

# Niagara County has earned a COVID-19 respite

**GUEST EDITORIAL BY DANIEL J. STAPLETON, MBA**  
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On June 15, Gov. Cuomo lifted almost all COVID-19 restrictions across New York state. Businesses, restaurants, gyms, movie theaters and so on could now return to operating their businesses the way they saw fit. That same night, I appeared at the Niagara County Legislature as the legislators returned to meeting in person at the courthouse in Lockport.

I took that opportunity to thank all the staff, partners and volunteers who have given so much of themselves to help our community through the pandemic, and give some perspective on all that has transpired. But the one thing I wanted to caution is that we are not celebrating the end of COVID-19.

Sporting events, concerts and movies have beginnings and endings. A public health crisis is not that clear cut. In the beginning of 2020, when rumblings of a new virus in China were beginning to get a little attention here, the Niagara County Department of



Health was already in preparation mode. We were involved in meetings with the federal government, particularly Customs and Border Patrol, on how to handle any sick people that may cross the border.

In mid-March, the pandemic really took hold, with the shutting down of much of our everyday life. Yet the Health Department staff was ramping up, focused on PPE and contact tracing. Shortly thereafter, we began running COVID testing operations, particular-

ly focused on senior congregate living facilities, which were the most susceptible venues to the virus. We also did testing in every school district in Niagara County.

The Niagara County Department of Health provides a tremendous array of important services – tuberculosis clinics, STD clinics, rabies clinics, restaurant inspections, services to families and so much more. Yet, many of those functions ceased or were significantly scaled back as staff members were transferred to our COVID efforts, filling roles they never could have imagined.

When our COVID numbers improved in the summer and fall of 2020, we continued our work, providing guidance to schools, businesses and others as some reopening of our world began. But we knew the coming holiday season beginning with Halloween and going through Easter would be challenging, and our worse fears were realized.

To say we were swamped with cases, requiring contact tracing, quarantines and isolations would be an understatement. But at the

end of 2020 and into this year, we knew hope was on the horizon as vaccine distribution began.

With everything that our team worked through, I think I'm most proud of our vaccination clinics. The years of training and preparation had clearly paid off as the team did not miss a single detail. At the height of our vaccination clinics, we were getting 2,500 shots in arms per day and could have doubled that had we received more vaccine. When demand for the mass clinics fell off, we switched to smaller venues in underserved urban and rural areas where the percent of those vaccinated was lagging.

In these few paragraphs, I cannot begin to capture all that went on and the tremendous gratitude I have for our staff, volunteers and community partners. Rain, shine or an unexpected snow storm, the team was still ready to go at every clinic. But I think one story might best illustrate how you come together in a pandemic.

Twelve years ago, H1N1 was a very serious health issue and we had to run vaccination clinics. We

had a retired couple in their late 60s volunteer to help direct people through. Trust me when I tell you the flow of people at a vaccination clinic is of paramount importance. Now, 12 years older and in their late 70s, this same couple came back and volunteered at our clinics again. They did so for no pay, no glory, but simply because their community needed them. And the community needed many, many others, as well, who helped bring us to June 15.

As I said, a public health crisis rarely has a clear beginning and it has an even less defined end. The COVID-19 battle is not over. We still have many people who are not vaccinated. We have variant strains that we are learning about. And we are still learning what this virus means long-term. So, we do our best to prevent, treat and manage the impacts of COVID, but we do so while living our lives to the fullest. And in that regard, I say enjoy your summer Niagara County, it wasn't just given to you ... you earned it!

## Building connections key at Heart & Soul

Continued from Page 6

meals, something they're hoping to increase. Future plans would see the inclusion of a greenhouse space to allow it to function year-round. He's hoping to connect with the surrounding community so, in the future, it can have ownership of it.

"We envision that, in the future, it can be a garden that the community takes care of and maintains and also uses so people from the community can come in and gather what they need," Baetzhold says.

The garden is also set to provide a therapeutic aspect to Heart, Love & Soul – not just in a community building sense, but also health care-wise.

"Behavioral health specialists, occupational therapists, physical therapists can take their patients to the garden and incorporate it into their treatment plans," Baetzhold



Heart, Love & Soul's community garden will be getting upgraded and will provide food and therapy for guests.

says. "We've actually just identified a landscape architect to help us with that. Blue Cross Blue Shield of Western New York has generously given us some startup money to support the development of the garden. So, it's all

good things."

Of course, the pandemic affected Heart, Love & Soul in other ways, particularly fundraising. Fortunately, there are ways folks can assist.

"Our annual fundraiser that's

usually held in April, we didn't hold it this year because of the pandemic. We've been planning a hybrid virtual/live event scheduled for Aug. 17 at Niagara University the dining commons," Baetzhold says. "We have been planning on 100-125 people, (but) I think the capacity of the dining hall is 250 and we might be able to get up to that number or close to that number. It still remains to be seen how things turn out pandemic."

An official announcement with more details will be released soon Baetzhold says.

There are a number of ways to help now. Donations can be made year-round at [www.heartloveandsoul.org/donate](http://www.heartloveandsoul.org/donate). But the most significant means of helping is still volunteering.

Bradley spoke first-hand about the personal positivity experienced from doing so.

"It just makes you realize how blessed you are that, when you see people come who have a need – nobody makes fun, nobody looks down on them or anything. People are here to help and, here, we gotta listen to what makes a difference," he says. "And you can feel it; you can see it. That's the reason why I'm here. ... That's why I love the organization, for what it does. For folks who may not know just how to get things they need, this place is an advocate for them. ... Whether it's nutrition, safety, medical; whether it's social service – doesn't make a difference. They will rise to the occasion and help people wherever they need."

## Project Awareness pharmacy label campaign

The Niagara County Department of Mental Health & Substance Abuse Services (NCDMH), in partnership with the Niagara County Opioid Task Force (OASIS) and local pharmacies, on Thursday announced the launch of Project Awareness, a campaign to provide the Niagara County Crisis Services 24-hour phone line number on prescription medications that have a high potential for abuse and overdose. The goal is to raise awareness that help is available – any time, any day – for individuals who may have substance use concerns or may be considering taking the medications with intent to harm themselves.

"With substance abuse and drug overdoses continuing to be an epidemic in our community, negatively impacting various facets of life for individuals, families and the community at large, we must do all we can together to address this public health crisis," said Myrla Gibbons Doxey, NCDMH deputy director and co-chair of the Niagara County Opioid Task Force public awareness/in-

volvement subcommittee.

NCDMH Director Laura Kelemen said, "No one should have to face life's most difficult challenges alone, and it's crucial that our communities know that there are people available to reach out to that can help make a positive impact on – and potentially save – their lives."

When approached with the idea of partnering to provide Crisis Services information on targeted prescription medications, 10 local pharmacies stepped up to be a part of this project. Those pharmacies are as follows:

**Lewiston:**  
✓ DeGiulio's Pharmacy, 220 Portage Road

**Lockport:**  
✓ Family Pharmacy Plus, 320 S. Transit Road  
✓ Lockport Apothecary, 6606 Lincoln Ave.

**Newfane:**  
✓ The Medicine Shoppe, 2780 S. Main St.

**Niagara Falls area:**  
✓ Community Medical Pharmacy, 918 Michigan Ave.  
✓ Niagara Apothecary, 8745 Niagara Falls Blvd.  
✓ Wellness Park Pharmacy, 8672

Buffalo Ave.

**North Tonawanda:**  
✓ Wurlitzer Family Pharmacy, 521 Division St.

**Pendleton:**  
✓ Pendleton Star Pharmacy, 6503 Campbell Blvd.

**Wheatfield:**  
✓ Summit Park Pharmacy, 2578 Niagara Falls Blvd., Suite 100

Niagara County Legislator Owen Steed said, "We really appreciate these local pharmacies who are going the extra mile to help our local citizens. I'm looking forward to when all Niagara County pharmacies have the Crisis Services phone number on their prescription medications to help those in need." He is co-chair of the Niagara County Opioid Task Force public awareness/involvement subcommittee.

It is anticipated approximately 360,000 labels will be placed on prescription medications over the course of the next year through the Project Awareness effort.

The Niagara County Crisis Services 24-hour phone line, 285-3515, operates every hour of every day of the year providing free, confidential support, guid-

ance, referral and/or intervention to anyone experiencing mental health and/or substance use related concerns.

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