

Erie County Taxpayer Newsletter

Volume 2, Issue 4

April 2009

From County Executive Chris Collins



I'd like to clear the air about some of the misconceptions I've heard regarding the Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program.

WIC is not, and never has been, an Erie County program. It is administered by New York State with federal funding. The county is simply a contracted vendor for the program.

When the county's contract expires in September, WIC services will **still be available** at the same level they are now. New York State will either implement the services, or choose a new local provider. Our office is committed to working with the new provider to ensure a smooth transition.

State mandates make up 88 percent of our county budget. My team is focused on improving the delivery of those mandated services. Erie County should not compete with private or not-for-profit organizations to provide non-mandated services like the WIC program. In addition, Erie County was losing money on the contract.

Once again, the quality of the WIC services will not be impacted, as the state has an obligation by law to provide the program, and Erie County remains committed to a smooth transition.

Contact the County Executive

Office: 95 Franklin St., 16th Floor, Buffalo, NY 14202

Phone: (716) 858-8500

E-mail: public_feedback@erie.gov

Erie County Challenges Constitutionality of Wick's Law

Erie County and the Buffalo Niagara Partnership joined the Empire State Chapter of Associated Builders and Contractors in a lawsuit, claiming the 2008 amendments to the Wick's Law violate the U.S. Constitution.

The Wick's Law requires local governments to hire multiple contractors for public projects, raising construction costs for municipalities by about \$300 million a year. The amendments require contractors to have pre-approved apprenticeship programs in place for three years to work on significant construction projects. It discourages competition and benefits large union contractors. The law also excludes virtually all minority and women owned businesses from public works projects.

"The latest Wicks Law changes are another glaring example of Albany's anti-business mentality," said County Executive Chris Collins. Adding, "We cannot stand by and watch the politicians continue to drive businesses out of New York State."

"Now more than ever, New Yorkers cannot afford the Wick's Law or it's 2008 Amendments," said attorney Michael Powers.

For more information, please visit: www.abcnys.org.



County Executive Collins speaks at the ITT Commencement Ceremony.



County Executive Collins speaks at a press conference regarding CEAS, along with Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, Sheriff Tim Howard, CPS Commissioner Peter Vito, and Emergency Services Commissioner Greg Skibitsky.

New Program to Help Erie County Businesses During Emergencies

Erie County introduced a new Corporate Emergency Access System (CEAS), to help keep businesses afloat in the event of a disaster. Recent emergencies like the October Storm of 2006, and the Crash of Flight 3407 highlight the need for this type of program in our area.

Participating businesses will be able to designate representatives who will be allowed to access their company inside restricted zones during an emergency to maintain the core functions of the business. The designated people will be given secure identification cards.

Erie County partnered with the Business Network of Emergency Resources (BNET) to develop this program, at the urging of the County's business community. Access to the workplace is a critical issue to the survival of some companies. Participating businesses include; M&T Bank, HSBC Bank, Citigroup, Merrill Lynch, and Buffalo Place.

Erie County Executive Chris Collins says, "We must do everything we can to help our business community recover in the event of a disaster. This disaster plan costs Erie County nothing, but could save businesses millions of dollars."

BNET Executive Director Peter Picarillo says, "There is an integral relationship between business continuity and overall emergency preparedness. Erie County's recognition of the CEAS will greatly enhance the resiliency of the region by ensuring its vital lifelines will survive a disaster."

The CEAS is already in place in the City of Buffalo, and is now expanding to a county-wide program. Business owners who would like more information about joining this program should visit www.CEAS.com.

Babies Sleep Safest Alone

A child is abused every 30 seconds in the United States. In 2008, Erie County received 10,414 reports of suspected child abuse. It was an all time record high. April is Child Abuse Prevention Month, and the Erie County Department of Social Services would like to pass along some important information for new parents.

Six infant deaths reported in Erie County last year involved co-sleeping. That's why Erie County is highlighting two initiatives to keep children safe.

The first is "Babies Sleep Safest Alone." Infants and toddlers should only sleep alone, in their cribs. Parents who fall asleep with their child run the risk of accidentally crushing or smothering them. It is particularly dangerous to sleep with a baby on a couch. Infants should never be allowed to sleep with anyone who has been drinking alcohol, using drugs, has taken medication that makes them sleepy, or is ill or extremely tired.

The second initiative, "Back to Sleep," is meant to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Putting a baby on its back greatly reduces the risk of SIDS. It's important to make sure babies have a crib with a firm mattress. Parents should also keep the crib free of pillows, bumpers, and stuffed toys. Blankets should be kept away from a baby's head.



More information about these important initiatives is available at www.nichd.nih.gov/SIDS.

Erie County Among Best in State for Child Support Collection

The State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) honored the Erie County Department of Social Services for increasing child support collections by 7.5 percent in 2008. It is one of the largest year-to-year increases in the entire state.

Workers in the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) brought in \$74.9 million last year. It added to a record high state total of \$1.7 billion.

OTDA Executive Deputy Commissioner Elizabeth Berlin said, "Erie County's exemplary efforts are helping to improve the lives of the many children and families who rely on you."

Erie County Department of Social Services Commissioner Michael Weiner added his appreciation by saying, "I take pride in the performance of our OCSE team, who have been challenged with increasing workloads, and who labor so diligently to help protect the well being of children and their families."

"While many areas of child support enforcement have been computerized, the efforts involved in success collections still directly depend on our child support enforcement personnel," said Erie County Executive Chris Collins. "I congratulate each and every one of them."

The increase in collections is partly the result of a Lean Six Sigma project. The Erie County Social Services Department reduced a backlog of **7,200** child support cases down to **103** cases in about a year. Six Sigma Green Belt, and OCSE Supervisor, Tim Konicki supervised the project to address the backlog of cases.

Erie County's OCSE also exceeds the state average with an 85 percent paternity establishment rate.



OTDA Exec. Dir. Elizabeth Berlin and Dep. Comm. Scott Cade present a plaque to Erie County Executive Chris Collins, Social Services Commissioner Michael Weiner, and OCSE Supervisor Tim Konicki.

Two New Projects will Enhance Erie County Sewer Service

In an effort to provide more efficient and effective sewer service to Orchard Park residents, Erie County recently awarded a new project to eliminate the Greenmeadow Pumping Station. It is a cooperative effort between the County and the Town of Orchard Park. A new gravity sewer will provide capacity for the Town of Orchard Park to abandon their pumping station at Scherff Road. It will also allow for the abandonment of several individual sewage grinder pumping systems, and will offer public sanitary sewer service for several existing homes along Powers Road.

The County awarded another new project in the Town of Evans. Construction of new Point Breeze and Lake Street force mains is the second phase of a multi-million dollar plan to improve the conveyance of wastewater in the southwestern portion of Evans. This recently awarded contract includes installation of several miles of large diameter piping for the pumping stations. The County will ultimately upgrade or replace five wastewater pumping stations and the pertinent force mains as part of this multi-phase project.

Holly Sinnott, the Erie County Commissioner of Environment and Planning said, "This work will support construction jobs, and help the local economy while strengthening the County's sanitary sewer system."

Construction for both projects will begin early this spring. The total cost for both projects is approximately \$2,768,000. The County Sewer Districts have plans in place to independently finance these projects.

Erie County Dedicates New Live Burn Building

On April 7th, Erie County Executive Chris Collins, along with Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown, Emergency Services Commissioner Greg Skibitsky, Buffalo Fire Commissioner Mike Lombardo and Chief Fire Chaplain Father Joseph Bayne dedicated the new Live Burn Building in Cheektowaga. The new facility uses the latest construction technology and offers a safe and realistic training environment.

The facility will be used to train an average of 3,000 to 4,000 firefighters each year from Erie County's 94 volunteer fire companies, and the City of Buffalo Fire Department. Buffalo Fire's training bureau is also located in the facility.

Erie County Emergency Services Commissioner Greg Skibitsky said, "Our County's first responders deserve the best training experience we can offer them."

"This new facility will provide the highest level of training, which the brave individuals in all of Erie County's fire departments need and deserve," said Erie County Executive Chris Collins.

Buffalo Mayor Byron Brown said, "My Administration continues to provide state-of-the-art equipment and technology upgrades for our Buffalo firefighters and I thank Erie County Executive Chris Collins for making this investment in this new Live Burn Building, which will provide excellent training opportunities for firefighters from the city and around the county."



County Executive Collins and Mayor Brown watch a rescue demonstration at the new Live Burn Building

Funding for the new building was set aside in the capital budget. It cost approximately \$1 million to complete.

Probation's 100th Anniversary



County Executive Collins, 8th District Judge Sharon Townsend, State Supreme Court Justice Timothy Drury, Probation Director Rachelle Cybulski, and CPS Commissioner Pete Vito gathered in a ceremonial courtroom as the Probation Department celebrated its 100th anniversary on April 1st.

Lean Six Sigma Filling County Vacancies

One of Erie County's latest Lean Six Sigma projects involves reducing the time it takes to fill vacant positions in the Department of Social Services. The workload for employees in that department continues to grow in this tough economy.

A Six Sigma "Green Belt" from the County's Personnel Department is documenting how long it takes to fill positions in Social Services, and her team has already identified 48 potential improvements to the process. She expects to start making those changes by May.

The team is confident the improvements identified in this project could apply to other county departments as well.

A new wave of Six Sigma Green Belts resume their training in May, as do 20 new employees working toward their Yellow Belts. The Yellow Belts will assist in Six Sigma projects that are already underway.

High Tech 911 Center Helps Residents Quickly in Emergencies

Since February 2007, the County's Central Police Services 911 Center has been taking emergency calls at the Public Safety Campus. Currently, call volumes are at record levels because the New York State 911 Board designated CPS as the wireless 911 center for all of Erie County.

The center averages more than 2,000 calls a day, and 70% of those calls come from cell phones. CPS and the Environment & Planning Department of Erie County developed a digital mapping system that can pinpoint cellular 911 callers to within meters.

Last year, a man whose boat capsized was rescued just minutes after his 911 distress call from the waters around Sturgeon Point. An overturned SUV was quickly located off Route 5 in Evans minutes after the frantic 911 call of the accident.

The high tech 911 mapping has helped many callers in the past and will continue to provide valuable assistance to all who may need to dial 911 in the future.

Wellness is a Walk in the Park

In an effort to promote wellness through exercise, the Erie County Health and Parks Departments are hosting a series of wellness walks this spring and summer.

Registration begins at 9 a.m. for walks starting at 10 a.m. Wegmans is co-sponsoring the events.

Walks will be held at the following locations:

May 2, 2009 **Chestnut Ridge Park**

May 9, 2009 **Como Lake Park**

May 16, 2009 **Akron Park**

May 30, 2009 **Emery Park**

June 6, 2009 **Times Beach**

June 13, 2009 **Isleview Park**



Coming Next Issue

- ♦ American Veterans Traveling Tribute
- ♦ Foster Parents Needed
- ♦ Spring Cleaning in Erie County Parks

Helping Homeless Veterans

In 1987, a group of Vietnam veterans realized many men and women have special needs when they return from military service, so they formed the Western New York Veteran's Housing Coalition. The non-profit organization gives homeless veterans a place to live, and resources they need to get back on their feet. The group operates four apartment complexes, altogether housing 100 low income people who are disabled, homeless, or have other special needs.

The Coalition's Chief Operating Officer, Celia O'Brien, is the widow of a Vietnam veteran. She became involved at the Coalition in 1996, and says, "There is a satisfaction that you get here, that you don't get out of any other jobs. Every vet that thanks me for helping them out is something I wouldn't have anywhere else."

The goal is to get veterans into permanent housing. Tenants meet with a case manager at least once a month and they're offered services to help them prevent becoming homeless again. The case workers place a heavy emphasis on stabilizing the vets' personal situations. They are given job training and education, and job referrals. Rent is based on a portion of the vets' monthly income.

The WNY Veteran's Housing Coalition sets itself apart from other property management organizations by providing this extensive caring component. Veterans facing tough times are given a helping hand in every way possible. O'Brien says, "I've had vets come up and thank me for saving their lives."

All of the work is funded by grants, and the Coalition recently applied for two new grants to extend their efforts to help veterans find jobs.

For more information about the WNY Veterans Housing Coalition, visit: www.veteranslifeops.org.



Celia O'Brien of the WNY Veterans' Housing Coalition

Empire State College Offers a SUNY Education for Adults

Even if you have not heard of Empire State College, chances are you already know someone who is a student or a graduate. Recognized as a leader in adult higher education, Empire State College was designed to meet the complex needs of adults who want to earn a highly respected SUNY degree. Since 1971, Empire State College has graduated 57,000 students, with 4,000 in Western New York.

In addition to transferring credits from other accredited institutions, Empire State College offers students the ability to earn credits for relevant college-level learning gained somewhere other than the classroom. Almost 1,000 Erie County residents are currently enrolled with Empire State College, including many Erie County employees. Empire State College students agree that the flexible study options at the college enable them to manage the demands of work, family and study.

Empire State College offers undergraduate and graduate degrees. Empire State's most popular degrees are in business-related fields and community and human services. Students may study in one of 11 areas and all students tailor a degree to fit their educational and career goals.

Contact Colleen Reedy at colleen.reedy@esc.edu or 686-7856 to find out more about your options at Empire State College.

Erie County Golf Registration Day

Parks Department employees will sell 2009 season golf passes at both the Elma Meadows and Grover Cleveland golf courses on **April 18th**, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

The Word's BIGGEST Disc Golf Weekend

Disc golfers around the world will be "teeing up" on May 2nd and 3rd. In Erie County, they'll be competing at the new disc golf course in Emery Park. Ready to test your skills with a Frisbee? Contact scott9257@roadrunner.com for more information.



Central Library is Last Stop on Traveling Display's Journey

A traveling display titled *Alexander Hamilton: The Man Who Made Modern America* will be on exhibit at the Central Library, 1 Lafayette Square from May 1- June 12. Along with this acclaimed New York Historical Society exhibit on national tour, the Central Library will feature significant artifacts from the Special Collections of the Buffalo & Erie County Public Library including Thomas Jefferson's annotated copy of *The Federalist Papers*. Special programs to be held throughout the month include a presentation by author Richard Brookhiser, a panel discussion titled *Sex, Lies and the Smoking Gun: Politics and Journalism* and a Colonial Kids' Day, which will feature stories, games and a take-home activity for children. For additional information, visit the Library's website at www.buffalolib.org

Graphic Novelists to Appear at Central Library

The Buffalo and Erie County Public Library System and its partners in the *Get Graphic! The World in Words and Pictures* initiative will host two events at the Central Library in late April. Acclaimed graphic novelist Jessica Abel, who has authored such works as *Drawing Words and Pictures* and *LaPerdida*, will speak about her life and work on Saturday, April 25 at 1:00 PM in the Auditorium. Abel will be joined by *First Second* editor Calista Brill and author and cartoonist Jason Little on Sunday, April 26 at 1:00 PM in the Central Library's Ring of Knowledge for *From Idea to Reality: A Panel Discussion on How to Bring Your Comics to Life*. Visit www.getgraphic.org for additional information.



County Parks Commissioner Jim Hornung and Joe Hanna from "Bunkers in Baghdad" pose at Elma Meadows on the Opening Day of the 2009 Golf season. "Bunkers in Baghdad" will give free golf balls to veterans at the County courses this year.