

Strong Starts Chautauqua

Promoting Healthy Starts for Chautauqua County Children and Families

The Mental Health Association in Chautauqua County (MHA) is playing a key role in [Strong Starts Chautauqua](#), a life-saving initiative designed to help pregnant women and young children. The result of a collaboration of nearly three dozen partners, it is also expected to save the county millions of dollars in future medical and special education costs.

The alarming rate of maternal substance misuse during pregnancy, including use of alcohol, tobacco, opioids, and other illicit and prescription drugs, put our children at extreme risk. The rate of newborns testing positive for opioids in Chautauqua County is three times that of New York State. COVID-19 is making the situation worse.

The physical toll on our children includes low birth weight and growth, problems with internal organs, and damage to parts of the brain. These lead to learning disabilities and low IQ, hyperactivity, poor ability to communicate, and poor reasoning and judgment—many of the behavior and learning problems our schools are dealing with now. These can become lifelong issues with school and social skills, mental health, substance use, keeping a job, and trouble with the law.

Leanna Luka-Conley is Deputy Commissioner of Chautauqua County Adult, Child & Family Services and a member of MHA's Advisory Committee. After hearing Dr. Ira Chasnoff speak on preventing and remediating the impacts of substance misuse on the developing brain, Leanna spearheaded the creation of Strong Starts Chautauqua. Dr. Chasnoff, an award-winning author, researcher, and Professor of Clinical Pediatrics at the University of Illinois College of Medicine, came to Chautauqua County to share his successes. He is now advising the program he inspired.

Strong Starts Chautauqua has two goals: (1) for all expectant women in Chautauqua County to have access to prenatal education, care, and community support to promote healthy



Newer additions to the MHA staff, Liz Witherspoon (left) and Jessica Crooks are navigators for Strong Starts Chautauqua.

birth outcomes and strong futures for their children, and (2) for all children aged birth through five to have access to resources and timely, responsible care that help them achieve their full potential.

Last fall the MHA added two new recovery coaches to work as Strong Starts navigators. Liz Witherspoon and Jessica Crooks joined Allison Murphy and Dorothy Carlson, two MHA coaches already working with moms. As navigators, these coaches support moms through pregnancy and postpartum and get help for their children later. With some participants they use the Positive Directions Model (pdawny.com) of Dr. Davina Moss-King.

A leading expert in substance abuse counseling and adjunct professor in the Department of Counseling and Human Services at Canisius College, Dr. Moss-King focuses her work and research heavily on neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). She has led several trainings in Chautauqua County and now (continued on page 4)



Give Big CHQ - Thursday, June 10, 2021

The Mental Health Association is participating in the 2021 Give Big CHQ. During this 24-hour online fundraiser, the MHA will be eligible for cash prize incentives sponsored throughout the day by the Chautauqua Region Community Foundation. To support the MHA in this important way, on **Thursday, June 10**, go to GiveBigCHQ.org, search for **Mental Health Association**, and **Give Big!**

MHA Happenings



MHA would like to thank UPMC Chautauqua for their donation of this beauty of a van. It has been wonderful in helping those in our community to get the services they need. This is another example of the strong relationship that has developed between MHA and UPMC over the past few years and will continue to grow to better serve our community with clinical and peer support.



As well as training 70 people via Zoom at the **Cassadaga Job Corps Center**, MHA Overdose Response Team Leader Allison Murphy recently did a Narcan training with all **Jamestown Community Learning Council (JCLC)** home visitors. Pictured from left: Kerry Widen, Willow Fodor, Allison, Liz Witherspoon, Krista Camarata, Amanda Telford, and Tracie Arthurs. MHA has been working closely with JCLC through our Strong Starts Chautauqua program (*see cover story*). **Narcan can save a life.**

For free group, individual, virtual or in-person Narcan training & free Narcan, visit MHChautauqua.org/naloxone



MHA is grateful to community partners like **Be The Change You Want To See In Jamestown** that donated personal care bags for our participants. MHA OD Response Team Leader Allison Murphy (*on left*) and Peer Specialist Tasha McFaul-Marsh note that a community that works together grows together. Recovery comes in the presence of community, and MHA provides recovery supports in-person anywhere in Chautauqua County, as well as by phone and virtual meetings.

In separate announcements, **Chautauqua County Executive PJ Wendel** named **Mental Health Association in Chautauqua County** and **MHA Certified Peer Specialist Sean Jones** as **COVID-19 Heroes**. He commended the MHA for continuing to provide peer recovery services throughout the pandemic, putting the needs of those struggling with substance abuse and mental health issues before themselves, touching and saving so many lives. Wendel recognized Sean for being on the frontlines at both the MHA and UPMC, assisting those with drug and mental health treatment and making sure both those with and without COVID receive the important advocacy they need.



MHA staff were delighted to welcome Hope (*center*), the **Jamestown Police Department's** first-ever comfort dog. Hope works with officer Emma Ward (*far left*) and **Project Crossroads**, the JPD's domestic violence education program. Community Resource Officer Matthew Rhinehart (*far right*) helped link MHA to the **Outpour Project** that distributes food boxes throughout Chautauqua County. Beside him is Bethany Vanderburg, one of the MHA's newest staff members.

The work of the Mental Health Association in Chautauqua County is made possible by funding from Appalachian Regional Commission ♡ Chautauqua County Departments of Mental Hygiene and Health & Human Services ♡ Ralph C. Sheldon Foundation ♡ Chautauqua Region Community Foundation ♡ United Way of Southern Chautauqua County ♡ Hultquist Foundation ♡ Lenna Foundation ♡ New York State ♡ The Tower Foundation ♡ UPMC Chautauqua ♡ & others.

Luis Rosa: MHA's 2020 Inaugural Peer of the Year

It is with great sadness and hearts filled with love that the MHA remembers Peer Specialist Luis Rosa.

Luis embodied integrity, recovery principles, honesty, humor, and dry wit. He walked everywhere with the knowledge that "recovery is always possible." Luis passed after a courageous and brave battle with cancer. His impact has been huge. Luis's spirit remains with us and the recovery community and the many people he touched.

Raised in the Bronx, Luis returned to his native Puerto Rico to graduate from high school, later studying accounting at Columbia University. It was friendships and the city's lower cost of living that lured Luis to Jamestown in 2006. After working seven years at a local retailer, his decreased hours and subsequent unemployment resulted in depression that led to drinking and smoking pot.

Luis's turning point came when he met MHA's Steven Cobb at an AA meeting. He began participating in several peer support groups, excelled in the work experience program, and was ultimately hired as a full-time recovery coach.

Luis was very open about his recovery. He helped many people with their journey to recovery, especially those in the



In addition to his great sense of humor, Luis Rosa was known for being one of the best-dressed folks at the MHA.

Hispanic community. He was one of the original staff at the MHA's Northern Chautauqua County program in Dunkirk.

As one of his colleagues noted, "Luis was our go-to, to help anyone who needed emergency inpatient or detox services. He had the largest caseloads and always answered the phone no matter what time of the day or night it was. He helped build the relationship we have with UPMC and make the MHA what it has become today."

Luis considered his coworkers to be his family. In the year following his cancer diagnosis in April 2020, MHA staff cared for him like family, providing his meals and taking turns staying with him around the clock.

For a 2017 MHA newsletter story, Luis responded, "If I had to start all over again, I would start here. ... I like this place because I'm helping others. I encourage them: 'I did it, you can too.'"

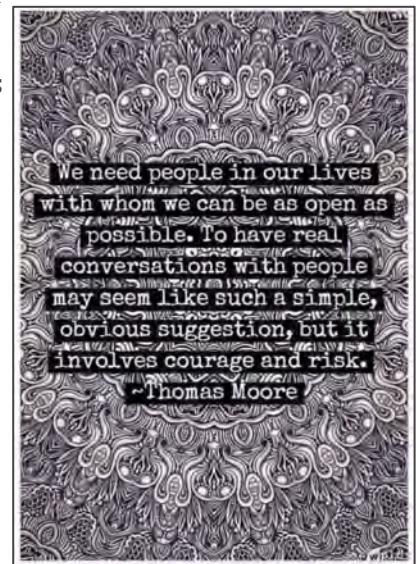
The Mental Health Association is naming Luis Rosa its first "Peer of the Year" with a recognition that will be placed in the Jamestown facility. Future recipients will receive the Luis Rosa Peer of the Year Award, named in honor of this gentle man who helped so many.

Many Groups for Many Needs

Even during the pandemic, the MHA has added as well as maintained groups—virtually and in-person—in both Jamestown and Dunkirk. Some of the new or revived groups include:

- **Crystal Meth Anonymous**, the first group in Chautauqua County with a special focus on those with a substance use disorder and also diagnosed with mental health and emotional disorders.
- **Mom Tribe**, where moms and moms-to-be share and learn how substance use and mental health affect our children and how we raise them. *(See front page story)*
- **AA and NA**, now with more opportunities since the MHA is providing safe socially-distanced space for groups that had to relocate.
- **#MeToo**, for domestic violence and assault survivors.
- **Southern Tier Queer Peers**, whose participants are helping plan the Jamestown Pride event Saturday, June 12, downtown at the Jamestown Public Market.
- Plus **Knitting for Wellbeing, Art in Recovery, PTSD, Suicide Prevention, Master Your Money, Relapse Prevention, Recovery Dharma** ...and more.

To learn more, call the MHA at (716) 661-9044. The full schedule of over three dozen groups that meet at MHA Jamestown and Dunkirk is at [MHACHAUTAUQUA.ORG/groups](https://mhachautauqua.org/groups).



A Message From MHA's Executive Director: On Making Dog Biscuits

...by Steven Cobb

It is not news that the COVID pandemic has led to a surge in substance misuse and related deaths. In 2020 the Mental Health Association in Chautauqua County responded to 198 overdoses, which we estimate may be only 60 percent of the actual cases.

The good news is that the MHA is back to offering numerous groups as well as individual services, in Jamestown, Dunkirk, and virtually. We look forward to when our Jamestown location can again be a true drop-in center for anyone who needs a place to go for support or just human companionship.

The exciting news is that a recent grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is giving a serious boost to MHA's Occupational Peer Empowerment Network (OPEN) program that began with funding from the United Way of Southern Chautauqua County and the Empire State Poverty Reduction Initiative (ESPRI).

OPEN's peer specialists support people in recovery as they enter or return to the workforce. They help them overcome barriers to gaining employment and to thriving as employees. They assist participants to find the resources that enable them to be work-ready and continue to provide a support network on the job.

While COVID forced OPEN to pause, the ARC grant is enabling the program to continue, re-tool a bit, involve some new businesses, and take a next step: being part of a dynamic new social enterprise—a business created to further a social purpose in a financially sustainable way.



Under the leadership of Fr. Luke Fodor, St. Luke's Episcopal Church in Jamestown has made strong connections with the MHA, with services like preparing meals for monthly Recovery Luncheons, sharing space for Refuge Recovery meetings, and funding modest projects.

Now St. Luke's and the MHA are working together on a new social enterprise that will serve as a training ground for participants. It will put them on a successful career path by developing and reinforcing skills like resume building, interviewing, financial management, and communication. While technically the project will be producing dog biscuits, its real outcome will be getting people in recovery back into the workforce.



Father Bernard's Blessed Biscuits will soon be up and running, so stay tuned: There will be more news to come!

Strong Starts Chautauqua, continued (from page 1)...

meets weekly with MHA Strong Starts navigators.

Moms in recovery themselves, the navigators help other moms navigate the system: getting them to medical appointments, helping them receive benefits, sometimes getting them into rehab, finding appropriate programs for their children, and supporting them in any way they can. They also facilitate the weekly Mom Tribe group meeting for moms and moms-to-be.

We are optimistic that Strong Starts Chautauqua will provide the support needed to empower children, moms, and whole families to achieve their potential. As the first county in the state to take this approach, Chautauqua County has created a strategy that could become a model for New York State and across the country.

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