

How dentists and counselors aim to address health inequity in one of Buffalo's poorest neighborhoods

Jon Harris

Gerard Place President and CEO David Zapfel zips through a 120-year-old former convent on Bailey Avenue, wooden boards creaking beneath his feet as he details a project he knows the community needs as soon as possible.

He lays out the vision: The first floor of this Bailey Avenue building will become a dental clinic, with two chairs for adults and one for kids.

Plans for the second floor: an outpatient mental health clinic – services in demand more than ever amid the Covid-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the racist mass shooting May 14 at the Tops on Jefferson Avenue, just a couple of miles away.

This project, a partnership between nonprofits Gerard Place and Lackawanna-based OLV Human Services, could boost access to mental health and dental services in Buffalo's Bailey-Delavan neighborhood.

It also fits into a trend of bolstering health care resources in communities that have historically been underserved.

"This is really one of the poorest and most underserved communities," Zapfel said of Buffalo's 14215 ZIP code where Gerard Place is located. "That's what we have to do more, is bring the service right to the people."

Access to affordable health services is a key social determinant of health, the term given to the nonmedical factors – other examples include housing, food access and economic stability – that affect a person's health and quality of life. It makes it clear that a person's health is often determined by the neighborhood in which they live.

The outcomes of these inequities are clear. With dental health, for instance, nearly twice as many Black or Mexican American adults have untreated cavities as white adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And while demand for treatment of anxiety and depression increased across the country during the pandemic, [researchers cited by the CDC](#) believe the need was even more pronounced among racial and ethnic minority groups who had greater exposure to pandemic-related stressors such as unemployment and food insecurity but didn't have the same access to mental health services.

It's Zapfel's hope the renovation project in his nonprofit organization's education building – the middle structure in Gerard Place's three-building Bailey Avenue campus – can provide convenience and access to nearby residents. Gerard Place will maintain ownership of the property, while OLV will operate and staff the dental and outpatient mental health clinics.

Zapfel has set an aggressive timeline to try to open it next summer. To hit that mark, Gerard Place is hoping to raise \$2 million – the estimated project cost – by the end of this year and get work started by the spring. The organization has raised about \$500,000 so far, he noted, and is meeting with various foundations and donors in Western New York.

"We don't really waste a lot of time," he said. "We would like it yesterday. But we keep moving forward."

'We're going to have health equity'

Hundreds gathered on a Saturday in mid-August at the University at Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, the site of the fifth annual Igniting Hope conference geared toward addressing the social determinants of health and tackling the causes that have driven deep race-based health inequities in Buffalo. "Here in Buffalo, we're going to have health equity, and we don't care if people don't think it's possible," said the Rev. George F. Nicholas, chairman of the Buffalo Center for Health Equity and senior pastor at Lincoln Memorial United Methodist Church..

Dr. Allison Brashear, dean of the Jacobs School, noted the Black population in Buffalo has four times more chronic disease than the white population. Further, she added, a Black person in Buffalo dies an average of 12 years sooner than a white person.

Those poor health outcomes are influenced by a variety of factors, including substandard housing, a lack of access to healthy food and limited health care resources in their communities.

And if health care resources are not accessible nearby, that forces residents to travel for services and absorb more expense – a big deal considering cost is one of the most commonly cited reasons for why people do not seek care.

The 14215 ZIP code, where Gerard Place is located, is home to 41,340 people, 72% of whom are Black, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. Nearly 30% of residents there live below the poverty line, more than double the rate in the Buffalo metro area, and the median value of owner-occupied housing units is \$71,100, the data show.

Kelly Wofford, director of the Erie County Office of Health Equity, said 14215 "is one of the ZIP codes that has the poorest health outcomes in the state."

"It's a recipe for poor health, between transportation issues, lack of access to healthy foods, education, employment level – not just unemployment but types of employment," she said.

The area around Gerard Place is among the most disadvantaged neighborhoods in the country, ranking in the 96th percentile in a nationwide index that is critical to assessing health disparities.

Many neighborhoods in East Buffalo rank similarly, according to the [Neighborhood Atlas tool from the Center for Health Disparities Research](#) at the University of Wisconsin, and it will take a sustained effort to eliminate longstanding inequities.

"Systems are built, and they work the way in which they've been built," Wofford said.

"When we look at the lack of so many things, including mental health services and dental services, you have to again look at the larger picture," Wofford said. "It goes back to how the system was built."

What Gerard Place, OLV see

The partnership between Gerard Place and OLV Human Services has been about a year in the making.

OLV had been searching for ways to collaborate with other Western New York nonprofits to bring its services to a wider group of people.

It found a partner in the much-smaller Gerard Place. Zapfel and his staff see the community's needs every day, whether it's in the nonprofit organization's food line where it provides 250 meals a week; in its supportive housing program for families; or in the Head Start program that currently serves 98 kids, 40% of whom have never been to the dentist.

As the conversations began, Zapfel quickly agreed that mental health counseling and dental care were two services needed in the area that Gerard Place serves.

And while Gerard Place had space available, OLV had the programming, staff and expertise, stemming from its outpatient counseling clinic and the 10,000-square-foot Baker Victory Dental Center in Lackawanna.

"It's a perfect marriage of what we do well, and what they have available and the access to the population," said OLV CEO Cindy Lee, noting the nonprofit organization also is collaborating with Gerard Place to provide care coordination services there.

The partners are confident in the project's success.

Of the Baker Victory Dental Center's 15,000 annual patients, roughly 1,000 of them come from the 14215 ZIP code.

"We bring the expertise to us, so that that community benefits from having programs and services that are walkable, since a lot of people don't have cars," Zapfel said.

Gerard Place and OLV also plan to offer the new space as a training ground for Daemen University, which is developing a dental school. The idea, Zapfel said, is that Daemen dental students could learn from OLV dentists while also working with patients of all ages.

OLV thinks the partnership with Gerard Place will just be the start of its growth in the area, which could boost access for long underserved neighborhoods.

"Our goal is to expand that into the greater geographical area around Bailey," Lee said. "I just have a feeling it's going to grow quickly."

Next steps

Before any of that can happen, however, there's a lot of work to do.

Namely, Zapfel said the project's budget is being finalized, expected to be around \$2 million – a big lift for the 20-employee Gerard Place, considering its annual budget also is \$2 million.

That's why Zapfel is applying and meeting with various foundations and donors. Gerard Place also has an application in for \$250,000 in state funding for neighborhood improvements. Gerard Place accepts donations through its website at gerardplace.org/get-involved/donate/.

A major expense will be adding an elevator in the former convent to boost accessibility from the third floor to the basement, which will be fully renovated to house several education programs now on the first floor.

There's a long way to go, but Zapfel believes the project will come to fruition, boosting access to mental health and dental services in the Bailey-Delavan neighborhood while also fitting into a larger community effort.

"Our goal is always to move people forward," he said, "in building a healthy community."

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