How did we get here?

REACH has been in existence since 2015, starting a seasonal shelter, which ultimately ended up being housed at 720 West Main St. We thank the Coptic Christian community for their support at this facility. As we moved forward, REACH contemplated an alternative to the sheltering of many at one site to a model of scattered sites with separate rooms and support services, social workers, and shelter management and staff. These support services provided assistance with anticipated behavioral health issues and medical concerns, as well as help with the many requirements to receive public assistance for each guest.

In 2022, the Monroe County Department of Human Services, the provider of public assistance for people experiencing homelessness through the Emergency Shelter Program (Temporary Housing Assistance), and REACH came together with partners to establish the foundation for REACH developing Project Haven. Project Haven was created as a program of 80 beds of temporary housing with six scattered sites, allowing a better geographical reach as well as the opportunity to address marginalized communities of unhoused LGBTQIA+ people, women fleeing from sex trafficking, and men seeking a sober living situation. These options were unique and highly effective.

It was understood that Project Haven would receive an appropriate per diem rate that would allow our program to house more than just people who satisfied the requirements for reimbursement from DHS—but also many who didn't qualify. This model was groundbreaking—serving a larger, more diverse population in Project Haven. It is unfortunate that the contract provided by MCDHS was a standard contract that only addressed the increase in per diem, and the flexibility offered when we met to set this program up was never addressed in the agreement with Monroe County. Nevertheless, REACH entered into this endeavor in good faith that the funding allocated by MCDHS would be received, meeting the expenses outlined in our budget.

Project Haven incurred significant start-up costs to locate property owners for site rental (our partners), develop operational and security plans for each site, and provide training and staffing to properly care for the guests we housed as the shelter filled to capacity in the first days of the contract. This work occurred before receiving our initial reimbursement from DHS, nearly three months after the contract went into effect. Funding over the first two years of the program never covered the incurred and agreed-to program costs. Project Haven continued operations with the promise of relief of its incurred debt and smoother reimbursements with other public funds that never materialized. It is important to state that

REACH failed in its fiduciary responsibility by relying on the potential relief offered verbally without written confirmation and not altering operations sooner.

As Project Haven worked through its financial difficulties, REACH was transparent about the unanticipated difficulty in getting individuals approved for temporary assistance at MCDHS. We engaged all parties and frequently had meetings with all stakeholders, public and private, for resolution. With the funding promises ending in early 2024, REACH did the prudent thing and closed four of the sites in February and a fifth site in June.

A significant portion of our budget relied on funding for 30 Code Blue beds each winter, providing an open door to these beds with limited regulatory responsibility. REACH has been a stable provider of these much-needed Code Blue beds for nine years and was provided assurance that this would be the case this winter. Yet, on the evening of November 25th, the day that Code Blue commenced, three days before Thanksgiving, and after REACH/Project Haven had set up the cots and staffing required at an increased cost, we were notified that our Code Blue proposal acceptance had been rescinded. We later learned that the county’s reasoning was that “adequate beds were already provided." We were shocked because homelessness in Monroe County increased more than 30% from 2023 to 2024 (annual point-in-time count). Yet, we could not find any published information on how many Code Blue beds were funded this year. However, in

a recent **RochesterFirst article**, Open Door Mission reported increasing their Code Blue bed count from 100 to 150 over the last few months and housing people in their office space.

Project Haven has remained open with the support of our real estate and service partners. However, inadequate funding makes it more difficult than ever to meet our payroll and bills that have escalated since the beginning. We must close this program and surrender our contract with the county.

We acknowledge that the county remains significantly understaffed, and there is now even more pressure on all nonprofit providers as well.

In spite of our financial struggles, Project Haven was successful in providing a safe haven for our guests. We served more than 900 guests, providing them with private rooms, three meals a day, and supportive services, placing over 40% into transitional or permanent housing. We provided a clear model of how to change the trajectory of homelessness in our community.

REACH continues its development of the community's first tiny home village, Edgerton Meadows, for people experiencing chronic homelessness in the Edgerton Neighborhood. We also continue providing advocacy for and with people who are unhoused and hope to work with

our elected officials to develop a more efficient and streamlined funding process.

Please direct all questions and comments to Patrick Tobin, Board Chair, at info@reachadvocacy.org.