

## **SUPPLEMENT TO RURAL OUTREACH CENTER APPLICATION FOR REZONING**

The Rural Outreach Center, Inc. (“ROC”) has applied to the Town Board for a rezoning of 730 Olean Road. In response to that application, a number of residents who live near the property have communicated their concerns to the Board about the requested rezoning. This supplement to ROC’s application is meant to respond to those residents and to add further information that may be relevant to the Board’s decision.

We at the ROC acknowledge our neighbors’ understandable concerns and are hopeful that a fuller explanation of the facts concerning the ROC’s efforts to minimize the effects of its activities on others will help to lessen those concerns. Before addressing those concerns, a brief description of the ROC’s history and its mission is in order.

### **ROC’S HISTORY AND MISSION**

The ROC grew out of a small program initiated by Pathways Christian Fellowship, a Christian congregation now based in the Town of Aurora, and its pastor, Dr. Frank Cerny. The congregation reached out to some of the poorest residents of the Southtowns in a spirit of sharing, starting out with a free monthly community dinner. It soon became clear that there was a large number of rural poor in the area, more than was evident. Further, there were no resources, either governmental or charitable, available to help those poor. They were not underserved; there was no service at all. Pathways began exploring ways to help these people, but it soon realized that the need was far greater than the small congregation could supply.

ROC was incorporated in 2012 as a not-for-profit, charitable organization to continue and expand the work of Pathways. Dr. Cerny was its initial Executive Director and continues in that role today. Pathways owned the land at 730 Olean Road, so, needing a base for its expanding operations, ROC acquired a used trailer from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and set it up on the property. The ROC soon outgrew the trailer, but was fortunate to have the East Aurora Kiwanis Club voluntarily construct an addition to the trailer at no cost to the ROC. Under Dr. Cerny’s guidance, and through the efforts of numerous, committed volunteers and employees, the ROC has grown from

serving less than 50 people in 2012 to touching the lives of over 4,000 people. It now employs several licensed social workers as well as case management and intake specialists and other staff.

ROC's mission has always been a charitable one, but the ROC does not simply distribute food and other resources to the rural poor. ROC's guiding principle is to "Assist, Empower and Elevate." Its primary mission is to empower people, so that they can eventually move to a position of self-sufficiency. In order to break the generational cycle of poverty, the ROC also has a particular focus on children, most of whom are suffering from various traumas brought on by their circumstances. Adult participants in the ROC program, individuals and families, are educated, counseled, and receive therapy and are linked with other resources to allow them to understand their own needs, to give them the means to break the grip of poverty, and to graduate to a brighter, and more stable future. All participants are treated with care and respect.

ROC is not tilting at windmills. It establishes objectives for participants, measures their movement towards those positive outcomes, and encourages participants to persevere on their difficult journeys to self-sufficiency, even in the face of serious obstacles. And it has found success. More than half of all participants have been able to make measurable, objective progress, as monitored by ROC, towards their goals.

The good that ROC does has not gone unnoticed. The ROC model has caught the attention of Federal agencies, New York State, Erie County and some of the surrounding counties who recognize the effectiveness of ROC. As an example, ROC recently received a grant of several hundred thousand dollars to be used to further develop and refine the ROC model so that it can be exported as a turn-key operation to other rural counties in New York State. Dr. Cerny has consulted with numerous federal agencies and other governmental and non-governmental organizations around the country regarding ROC's program and methods. Finally, the ROC was recently recognized by the New York State Health Association for its model of service.

Various Western New York foundations, corporations, governmental agencies and many individuals have all contributed financially to the ROC's ongoing operations. Residents of the Town of Aurora have welcomed and supported the ROC, as shown by their generous financial support and the over 150 volunteers who assist in ROC's ongoing operations. The number of donors from the Aurora Community has increased every year, as well as the total amount of their contributions.

## **NEED FOR NEW BUILDING**

Since occupying the repurposed double wide trailer on the property in 2015, there has been an over 1,000% increase in the number of participants in ROC's programs. The trailer was used when ROC obtained it, and it is reaching the end of its useful life. More importantly, the wide array and depth of services offered to the increased number of our participants can no longer be carried out in a safe and effective manner in our beyond-expiration-date trailer. There is simply not enough space available. Even now, ROC has been forced to rent additional space away from the property for some of its administrative staff, leading to increased costs and inefficiencies.

The proposed facility is designed to be welcoming with a look that sends the message that each person who enters is valued and will be cared for. The estimated cost of the building is \$3,000,000 of which \$1,500,000 has been raised, including \$400,000 from Erie County.

## **THE CONCERNS OF OUR NEIGHBORS**

As we understand it, there are three major areas of concern: a new building set among residents, potential increased traffic volume and operation of the Code Blue program.

### **New building concerns**

As noted above, the building design is meant to be attractive and consistent with its rural setting. It obviously will be substantially more attractive than the trailer and addition now on the property. Several neighbors have expressed concern regarding the intrusion into their otherwise isolated residences. We note that when ROC moved to the property one of the first things it did was plant a line of trees along the south boundary line of the property. The new building will be constructed at a spot farther from Olean Road than where the FEMA trailer is now positioned. The proposed parking area will be behind the building, out of view from the road and well buffered from the view of immediate neighbors. Additionally, the new building design provides for outside lighting specifically designed so that light does not project across the side lines of the property. Further, our architects have created a site plan that includes provisions for a drainage and water retention system that will significantly improve the current situation for the ROC and our neighbors. Ample parking to

the rear of the building and an improved entrance and exit from the property will make access to the property safer than it is now.

### **Traffic volume**

Traffic volume concerns appear to relate to occasions this year when the ROC was distributing food and a line of waiting cars extended onto Olean Road for a substantial distance. This situation is temporary. Food distribution is not a usual activity for the ROC. Because of increased need for food caused by the effects of the Covid 19 pandemic, the USDA requested ROC to help with the distribution of food in rural areas because of ROC's reputation and reach into these communities. We find that people come from as far away as Caneadea and Little Valley, suggesting that we are meeting a need.

At present, once the distribution of food begins, most are served within 45 minutes. In recognition of the potential safety issues, we engage fire auxiliary to provide flashing warning lights and traffic direction. We also post signs asking people to not block driveways.

Once the pandemic recedes and this short-term, increased demand for food is over, we will no longer serve the community in this capacity. The ROC has not developed a food or clothing pantry, recognizing that existing organizations such as FISH, BOLO and Trading Post, already serve these needs. Even so, should the need arise again in the future, and the ROC again be called upon to distribute food temporarily, the proposed building and grounds, with a longer driveway and increased parking area, would provide space to minimize roadside waiting.

### **Code Blue Program**

The most pressing concern of our neighbors relate to the Code Blue Program that ROC operates. New York State mandates that each county provide shelter for homeless persons whenever the temperature, with wind chill, drops below 32 degrees from mid-November until the end of March. Erie County has contracted with the ROC to provide this service and we are the only agency offering this service in rural Erie County. Unlike other such programs in other areas, the focus of the ROC is not just on providing temporary shelter on nights when it is freezing. The ROC uses the program as an outreach to the profoundly poor in rural communities. Our focus is on providing resources so that homeless persons find housing and even employment. Our success rate is such that over 50% of those

coming to ROC Code Blue end up with more permanent housing and many have them have been helped to find employment. One former homeless person served by the ROC is now the proud owner of his own mobile home.

This is part of the ROC model – to move persons from dependency toward greater self-sufficiency.

Notably, the number of individuals that are sheltered on any particular night seldom exceeds 6, and is more often 3 to 5.

We readily admit that we made mistakes in the first two years of Code Blue operation. We tried to “save everyone.” We learned from those mistakes. Our current rules are attached to this supplement. In brief, we no longer accept those with severe mental illness, who exhibit evidence of substance abuse or otherwise engage in behavior that would cause concerns among neighbors. We have put procedures in place to prevent disruption.

The presence of police at the house is a reflection of this increased vigilance. To enforce our restrictions we have asked and the East Aurora police have agreed to conduct random inspections for drugs among those sheltered, thus ensuring that we have a drug free environment. It is also the case that homeless often have special needs, caused in large part by their circumstances. For example, last year we had two residents undergoing cancer treatment (imagine being homeless and enduring treatment). This necessitated frequent transportation via ambulance and police. With our revised rules and procedures, the presence of police or ambulances at our Code Blue shelter is now more likely to be for aid and assistance, not in response to criminal activity on the premises.

## **CONCLUSION**

It has been said that you cannot do all the good that the world needs, but the world needs all the good you can do. Whether called by faith, or by ethics, or just because it is the right thing to do, the Aurora Community has always supported charitable and community-building works, whether through its service clubs, such as Kiwanis and the Rotary Club, community organizations such as the Boys & Girls Club of East Aurora, the East Aurora Educational Foundation, and Aurora Adult Day Services, or simply by individual volunteer activity and financial contributions. The ROC is part of this community-building effort. The ROC strives to fill the needs of the rural poor that have for too long

been unrecognized and unmet. The ROC is proud that it can be a force in breaking the cycle of poverty among the rural poor, thereby restoring them as contributing members of the community. We are always ready to address the concerns of our neighbors and we hope to persuade them and the Town Board to support us in our efforts to carry out our mission.

January 7, 2021

Respectfully submitted,  
The Rural Outreach Center, Inc.

## **APPENDIX - Summary of Code Blue Policies**

**Sex offenders:** Level Two and Three Sexual offenders will be subject to alternative placement through the County Department of Social Services, based on the nature of their sexual offense. Specifically, those that have committed sexual acts/crimes against minors under 16 are not allowed to reside at the ROC Code Blue facility. The determination is made by the Coordinator and Executive Director.

**Severe mental health diagnoses:** The ROC Code blue facility is not equipped to deal with persons with severe mental health diagnoses. Such individuals will be offered to and transported to alternate, more appropriate, facilities.

**Substance Possession and Use:** Participants and staff may not have or use alcohol or illegal substances on the property, nor have drug-related paraphernalia in their possession, at any time. (A list of specific drugs and paraphernalia is provided). Searches are made prior to entry and regular patrols by local law enforcement, including the K-9 unit, are made. Those unwilling to agree to this rule are asked to leave and, when necessary, escorted to another site in Buffalo.

If anyone comes to the facility in a state that requires medical attention or is in a state that is dangerous to themselves or others, the police and/or paramedics are called to remove the person.

Participants and staff that need medication must have medication in the original prescription bottle with the name and type of prescription labeled. Participants and staff must maintain their own prescriptions. The Rural Outreach Center cannot store or lock up prescriptions.

**Staff/Participant Relationships:** Code Blue staff relationships with participants will be professional in nature. Staff should only have contact or access to participants while they are scheduled to work onsite. Staff may never give participants their personal phone numbers, house address, or engage with them in a personal setting outside of work. Staff are not permitted to purchase items with their personal funds for participants. Staff are not permitted to purchase items for Code Blue participants when they are not scheduled to work. If a participant is rehoused, Code Blue staff are not allowed to visit the individual at their house.

**Sanitation and Cleanliness:** Code Blue staff are responsible for completing daily cleaning checklists and are responsible for maintaining a safe and clean facility that satisfies Health Department.

Code Blue participants are assigned cots and living spaces that are set up six feet apart from one another. Participants are responsible for maintaining personal hygiene, including showering at least every other day while at our facility. Participants will be responsible for cleaning their personal area, as well as cleaning their dishes.

**Discrimination:** The Rural Outreach Center accepts and welcomes all Code Blue Staff members and participants regardless of race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, sex, citizenship status, political affiliation, religion, physical appearance, and work status etc. Code Blue

staff that behave or express comments that indicate discrimination will be fired immediately. Code Blue participants that behave or speak in a discriminatory manner will be asked to leave for 24 hours.

**Entering and Exiting the Building:** Participants are granted entrance into the building until 11pm for nighttime warming. The doors will be closed at that time. The doors reopen at 7am. Individuals needing daytime warming may enter at this time. Upon entering the building, participants and staff agree to have their personal belongings searched and a pat down.

If participants need to leave the building between 11pm and 7 am (e.g., to smoke), they must have a staff member accompany or escort them.

Participants and Code Blue staff are only granted access to the Code Blue facility and/or The Rural Outreach Center when a Code Blue is activated. If participants or staff enter the premise when Code Blue is not activated, the authorities will be contacted for trespassing.

**Meals and Food:** Code Blue Staff are responsible for shopping and providing a community food source for Code Blue participants. Additionally, Code Blue staff will be responsible for taking participants shopping for food and personal care items on a weekly basis.

All participants are granted two meals and two snacks per day provided by Code Blue funding and sources. If a documented medical condition indicates the need for additional or specific food items, it will be provided.

Code Blue staff cannot prepare food for participants but can assist participants in preparing their own food (giving directions).

**Sleeping Arrangements:** Men and Women will be separated based upon their gender identity. Opposite Sex/gender couples will only be granted access to sleeping arrangements in the same room/area as one another for the following accommodations: if they are the caretaker of their partner, or if they are with minor children that they are the parent(s)/ guardian(s) over. The ROC works to move families to more appropriate facilities as quickly as possible.

Family and Children have preference to private sleeping arrangements, followed by participants that identify as female/woman.

Sleeping arrangements (cots, personal items, blankets, etc.) may be set up by participants or staff, beginning at 7pm. The sleeping area must be cleaned up and stored away by 9 am the following day.

**Transportation:** The Rural Outreach Center provides Code Blue transportation to and from the towns identified within our service area. Code Blue transportation to and from the shelter is available when Code Blue Drivers are scheduled. Individuals from outside our service area are permitted to utilize Code Blue services but need to identify their own transportation to access our site.

Transportation services that are not related to obtaining access to our shelter or leaving our shelter, e.g. doctor's appointments, mental health appointments, and appointments at the Department of Social Services, must be scheduled through the Administrative Assistant at The Rural Outreach Center.

Transportation will must be scheduled at least 36 hours in advance. The Rural Outreach Center reserves the right to cancel and deny these transportation requests.



**Weapons:** While on the property, firearms are never permitted for either staff and program participants. We will contact authorities if a gun is suspected or found.

If participants carry other modes of protection such as (but not limited to): knife, pepper spray, air soft/bee- bee guns, and a taser, such devices must be turned in to staff and will be returned when leaving the property. Refusal to relinquish such devices are considered a refusal to enter the premises. If a weapon is hidden and later found during a random check, we reserve the right to keep the weapon or ask you to leave the property.

**Minors for Code Blue:** Children under 18 will remain with parents/legal guardians when they are at the Code Blue shelter. Families can and will be held at the shelter on a temporary basis as they will be referred to a shelter that accommodates minors.