

Good morning,

My name is Roosevelt Mareus and I am the Dean/Executive Director of the Rochester Educational Opportunity Center (REOC). Before I begin, I would like to thank Senator Brouk for inviting me to explore the causes and effects of poverty and concentrated poverty in Upstate cities as well as the policies that the legislature can implement to reduce poverty.

At REOC, our mission is to deliver academic and workforce development programs and provide support services leading to enhanced employment opportunities, access to further education, personal growth and development.

All of our programs are tuition-free for all qualified and underserved individuals throughout Rochester and Monroe County. Every year, we enroll about 1300 students at REOC. Many of our students come from three of NY state's five poorest zip codes (14621, 14605, 14611), which are in the City of Rochester. For many of our community members, REOC is the only option they have to improve their lives to a higher level of self-sufficiency. For over 50 years, REOC has been transforming lives and has placed countless people on the path to upward mobility, which has created lasting change for the betterment of our city and beyond. For example, in 2022-23 the average salaries for our students prior to REOC (household) was about \$23,100 annually which is about \$11.05/hr. After they graduated from REOC, most of them were making at least \$ 36,000. We have students who became doctors, business owners, nurses, teachers and professors, to name a few.

by poverty

Many of students who are impacted were because of:

- ✓ Most of our students are renters, not home owners, which is very unfortunate because homeownership has long been a symbol of economic stability in the United States. Many of our students of color are denied credit for home purchase loans.
- ✓ Many of our students are ~~citizens~~ <sup>Ex-offenders</sup> returning to society from incarceration, and they face numerous obstacles when integrating back into public life (examples?)
- ✓ Many of our students suffer from poor health and mental health issues.
- ✓ Lack of resources in the poorest neighborhoods. According to several leaders in Monroe County, Rochester is a place with a lot of resources, but tremendous inequality when it comes to the distribution of those resources.
- ✓ Paying back student loans
- ✓ Many of our students are single parents
- ✓ Access to quality education and educational pathways

We <sup>have</sup> ~~are~~ several key organizations addressing poverty in Rochester. ~~and~~ I am a steering member of the Rochester-Monroe Anti-Poverty initiative (RMAPI). RMAPI is a coalition of strong-willed individuals and organizations working together to tackle the systematic root causes that create and perpetuate poverty in Rochester. RMAPI has developed a list of policy priorities for 2024 aimed at breaking the cycle of poverty by shifting power to enable upward mobility for all families. RMAPI provided a written testimony which discusses the priorities in full details.

Jerome H. Underwood, President and CEO for Action for a better community pointed out that “We must all change the narrative around poverty; transition from the individual who finds themselves in a situation they do not want. We should address the systems, policies and practices that allow economic deprivation to continue ~~unhated~~ for so long.

*unhated*

I would like to share a personal testimony regarding poverty.

If it was not for REOC and SUNY Brockport, I might have ended up being a statistic—an underachiever. Twenty-three years ago, when I began my career at REOC as a security guard, I was satisfied and accepted this position as being at my peak role in life even though I was living below the poverty line. Like many of our students, I set the bar very low. I was placed in a box because of the environment I was in and the lack of resources and role models in my neighborhood. My zip codes were 14621 and 14613. After a few months of working at REOC and witnessing so many successful people of color in senior leadership positions, a mental shift occurred. I wanted to emulate them and thus promised myself I was going to aspire for more. Needless to say, REOC helped me to raise the bar. I soon enrolled at SUNY Brockport and there began my transformation.

When I started working at REOC in 1999, I had to work about 60 hours a week just to get by. The agency who had the contract with REOC to provide security paid us the minimum, while

keeping the majority of the money REOC was giving them. After a year of working at REOC and proving to the leaders that I was a worthy employee, I went to them to discuss the system that was in place which was perpetuating poverty at REOC unintentionally. After a few meetings with leadership, I was able to convince them to change the system and explore hiring internal security guards through civil service where I now had benefits and was making a decent living. As a result of REOC Increasing my income, my health and economic status improved a lot.

RMAPI stated poverty is a system problem that requires systems solutions.

In closing, there is a lot of data and reports which speak to the cause and effects of poverty and many are hopefully familiar with the various disparities that exist along racial and ethnic lines. We encourage the legislature to have public policies that will level the playing field and eliminate Areas of Deprivation which will assist underserved populations who live there to move towards social/emotional and economic self-sufficiency.