

# New county task force to combat poverty, health problems

By BRIAN ZAHN [bzahn@palltimes.com](mailto:bzahn@palltimes.com) | Posted: Thursday, February 5, 2015 4:00 am

OSWEGO – The Oswego County Legislature announced Wednesday the appointment of a task force, the Community Health and Poverty Reduction Task Force, to address poor health behaviors and poverty issues in the county.

The task force, a bipartisan committee chaired by Legislator Roy Reehil, R-Constantia, will partner with CZB consulting group of Alexandria, Va., to analyze county data and brainstorm solutions to generational poverty and social services provided by the county.

"On the surface, it's pretty clear there's correlations between health behaviors and poverty," Reehil said.

According to the state Department of Health, Oswego County ranks last out of 62 counties in the state for health behaviors, which tracks statistics such as childhood obesity and smoking rates.

Oswego County Health Director Jiancheng Huang said the task force is "a great initiative." "I think this is a move in the right direction and we really need to use all county resources and change our culture and change our health behavior," he said. "I'm happy to see the legislature take leadership action and lead the community in the right direction and I appreciate that they're taking this leadership role." Steering committee members said their goal is to collect data on county demographics and health behaviors.

"Our idea is to quantify the services that the county is providing currently and try to build a better network and try to reach out a little bit deeper," Reehil said.

Although the steering committee and several advisory partners, including representatives of all nine of the county's school districts, have been selected, the task force is still in its organizational stages, as it has yet to meet.

Committee Vice Chairwoman Marie Schadt, D-Minetto, said she expects that if the partnership with CZB is successful, the county will include the firm to analyze other aspects of the county's demographics and how the legislature authorizes spending.

"They will go in and go over all the raw data at the Department of Social Services, and they will find where people are coming from and if services are overlapping," Schadt said.

County Legislature Chairman Kevin Gardner, R-New Haven, said the county must admit it has a problem with generational poverty, and it must take steps to address the issues at the source.

"We need to take an inventory of how we do things in the county in regards to poverty, such as what is causing it, and try to find indicators to see how we can change it," he said.

According to Gardner, the task force is hoping to partner with the Shineman Foundation for funding.

According to Gardner and Schadt, Legislator Shane Broadwell, R-Oswego, played a large role in forming the committee, which he will also serve on in an advisory capacity.

"I learned a whole lot last year that poverty is a lot more than looking at it as a dollar sign," Broadwell said. "This is a long-term process." Broadwell said he hoped the committee would identify areas for the legislature to address its efforts.

"It's taken a very long time for Oswego County to get into this position where we are with its percentage of poverty," he said.

Gardner said he expected the task force to take four to five months to gather the data.

"Hopefully by the fall we'll be able to have some sufficient data to go by," Gardner said.

Reehil said his vision of the task force would involve providing members of the community with job training and apprenticeships, as well as addressing substance abuse issues.

"Whether it be continued assistance to fight addiction or some therapies to give (citizens) skills to be better workers, we want to be able to put together groups of people that can really help," he said.

"We're going to be open to every idea. This is a wide-eyed, wide-open process." Schadt said she hoped to wean community members off of social services with the task force's work.

"I think this is going to be a very positive look at what's happening to our county and where we're spending our tax dollars," she said. "I want to see the data and have experts guide us through the data and I look forward to their guidance to get us going forward."