



CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HYGIENE

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OPEN TABLE CONTINUES TO AID INDIVIDUALS LIVING IN POVERTY IN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY

MAYVILLE, N.Y.: Local faith communities in collaboration with Chautauqua Tapestry and county government are expanding efforts to lift individuals in Chautauqua County out of poverty through an initiative called *Open Table*. The *Open Table* model was first introduced in Chautauqua County in 2011 and has impacted six local community members who have been served by tables started by local churches: Kidder Memorial United Methodist Church, Fluvanna Community Church, Gerry Free Methodist Church, Zion Covenant Church, Jamestown Free Methodist Church, Kiantone Congregational Church, Levant Wesleyan Church, Busti Church of God, Bemus Point United Methodist Church, and Christ First United Methodist Church.

"The *Open Table* brings the faith community and government together to support our community members," said Patricia Brinkman, Director of the Chautauqua County Department of Mental Hygiene. "This strategic approach diminishes the deep effects of poverty that impact families and our community. The model ensures existing social and intellectual capital is brought to the table by community partners to build natural sustainable strengths with family members, one table at a time."

Open Table launched in Arizona in 2006 and is now operating in almost 20 states with plans for ongoing national expansion. Chautauqua County is one of only three nationwide communities awarded funds through a federal System of Care (SOC) grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) to partner with *Open Table*. The program educates and trains congregation members to guide the homeless and families in poverty back into the community by changing their circumstances while accessing the "intellectual and social capital" available within a congregation. A group of volunteers compose a "table" and commit an hour a week for a year to help the youth, individual, or family to meet goals that they have established in a document called a life plan.

"The Jamestown faith community and the system of care that exists in Chautauqua County helped pioneer the *Open Table* model in New York State and it has now expanded to 17 states. Now they are bringing all of the learning and experience to congregations across the county to help families and strengthen communities," said Jon Katov, Founder and CEO of *Open Table*.

Open Table began as a chance encounter with an Arizona man named Ernie who was experiencing homelessness in 2005. The story begins with Ernie asking members of a church youth group serving food at a Phoenix homeless shelter if

he could worship at their church. They picked him up from the shelter and brought him to church every Sunday, which led to a strong bond and forged relationships among several congregants. These members formed a group and became personally involved in Ernie's plan and gave themselves a simple moniker – a table. The table met every week for eight months to develop a stability plan to help Ernie access employment, housing, healthcare, and transportation. Ernie eventually found employment as a security guard and is now retired. He and his table leader have maintained their close friendship for 10 years.

Some of the most powerful testimonials have come from congregation members who have served others working to rise out of poverty and reflect the extraordinary relationships formed. Often individuals who are served by tables come from extreme and desperate circumstances. A table member from Arizona shared how the relationship she formed with a woman she served by participating on a table changed her life: "She had been through more suffering than I could ever imagine, and lost 16 members of her family to a hurricane... She was brought to this country with the hope of being a nanny and was left jobless and homeless when she didn't know the language: living out of a dumpster, prostituting, working the whole time, and saving money. She is amazing and strong and I am blessed to call her 'friend.' Only relationship could affect this kind of change in both of us. She is now my friend because of our relationship on her Table."

Local faith leaders were invited to accompany Chautauqua Tapestry staff on a fact finding mission to Phoenix in March this year to see firsthand how the *Open Table* system worked. Since the trip to Arizona earlier this year, a visit by *Open Table* leaders has been planned to expand efforts in Chautauqua County and to provide further information to local individuals or congregations who would like to join *Open Table* efforts in Chautauqua County.

"*Open Table* not only helps those living in poverty, but creates collaborations between churches and congregations serving on tables. These collaborations between smaller faith communities create a larger and stronger community that is better prepared to serve those who are in poverty," commented Senior Pastor Roy Ferguson, Busti Church of God.

An Open Table Exploration event will be held on Saturday, June 20, 2015 from 9 a.m. to noon at the Bemus Point United Methodist Church. Representatives from *Open Table* as well as local community members who have worked with *Open Table* will be speaking about their experience and will have further information available for those who wish to get involved with local efforts.

"I am excited about the opportunity that Open Table presents for those living in poverty here in Chautauqua County," said Vince Horrigan, Chautauqua County Executive. "The faith based community is a key part of the team working hard to lift people out of poverty. I look forward to participating in this exploration event."

This event is free and open to the public and all are welcome to attend. Those who are planning to attend are asked to please register for the event by calling Marilyn at (716) 753-4507. More information on the *Open Table* model is also available at www.theopentable.org.

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