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WNY Social Care Network Has Screened 65,000 Medicaid Members and Counting

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When Gov. Kathy Hochul announced in August 2024 that **Western New York Integrated Care Collaborative Inc.** would run a social care network in Erie, Niagara, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties, the small Buffalo nonprofit had just seven employees.

Two years later, WNYICC has grown to 35 staff members as it has tried to do its part in making Medicaid members in Western New York healthier through the state's Medicaid Section 1115 Demonstration Waiver.

In running the region's social care network, WNYICC and its partners have screened more than 65,000 Medicaid members across Erie, Niagara, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties, said Nikki Kmicinski, CEO of WNYICC. Across New York State, the nine social care network lead entities statewide have screened more than 1.5 million Medicaid members.

Of those screened in the four counties in Western New York, more than 76% reported at least one unmet social need – food was the most common need, followed by housing and then transportation, Kmicinski said.

After a Medicaid member is screened, Kmicinski explained that the person works with a social care navigator to find out what services they're eligible for. From there, the navigator helps connect the person with services available through one of the almost 150 community-based organizations that WNYICC has partnered with as it has built out the social care network.

Food services, in particular, have been successful, Kmicinski said. Among the partners: **Community Nutrition Partnership**, a nonprofit that provides weekly food boxes, nutrition guidance and ongoing support through its FreshFlavorRx program.

“They’ve really taken this opportunity and run with it,” Kmicinski said of Community Nutrition Partnership. “They’re helping feed so many people in our region. They’re a great partner.”

The Medicaid waiver and its future

In early January 2024, the state announced the U.S. Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services had approved its $7.5 billion Medicaid Section 1115 Demonstration Waiver. The waiver included nearly $6 billion in federal funding over three years, focused on actions that will boost health equity, cut health disparities and bolster access to primary and behavioral health care.

One component of the waiver was the establishment of social care networks across New York State. Nine organizations statewide, including WNYICC, were selected to share a total of $500 million over a three-year period as they built out social care networks in their regions to help connect Medicaid members to nutritional meals, housing supports, transportation and other social services.

While WNYICC’s social care network covers Erie, Niagara, Cattaraugus and Chautauqua counties, Allegany, Genesee, Orleans and Wyoming counties are included in the **Finger Lakes region and are covered by a social care network** run by **Forward Leading IPA**.

The current waiver is authorized through March 31, and New York State on Sept. 30 submitted an application to the U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services to **request a five-year extension of the waiver**.

Kmicinski expects to find out more toward the end of the year, but she believes the state will find a way to continue the work.

“The state is committed to keeping the social care network as a permanent fixture in the Medicaid space, and just how it gets funded is what’s in question now,” she said.

Starting to evaluate results

As the work continues, Kmicinski said her group is starting a project with HEALTHeLINK to evaluate the early results of the social care network.

HEALTHeLINK, a nonprofit health information exchange in Western New York, has long been a regional facilitator that connects more than 5,300 health care providers in the area. In addition, after the operations of Population Health Collaborative merged into HEALTHeLINK in 2022, HEALTHeLINK’s mission has expanded to include regional health improvement.

Kmicinski said WNYICC will be working with HEALTHeLINK to answer questions such as: Have the services Medicaid members received through the social care network helped their clinical measures? Have they gone to an urgent care or an emergency room less often?

“We're going to be pulling a lot of those and hope to have more of that data in the next couple months,” she said.