

Upstate VOA celebrates 125 years of serving children, the impoverished

By: [Velvet Spicer](#) August 5, 2021



Volunteers of America was founded in New York City in 1896. The Rochester office opened in 1901 after relocating from Binghamton. (Photo provided)

In its first 125 years, Volunteers of America Upstate New York has helped more than 1 million people through poverty and homelessness, reentry and children’s services and annually serves 6,000 people in Upstate New York.

Founded in New York City in 1896, the nonprofit agency grew out of a need to help formerly incarcerated individuals reenter society. Ballington Booth, son of the founder of the Salvation Army, and his wife, Maud Booth, ran the Salvation Army out of New York until infighting over the direction of the organization pushed the Booths to open VOA.

The Binghamton, Broome County, office was among the first locations to open. The office moved to Rochester in 1901.



“Over the course of the first year we were in more than 140 communities nationally, and the focus was on serving and uplifting the population,” said VOA Upstate President and CEO Lynn Sullivan. “There’s been a continual focus on helping individuals to rise from poverty through VOAs across the United States since its beginning.”

While services have evolved through the years, VOA continues to operate 34 programs in the areas of homelessness prevention, childhood education and reentry. Rob Stedman serves as vice president of services for children and families. He oversees the VOA’s children’s center on Lake Avenue. Some 60 people work at the center.

“We provide programs and services to children up to 12 years old,” Stedman explained. “We have a very large, one of the largest community-based pre-k programs here in the city that we partner with the city school district to provide.”

Stedman said the center has two “seasons;” during the school year VOA offers pre-k programming in partnership with the Rochester City School District that is funded by the state, as well as the federally-funded



Head Start program and Early Head Start program. The VOA typically serves nearly 300 kids in the pre-k programs.

The other program offered at the center during the school year is VOA's after-school program.

"Those are kids here in the city that either attend a district school or they attend a charter school and their families need a quality, safe after-school program for their child to attend. We have about 50-60 kids during a normal school year that are in that program," Stedman said.

The center serves more than 500 children and families annually and provides additional support services including a full-time registered nurse, on-site dental, family development services, ongoing parent training, full-day care and disability supports for children with special needs.

During the summer, the center's second "season," VOA offers full-day summer camp at the Lake Avenue center.

During the pandemic, VOA had to shift its hours and services to attend to the needs of city schoolchildren, Stedman noted.

"That after-school program this year has primarily been a full day program because of the fact that the city school district until February was fully virtual," he explained. "So those kids that are nine, 10 or 11 that would typically go to school and maybe come to us in the afternoons, many of those families had to work or had to go to school or whatever their individual situation was, and they needed a safe place for their kids to go."



On the housing side of things, Mike Deedee serves as vice president of housing services for VOA Upstate. He oversees housing in Rochester and Binghamton.

"We serve a wide range of the needy population around homeless services. We have veterans, seniors, families — because we're one of the only guest houses that offers shelters for families — single men in different programs for both shelter and permanent supportive housing and we have our residential reentry program, which is formerly known as a halfway house, serving those referred to our program from federal prison until they're ready to get acclimated back into society," Deedee explained.

VOA's support services primarily include case management; often the agency provides rental assistance support for those in permanent housing via partnerships with HUD. Grant funds and partnerships with government entities also contribute to those services, Deedee noted.

"But many times part of that support is not just providing rent for people; it's a lot more than that. In order for us to help them reach a status of self-sufficiency, most people, whether they recognize it or not, are in need of case management and supportive services," he said. "So what that includes is regular visits and meetings and contact with our case managers to help them learn how to advocate for themselves, how to budget, how to access the resources in the community that sometimes are difficult for anybody to navigate."

Housing and employment come first within his division, Deedee said.

“One of the big things is helping them access employment and generate income. Once they’re able to start doing that and mitigate the need for that continual rental assistance, now we’re on that path for self-sufficiency, that they’re able to pay their own bills, they’re able to budget, they’re able to stay in that permanent housing situation without the supportive services,” he explained. “That’s the transition from permanent supportive housing to permanent housing.”

All of the housing services, including reentry, are for men and women, with the agency’s “guest house” serving families.

“The thing that I continuously preach about homelessness is that anybody can become homeless. There’s a stereotype that homelessness is the person on the corner of the expressway panhandling for food or money. And it’s not really about that,” Deedee said. “We’ve had people who are seniors who are no longer benefitting from either social security or income. We’ve had people lose their jobs. We’ve had people whose homes have burned down. We have domestic violence situations. We have human trafficking victims. So it’s a wide range of people and homelessness can occur in any geographic area.”

Throughout the last year and a half, housing services at VOA changed very little, Deedee said.

“We never stopped providing services, we never stopped saving lives, we never shut down. I never worked a day at home during the pandemic and neither did almost all of our housing team,” he said. “We provide 24/7 services and we never stopped providing those services.”

The Upstate VOA provides safe housing to more than 550 people every night between its Rochester and Binghamton locations, and provides more than 200,000 nights of safe shelter annually. Some 438,000 meals are provided to those in need annually.



Volunteers of America Founders Maud and Ballington Booth. Ballington was the son of the founder of the Salvation Army. The two created the nonprofit to aid formerly incarcerated people rejoin society. (Photo provided)

The biggest challenge VOA faces is funding, Sullivan said.

“We’ve been heavily government funded for many years; it’s something we’re working on now to start to build other revenue streams, and I’m looking at various forms of social entrepreneurship from that standpoint to help the organization not be reliant 100 percent on government funding,” she explained.

The past year has been a particular challenge in that realm, Sullivan said.

“The need for technology has increased substantially over the past year,” she said. “We’ve been very fortunate that we have had some very good partners that have helped to provide that technology, from United Way grants to ESL to our VOA national organization, and that’s really helped to fund that great need.”

But minimum wage has been an issue as well. Many social and human services organizations have considered increasing their wages as a result of local and regional efforts to pay frontline workers a livable wage.

“We are working to increase the wage of our employees to provide a more livable wage because that’s something that’s important going forward, but as the labor market becomes more competitive, unless we find a way to increase those wages, which is obviously limited by some of the grants we have, we’re not going to get the talent we need,” Sullivan acknowledged. “I think that many of the human and health services organizations are experiencing that issue right now. The labor market, more recently I would say, has been tougher than in the past because the past year I think has caused in certain cases people to reevaluate what they want to do with their careers.”

And, in fact, it is the people of the VOA that make the not-for-profit a success, she said.

“The team that I have really care about what they do. They’re focused on making a difference in the community,” she explained. “And because of that, it’s enabled us to not only get through the pandemic, but to successfully get through the pandemic.”

Sullivan said there always will be a need for the types of services and programs VOA offers the community, a double-edged sword.

“I wish that organizations like ours weren’t necessarily needed. It would mean that everybody was living at a livable wage and had decent opportunities,” she said. “But the fact is, we know that doesn’t exist today.”

Mental health crises will continue to be an issue, and workforce development will play a large role in the VOA’s offerings.

“I think the future holds a lot for us,” Sullivan said. “We’re continuing to look and see where the needs in the community are. How do we continue to transform ourselves? How do we take advantage of what we’ve learned in the last year to continue to strengthen the organization? The fact is, the needs still exist for services like ours and I think we’ve got a lot of opportunity for the future.”