doing something but it's not…I'm just filling up your roster."* Others also complained about the "transactional" nature of many agency's services.

- Clarity about certificates and the value of certificates were mentioned by a number of people. A New American shared, *"They want me to take more certificates. I have now a certificate with the assistant teacher, learning English. When I worked in Saudi Arabia, when I teach any student, I would write in English but speak in Arabic. When I come to Syracuse, I have now more certifications, I don't know why I can't find another job."* A peer echoed, *"It's not fair…because we're coming from a different country…she has her certificates and education."*

- Many participants shared their frustrations about decision makers and employers, *"Bring documents to my face, then bring me proof that you did what your word was."* One woman lamented how *"I can put out tons of applications to every nursing home, call them, and they'll say 'we're not looking for a TNA at the moment."* Another participant stated, *"There's work out there but people are shutting doors, it's hard."*

**Takeaway 3) COVID-19 has Disrupted the Workforce by Raising Fears about Family, Personal Safety, Health, and Security.** Among the responses:
- A number of the participants either worked in and/or valued in-person work that has either been disrupted or eliminated altogether due to the pandemic (a translator, a substitute teacher). Concerns about a "remote world," technology, and closed programs, etc. were raised and noted above.

- People didn't mention concerns about entering the workplace *per se*. Participants did express, however, fears of work-related stress and of making loved ones sick. Fears over the safety of schools and the stability of school schedules were raised by a number of participants. One person remarked, *"What if it's a one parent home, you just eliminated a person in a workforce that they have to stay home and supposed to look after their kids and that's become their new job."* Matters of youth and daycare will be discussed shortly.

- One man shared setbacks about his health… *"I want to go back to work, there's a process when you have a heart attack. With cardiac rehab, my cardiac rehab was closed. They closed it due to COVID-19. Once they closed it, I have a certain amount of time in this course, all that stuff has been halted. It's been a big lapse, so I'll have to start over."*

- Another participant said the most important thing to her was "her health" and that employers aren't necessarily sympathetic. She stated that *"These jobs nowadays want you to be on time, but then again your health is more important. If you're sick, you can't take time off. If you have kids that's sick at home, you can't take some time off of that job. With all the extra stress, my health is more important to me because if I'm not healthy and strong to provide for myself, how can I provide for my family and my children? I know that I need a job but …one that's not going to stress me out at the end of the day."*

Tied to this point, declared matters of health proved complex. It was clear how, **even prior to COVID-19, personal/family-related health issues affected one's ability and willingness to work.**
- A number of participants shared that they had children/family members with pre-existing conditions (lupus, asthma, mental health were cited) that limited their desire to work before and during COVID. *"I have four kids at home and I'm not willing to jeopardize them. My youngest already has severe asthma."*

- A number of participants expressed age-related maladies that limited their ability to work. For example, a substitute teacher questioned her ability to stand on her feet for 8 hours; a carpenter shared how he is *"good with his hands"* but his arthritis made it painful to pursue his work in carpentry. He stated that *"the wear and tear on my body over these years is bringing on other health issues – arthritis, cramps in my hands." "It has been*

*a challenge to find work that I am comfortable going to every day and that I'll be able to complete the eight-hour shift. Without my hands there is no working."*

**Takeaway 4) Longstanding Work- and Equity-Related Barriers have been Further Amplified during COVID-19.**

- Typical barriers such as <u>transportation, daycare, inability to pass background checks, access to free education and training</u> were cited.

- **Regarding Equity,** <u>concerns about access</u> were raised throughout the *Conversations*. A number of New Americans lamented how their teaching degrees were not recognized and/or transferable in the United States and how it was difficult to return to school with children. In the third session composed entirely of New Americans, there was universal frustration about barriers. One woman commented, *"I wish they would change the rules for people like my sister who has the education, certificates, loves her job so much."* In response to this sentiment, another woman responded about the participant in question, <u>*"some people know English better than her, but they can't teach better than her."*</u>

  - One New American who previously was a teacher spoke about how she has strong math skills, has tried to get work in other fields where her math skills could be useful (banking was cited), and can't get an interview when she applies. <u>*"…the manager told me because I'm without many credits in Syracuse…but I have more experience with students, with mathematics."*</u>

  - Multiple participants were concerned by <u>a lack of resources within the Syracuse City School District, especially when compared to suburban districts</u>. In the first group, all 3 participants agreed with one person's statement that *"more city funds should be put back into our school district."* One person commented on there being too many students and a lack of money for thermometers to reopen. Another person noted how *"in Liverpool, kids are starting school, the community got together and donated money to get shields for kid's desk. They came together."* The person felt that the *"inner city of Syracuse, we're not a community."*

  - Another participant shared, *"It's just Black Lives Matter-your lives do not matter if you're dropping us like flies, so black lives do not matter. Everybody lives matter around here. I think we need to all come as a community…Y'all have these book bag drives for low-income people, should be for everybody, for everybody to feel equal."*

  - Related to resources, one participant expressed <u>her concern about technology access</u>. *"Usually people don't get involved or have the means to use technology, so it should be fair for everybody. You see that in schools right now. Poor kids don't have the internet or the computers to learn." "I don't know what the future's going to be if they don't take care of that now."*

**Takeaway 5) Concerns about Youth and Work are Interconnected and are in the Forefront of Many People's Minds, Affecting One's Ability and Willingness to Work.** Many participants were especially <u>concerned about not only their children but youth more broadly.</u> The desire for youth to succeed was real and stated in many ways. Some questions about health and resources were noted above.

- A number of people expressed concerns about youth getting in trouble, violence, etc. Much of it can be linked to <u>concerns about structure</u>. One participant said as much, *"these kids are running around, on the block because they don't have any structure."* The need for <u>greater youth-based programs and supports</u> were cited by numerous people. Matters of work were frequently noted, including:

  - There were concerns raised about a lack of youth, work and soft skills development programs

  - Summer jobs and summer programs… *"Boys Club gave us something to do other than sitting outside, hustling and robbing people."*

- Another person, *"job training started at a younger age, for safety in the future of our kids…Build job skills early on-becomes easier to get up, go and find out what you like to do…that's something that should be explored at a younger age and also gives more responsibility to the kids."*

- <u>One's ability to work was often linked to a child's school schedule and virtual/hybrid formats</u>. Lacking school resources were already noted. When asked about prospective services or programs which would help participants gain their ideal job, one participant described a women's leadership program that would provide daycare services. *"You could come and get all the help and resources that you need. Jobs, you can bring babies there." "I wouldn't care if you on heroin or on crack and you need help. If you want to drop your kids off to go get clean or do what you need to do, I'm here."*

- <u>Concerns about one's child falling behind academically</u> was noted by many. When asked "If I offered you a position today, you might think twice about it?" one participant responded *"I would have to, I don't want to jeopardize my kids going back to school. And they say you can send them to daycare. No, because I don't know what's going on at the daycare either."* The same woman earlier shared that *"I have 4 kids at home and I'm not willing to jeopardize them…they're at home doing virtual learning, it's hard enough to do that alone and then having to think while they're going to open back up school."*

- Regarding daycare, another participant expressed <u>concerns about enrolling her son in daycare.</u> No one in the conversations is recorded explicitly saying that they send their kids to daycare or wish to do so.

- Lastly, a number of the participants <u>linked their work and career choices with the desire to support and to make better futures for their children and grandchildren</u>: *"The most important thing in my life right now is the future of my kids and grandkids…I'm 54 years old, put a timeline on myself so by the time I'm 62, 63, I have things set in place that is generating income for them so they don't have to struggle and work as hard as I have to get the life and enjoy life without having to work their whole lives in a hole and have nothing in the end like I do."* To this latter point…

## Takeaway 6) *"I Want a Career, Not a Job."* People Seek Career-oriented, Satisfying, and/or Flexible Work.

- As one participant stated, *"I want a career, not a job."* Another person shared, *"My main thing is not finding work, I can find work. My main thing is keeping the job that I really like."* A third commentator shared how their motives to work revolved around family, *"I have to get back into the workforce to generate cash in a certain period of time. I set time limits on myself to find a certain financial status, build a financial empire for my daughters and my grandkids so that they don't have to struggle as I did."*

- Tied to this latter point, people are taking steps to improve their lives through work and investment.

  - A number of people <u>desired certificates.</u> A woman shared how *"I want to get a degree but cannot do it now. The three days I work in the week are not even enough to pay my rent. To find a good job now, it's too difficult."*

  - A number of people <u>expressed an understanding and/or interest in stackable credentials.</u> One woman talked about working at *Dunkin Donuts* to compliment her culinary arts certificate and to open her own café. This participant also wanted to obtain a business degree to make money.

- As noted in Takeaway #1, multiple participants view<u> the owning of one's own business as a vehicle to pursue one's professional passions</u>. Indeed, *Conversation* participants with backgrounds and interests in culinary arts, housekeeping, electronics/technology repair, pet care, and fashion all shared a passion for owning their own business. One woman said she is *"looking towards what I really want to do – work with animals." "I just feel something of a goodness in that,"* she added. When another participant was asked how

starting a business made her feel, she responded *"Excited. I'm a go getter, I love challenges."* One participant expressed frustration with how the system prepares you for work, stating, *"You used to have people going to school for occupation. Now you have to go to a school where you have to pay money like a college. They used to teach all that stuff in school – mechanics, carpentry…"*

## V. Conclusions and Next Steps. Closing the Loops of *Community Conversations*

In a *TED* talk about international aid, Ernesto Sirolli passionately calls for the client to be better integrated into economic development and workforce-related projects. In Sirolli's estimation, for a project to be successful, *"You Have to Learn How to Get These People to Come and to Talk with You."*[11] The emphasis on active engagement, on finding the spaces to incorporate a client's needs into networks, planning, and/or service processes, "closes the loop" according to the *Listen4Good* method. In sum, this report raises the voices (Step 3 of the *Listen4Good* method) of those individuals who are unemployed or underemployed in Central New York during the COVID-19 pandemic. <u>Of the needs that inform and/or often take priority beyond one's desire to work. Of the structural barriers that often prevent one from obtaining dignified work for themselves and their families.</u> Research remains about obtaining participants' feedback concerning the report and implementing reforms based upon their views. In response, the Taskforce will pursue these actions:

**To Circulate and to Discuss the Results of the Report with *Community Conversations* Participants.** Copies of the report will be distributed via email or hard copy to the *Community Conversations'* participants. When registered for the sessions, the participants provided their contact information. From it, Job coaches, case managers, and other staff will seek out and record the feedback of participants who use their respective agency's services.

**To Dialogue with Participants for More Information.** The Taskforce believes further questions and ideas will be generated when the *Conversations'* participants interpret this report. A similar effect was seen when the Taskforce's members engaged with the report. 4 consistent questions and ideas emerged, including:

- **How are You, Your Families, and Your Networks?** If you have not been in contact with us since the completion of the *Conversations* in September, have there been any noticeable changes for you and your family? Are you facing any new or unforeseen challenges since we last spoke? Are you in need of additional supports, especially as it relates to work, training, and careers?

- **Did you Receive a *CARES Act Economic Impact Payment,* Popularly Known as the "Stimulus Check?" And If So, How Did it Affect You and Your Family at the Time?** The meeting of your basic needs? The desire to work, especially in relation to the pressures described throughout the *Conversations*? Around the time of the *Conversations,* research was being conducted and released about the economic and social-emotional effects of the Stimulus Checks on American families. Learning more from our participants about Stimulus Checks might not only provide context but also much more importantly further public advocacy for COVID-related reliefs. Connected with this line of questioning,

- **What does the Following Data Point Mean to You? Given your Earlier Feedback, is this Something that You have Considered?** According to a recently released *CenterState*

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[11] Ernesto Sirolli, "Want to Help Someone? Shut Up and Listen!" *TEDxEQChCh,* September 2012, https://www.ted.com/talks/ernesto_sirolli_want_to_help_someone_shut_up_and_listen?language=en. Thanks go to Laura Miller, General Manager of Darco Manufacturing, for recommending the talk to the *PEACE, Inc.* Community Engagement Team.

*CEO* report, approximately 11,700 people dropped out of the Central New York Labor Force between August and September 2020.[12]

- **How can the Taskforce Raise Greater Awareness about the Report's Findings as well as Existing/Developing Resources more Broadly?** Communication and knowledge about workforce- and youth-related resources were felt to be limited by many of the *Conversations'* participants. Areas for improvement were noted in the report and already acted upon by members of the Taskforce (more on this in a moment). Participant feedback about how best to "act upon" the findings of the report would be welcomed.

**To Implement Service, Policy, and Systems-wide Changes Based Upon the *Community Conversations.*** Even before the finalization of this report, Taskforce members were already taking actionable steps to address the collected "data" by…

- **Providing immediate case management support** for participants and their stated needs. For example, an aforementioned participant who was a New American and a former teacher in her home country has already received assistance in identifying childcare and employment supports so that she can potentially enroll in a graduate education program.

- **Brainstorming collectively about "What to Do" next.** From these initial conversations, continuing dialogues with *Community Conversations* participants was stressed. Taking steps to host similar *Conversations* in the future was also championed. Perhaps most importantly, conversations about identifying and overcoming barriers within the Taskforce's respective agencies have been productive. The conversations have also raised broader questions about the structural barriers and legacies that inform work in Central New York. To this point, the Taskforce has been…

- **Discussing whether the responses are unique to this COVID-19 moment.** On the one hand, the *Conversations'* questions were framed in a way so that participants could offer a range of work-related views, including the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on them. On the other hand, the participants' responses as well as previous studies about work-related barriers in Central New York led the group to think more deeply about system-wide inequalities and continuities.[13] It pushed the Taskforce to uncover and to incorporate equity-based approaches such as *Listen4Good.* And it has encouraged the group towards…

- **Reporting and pushing for change publicly.** With the completion of the report, contacting press outlets and raising greater awareness across media about the *Community Conversations* have been recommended. Individual agencies and members within the Taskforce have already "reported out" the findings in meetings with employers, recruiters, educators, and other workforce professionals. Entities that convene workforce professionals such as *CenterState CEO, Greater Syracuse Works,* and *Syracuse Boost* have also begun to schedule trainings around the results. Such trainings have also been provided the staff of the individual agencies. These efforts will

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[12] "Syracuse MSA Workforce Data Report, December 2020."

[13] Regarding matters of lacking communication, resources, health, youth, equity, and more, the responses offered during *Community Conversations* echo those found in pre-pandemic focus groups and research. Examples include "Jobs to Careers Partnership: Systems and Policy Study," *Syracuse University, The Office of Professional Research and Development,* 2017 (paper shared by Taskforce member Maribel Arce) and "Building Equity in the Construction Trades: A Racial Equity Impact Statement," *Urban Jobs Task Force,* 2019, https://www.ujtf.org/reis. *PEACE, Inc.'s* aforementioned *COVID-19 Community Needs Chronicle and Assessment* also draws links between Redlining and matters of work, health, youth, equity, and more.

increase with the release of the formal report and the anticipated interest among the region's workforce networks

**To Promote "Areas for Celebration"[14] and to Normalize Strengths-Based, Responsive, and Equitable Approaches.** The *Community Conversations* were just first steps. As noted above, further research, policy recommendations, and workforce development pathways should be pursued not only to address the barriers discussed within the report but to incorporate the real strengths, talents, and dreams of the *Conversations'* participants. Those surveyed have a range of skills and qualities that should be desirable in any training and workplace setting. Frequently mentioned were math and measurement skills; bilingualism; formal credentials and degrees in nursing, the trades, culinary fields, and education; the ability to work as a member of a team; personal savings; and the desire to improve one's family and one's self. Many showed awareness about and interests in career pathways, in particular the value of education, training, and credentials that can generate opportunity and greater stability. Noteworthy as well were those participants who wished to start their own businesses, both large and small.

To create a sustainable, equitable Central New York economy for all, spaces such as *Community Conversations* need to be recognized for their potential to spur systems change. By normalizing client feedback loops, workforce development organizations, policy advocates, and community interests will take critical steps towards creating a more equitable, inclusive community and thus ensuring improvement in the name of the common good.

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[14] "What is Feedback?"