



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A division of the Erie County Department of Health, the Erie County Office of Health Equity (ECOHE) was established by the Erie County Health Equity Act of 2021 [1]. The vision of the ECOHE is for all disadvantaged, marginalized, and diverse populations in Erie County to achieve maximum health and wellness. Existing data, including the findings described in this report, strongly indicate that inequities in health experiences and health outcomes occur among Erie County residents according to demographic factors. The root causes for these differences are historical, systemic, and largely ongoing. As a result, addressing these inequities requires intentional and targeted solutions.

Health disparities and inequities in our community both prompted the creation of the ECOHE and provided evidence of the continued need for the office. Recent tragedies that have befallen our community, like the COVID-19 pandemic, the racially motivated mass shooting at Tops Supermarket on May 14, 2022, and the December 2022 blizzard, highlighted the ways in which racism and the social determinants of health influence our safety and well-being. Achieving health equity means ensuring that who we are or where we live does not limit our ability to live a life of maximum health and wellness. The work of the ECOHE is needed now more than ever.

This report is intended to provide an overview of the ECOHE's programs, actions, and future directions. This report is also intended to serve as a resource for all Erie County residents to better understand the issues and status of health equity and health disparities in the county. As stated in the ECOHE's 2023 report, *Health Equity in Erie County: An Initial Health Disparities Assessment*, "Without knowledge of the existing health disparities and the SDOH and other contributing health factors, health outcomes can neither be adequately addressed nor improved [2]." The intent of the 2022 ECOHE Community Survey, focus groups, and this report was to build off of and supplement the existing health equity data explored in *Health Equity in Erie County: An Initial Health Disparities Assessment*. Specifically, these efforts and this report were meant to capture and analyze new relevant, specific, and accurate local data describing the current health of Erie County residents.

ECOHE PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Mental Health First Aid Trainings Help Address Critical Community Need

In 2023, the Erie County Office of Health Equity (ECOHE) began facilitating Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training throughout Erie County. The prevalence of mental health distress is high, especially among racial and ethnic minority groups, residents of rural areas, and the LGBTQ+ community. Currently, there are not enough providers to meet the demand for mental health services, and many people are not prepared to assist someone who may be experiencing a mental health or substance use challenge. MHFA teaches participants how to recognize signs of mental health or substance use challenges, how to offer and provide help, and how to guide a person toward appropriate care.

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In 2023, the ECOHE certified over 700 Mental Health First Aiders in Erie County. MHFA training participants were demographically diverse in many ways, including age, educational background, gender, race, sexual orientation, and residential location within Erie County. Next steps include exploring barriers to participation that keep community members from signing up or from attending MHFA trainings, which may include SDOH factors, and creating a plan to mitigate these barriers.

CYSHCN Program Supports Families With Special Health Care Needs

The Erie County Children and Youth with Special Health Care Needs (CYSHCN, pronounced “shin”) Program seeks to improve the coordination of care for children and youth who have special health care needs. This program serves families with infants, children, and youth from birth to 21 years old who have serious or chronic medical, physical, behavioral, emotional, or developmental conditions. A diagnosis is not required for enrollment in the Erie County CYSHCN Program. The CYSHCN Program matches families with community resources and provides referrals to community programs. The CYSHCN Program can also help by providing advocacy with health care providers and school districts, linkage with medical providers and specialists, and assistance with health insurance. Since July 2023, the Erie County CYSHCN program has provided over 200 referrals and resources to families with CYSHCN. Next steps for the Erie County CYSHCN Program include continuing to build connections with community organizations and community partners, including local school systems, childcare providers, and medical providers to identify unmet needs and challenges and to better assist CYSHCN and their families.

Grants Program Provides Support to Under-Resourced Community-Based Organizations

ECOHE grant programs and services primarily fall into two categories: internal ECOHE grant programs and pilots to improve health disparities and external grant technical assistance to community organizations engaging in health equity work. The ECOHE provides free grant-related technical assistance to local community-based organizations and groups serving minority, marginalized, and underserved communities in Erie County. The ECOHE’s grant technical assistance services include a group workshop, Let’s Talk About Grants, which was developed in 2023. In 2023, ECOHE applied for and secured funding for four internal ECOHE grant programs and pilots totaling \$193,000.00. In 2023, the ECOHE provided 222 hours of one-on-one technical assistance, helping 72 community-based organizations and groups apply for a total of \$11,575,000 in grant funding from federal, state, municipal, and foundation funders, much of which is pending at the time of this report but \$3,550,000 of which has already been successfully received by 18 of those community organizations. The increasing frequency of requests for technical assistance indicates that there is a significant community need for grant-related technical assistance among community-based organizations and groups serving minority, marginalized, and underserved communities in Erie County.

ECOHE Newsletters Offer Accessible Resources and Knowledge

ECOHE newsletters are designed to inform, remind, and connect communities in Erie County to resources and knowledge of topics relating to the social determinants of health. ECOHE newsletters are intended to offer upstream support that addresses health equity issues by putting the power of

information in the hands of the residents of Erie County in a way that is positive, inviting, culturally connected, and representative of the diverse population we see across the county. The ECOHE newsletters is intended to be culturally responsive and is written in plain language to meet Erie County residents where they are at in terms of identity and literacy, respectively. Each edition of the ECOHE newsletter is distributed in Arabic, Bengali, Burmese, English, Spanish, and Swahili. While primarily distributed in print to community-based organizations, each newsletter is available in both print and digital formats. Four new editions of the ECOHE Newsletter were produced in 2023: Let's Talk About Pregnancy, Let's Talk About Summer Heat, Let's Talk About Lead, and Let's Talk About Grants. The ECOHE Newsletter distribution reaches approximately 14,000 people in print and digital format per edition. In print, the newsletter reaches 28 ZIP codes at 129 unique locations per edition. In email, the ECOHE sends the newsletter out to 881 addresses and counting, a list that continues to grow through the ECOHE's ongoing community engagement efforts. The ECOHE will continue to produce a set of materials that is reflective of the needs of Erie County residents. The upcoming topic list includes but is not limited to health equity, diabetes, heart health, and immunizations.

KEY FINDINGS: 2022 ECOHE COMMUNITY SURVEY

The ECOHE published a report in January of 2023 entitled *Health Equity in Erie County: An Initial Health Disparities Assessment* that examined inequities in health by reviewing data on health outcomes and social factors, such as income and education [2]. This report seeks to reflect the efforts of this initial data collection, as well as to provide insights and key findings from new survey and focus group data provided by the community. To gather information to address some of the gaps in existing data, the ECOHE planned three methods to hear directly from the community from 2022 through 2024: a community survey, a series of focus groups, and a series of dialogues with community leaders. The aim of this research was to hear from communities that are often overlooked, voiceless or underrepresented in data. Outreach efforts prioritized racial, ethnic, and gender minority communities. For example, the ECOHE survey was taken door-to-door in partnership with the Buffalo Center for Health Equity and the Witness Project, resulting in over one thousand survey responses from the East Side of Buffalo. As a result, the pool of respondents is not a representative sample of Erie County residents. This report contains a section for each of the 6 domains of the social determinants of health (SDOH). Each SDOH section presents findings from the community survey along with excerpts from the community focus groups. Dialogues with leaders from communities not able to be reached by the survey and focus groups are planned for 2024.

Race and Ethnicity Correlate to Assets and Advantages

There are stark differences in rates of assets and advantages, such as homeownership and use of a personal vehicle, among Erie County residents based on race and ethnicity, even when controlling for education level in many instances. Racially and ethnically minoritized respondents reported poorer finances and fewer assets than non-Hispanic White respondents with the same level of formal education. Respondents who reported their race and ethnicity as non-Hispanic White were far more likely than any other racial or ethnic group to report that they own their homes or report that they get around by personal vehicle. Having fewer assets and advantages also correlated to more challenges

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and barriers related to other SDOH factors, such as finding or keeping a job, accessing food and other life necessities, and having enough money to pay for day-to-day expenses.

Accessing Quality Health Care Is a Challenge for Marginalized Groups

When examined by race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, access to care and quality of health care among Erie County residents were consistently lower for minority groups. Survey respondents who indicated genders other than man or woman, including transgender and nonbinary respondents, were more likely to have challenges accessing health care and more likely to feel that they have been treated poorly by health care providers. Similarly, challenges to accessing health care were experienced at much higher rates by respondents from racially minoritized groups.

Barriers Include Affordability, Education Level, Transportation, and Language Access

Data from survey respondents and focus group participants clearly demonstrate a variety of barriers and challenges impacting the health of Erie County residents. Affordability was a prominent challenge across SDOH domains, and was reported as a barrier to accessing transportation, eating healthy, and obtaining child care and adult care across all demographic groups. Formal education level was reported as a barrier to employment for many Erie County residents. Higher levels of formal education were clearly associated with increased assets and stability, including respondents' housing and financial situations. Public transportation barriers are also present in Erie County, and disproportionately impact urban and rural residents. Survey and focus group data also indicate that language access is a barrier to health care access in Erie County for those whose primary language is not English. In several focus groups, lack of interpretation/translation was cited as a barrier to receiving important information regarding health, health care, and safety (e.g., information during the December 2022 blizzard).

Regular Data Collection Is Needed

Data collection plays a key role in the process of addressing inequities. Without continued data collection, we are unable to identify disparities and systemic issues or to measure our progress towards addressing them. Ongoing data collection also ensures that we have a clear, accurate, and comprehensive picture of health and health equity in Erie County. While the 2022 ECOHE Community Survey yielded a lot of valuable information, it also contained imperfections that led to unforeseen challenges. Lessons learned during this process, including the challenges of open-ended questions and the competing priorities of privacy and data quality, will inform future efforts. Additionally, the data contained in this report highlight a continued need for further disaggregation of typically broad categories that may conceal important health disparities due to the immense diversity of the individuals and communities that fall under those categories. For example, while survey respondents born in U.S. territories reported more challenges overall than those born outside the United States, it is difficult to draw distinct conclusions for individuals born outside the United States, likely because there is so much variation in experiences and assets. Research on the experiences of immigrants needs to be more specific. The 2022 ECOHE Community Survey and focus groups were implemented with the goal of collecting relevant, specific, and accurate local data describing the current health of Erie County residents. While the data contained in this report represent successful efforts towards this goal, continued data collection is crucial.

NEXT STEPS

The ECOHE will continue to serve as a resource to organizations and individuals in the community that are striving to reduce health disparities and increase health equity in Erie County. The ECOHE brings its subject matter expertise in data collection, analysis, and reporting as well as grant writing and grants management assistance to those who would like support in these areas in order to further their health equity work. The ECOHE will continue to provide upstream support including engagement, education, and resources to the Erie County community. Future ECOHE reports will analyze new data collected by the ECOHE team as well as report on findings of analysis of public (federal, state, county, and city) and private data sources.