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Orchard Park Bee Lifestyles

Without fairness in health care, there is a risk of groups of people being left sick and unattended. The Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs program has been charged with bridging disparity gaps in health care. It was reintroduced into the Erie County Office of Health Equity this past July after a decade-long hiatus.

It is a federal program that is based on the Maternal and Child Health bureau, and every county in New York State has a CYSHCN program. Evan Ramos, program coordinator for the Office of Health Equity, explained this free resource is meant to improve the coordination of care for families with children, from birth to 21 years old. "The program helps families that have children who have any medical, behavioral, emotional or healthcare needs, and making sure that families are pretty much linked to community organizations and services that

can help them," she said.

According to the health department website, CYSHCN will connect families with community resources, including: Medical referrals, providers and specialists; medical supplies and equipment; medical appointment scheduling and transportation; mental and behavioral health resources; and health insurance.

They also provide education resources such as GED, tutoring, college planning, employment resources, vocational counseling, working papers, career planning and interview skills, translation and interpretation services, transition to adult services (medical, education, housing, medical providers), and play/support groups.

"There is no 'one-size-fits-all' solution for the complex issues that some children in Erie County face," said Commissioner of Health Dr. Gale Burstein in an interview.



view with IMAGINE Buffalo, a weekly series from the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library. "This program is prepared to advocate with health care providers and school districts in ways that build a network of supports around a child and their family."

What makes CYSHCN unique, Ramos explained, is that it does not require a diagnosis like other programs. Any change in a child's physical or social development could raise questions and concerns for parents and

caregivers. Coming back after 10 years, some of the different ways Erie County developed the program is by being the first program that is centered in the Office of Health Equity, which ensures that the people working in CYSHCN are looking at youth and young adults through a health equity lens.

"So not just looking at the health care and how they are currently, but how did we get there; looking at where they live, where they go to school, looking at their family composition. Looking at mom and dad or whoever their caregivers are," Ramos said. "Looking at those adverse childhood experiences — how can we help these families have great health outcomes, but also help them with some of the social determinants of health."

"The systems that we live in, for everyday people, can be a little overwhelming. And so that's where we come in; to be able to be that team, that bridge that helps," Ramos said. "If you

are navigating a health care insurance website, for example, that can be frustrating to someone who does not understand how to print out a PDF of what providers accept their insurance. That can sometimes lead to frustration. Or if someone feels they're stuck with a certain provider or doctor that they maybe don't have a good relationship with, and that's where we can come in and help."

Five months in, Ramos explained that a lot of what CYSHCN is focused on is centralized in the City of Buffalo, as they are in talks with different organizations. Ramos added the focus for next year is to focus on southtowns and rural areas to work with area organizations that can also provide CYSHCN services, "to make sure that families are feeling supported and have the support that they need," she said.

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