

# REVIVING A CITY OF WORKERS

*by: Gary A. Officer, President & CEO, Senior Service America*



## BUFFALO

Buffalo is one of those American cities for whom Labor Day, our last holiday of the summer season, was created. It is a city for—and of—workers.

For a significant portion of the 20th Century, Buffalo's middle class was sustained by companies like Buffalo Forge, Curtiss-Wright, Bethlehem Steel, Republic Steel, the American Ship Building Company, and Westinghouse Electric Corporation. Buffalo was a titan of industry, providing grain, steel, and motors to America and the world.

As the 20th Century drew to a close, Buffalo, in common with other Manufacturing Belt cities, experienced a massive economic decline as the result of American deindustrialization. As the manufacturing base which supported the region's economy began to shrink, joblessness soared. By 2005, as the Partnership for The Public Good noted, "the City of Buffalo had a poverty rate nearly double the U.S. average." [1]

THIS IS THE 2ND  
PIECE IN OUR SERIES  
EXPLORING WHY  
SOME CITIES  
CONTINUE TO  
DECLINE WHILE  
OTHERS ARE  
THRIVING





## THE IMPACT OF DECLINE

The effects of the city's decline were most visible to me in the city's residential and commercial real estate sectors. Foreclosures and abandonment brought decay to once-proud neighborhoods and former industrial centers.

For many years, I have driven through the city of Buffalo - always on my way to somewhere. Somewhere better. Somewhere just that

little more appealing. The Great Recession further devastated our nation's economy, and nowhere was it felt more acutely than in our nation's older cities. Detroit fell into bankruptcy. Cleveland and her mid-western city cousins experienced prolonged economic declines. Buffalo was no different. By January of 2010, the unemployment rate in the Buffalo area

was 9.2%. [2]

However, even during the bleakest moments, Buffalo remained a proud city. This remained a city - and a region - built by a proud community of hard working men and women. This was a city that wanted a return to its past glory.

## REVITALIZATION

In early August, I visited Buffalo for the first time in over a decade. The purpose of my visit was to meet the leadership at one of the region's most successful workforce development non-profit: Supportive Services Corporation.

During my visit, it was noticeable just how much change had occurred in the city. Blight and abandonment had dramatically decreased. Gentrification had transformed many urban neighborhoods. Hope and optimism appeared to fill the warm summer air.

Buffalo's renewal is a product of enlightened local political leadership across multiple agencies and jurisdictions. Government incentives attracted new employers, with an emphasis on creating skilled jobs within the manufacturing and health care sectors.

Ford and General Motors have opened new plants. Tesla—with the aid of \$750 million in incentives from the State of New York—recently opened a new state-of-the-art manufacturing plant. Delaware North has continued to grow, becoming

an ever-larger industrial employer. The new Medical District has energized the city's downtown community, delivering thousands of new skilled jobs to Buffalo.

As of June 2019, the unemployment rate in Buffalo was 3.7%. [3] This is a 50% reduction in unemployment in less than a decade.

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## THE STRATEGY

The work of the urban policy experts Bruce Katz and Jeremy Novak has illuminated many of the strategies adopted by Buffalo in recent years. In the newsletter which expands on the work of their wonderful book, *The New Localism*, Katz recently argued, “We are moving from a system of 20th century problem solving that was top down, led by national governments and specialized, vertically organized agencies to a 21st century *modus operandi* that is bottom up and designed and delivered by horizontal networks of institutions and leaders across multiple sectors and disciplines.”[4]

Katz also emphasizes the idea that “capital follows capital and that capital generally will align with special market advantages and purpose.”[5] As Governor Cuomo and the state of New York continue to invest in Buffalo’s future—as exemplified in the recent \$50 million East Side Corridor Economic Development Fund[6]—the influx of public investment focused on expanding commercial opportunities and workforce training will hopefully inspire a corresponding wave of locally-driven strategic investment, further catalyzing regional economic renewal.



## THE ROLE OF OLDER WORKERS

It is important to keep in mind that even as job growth results in opportunities for workers to once again earn middle-income salaries, we must take care to ensure that all workers can participate. Many older—and displaced—workers are traumatized by the experiences of the past. Their pathway back into full-time employment can be a difficult and intimidating journey. Older low-income workers often require the assistance of federal job programs like the Senior Community Service Employment Program (SCSEP) to facilitate their workforce re-entry.

During my visit to Supportive Services Corporation, I met Jackie, a dynamic and energetic woman in her mid-60s. Jackie was forced back into the workforce following her recent divorce. For much of her adult life, Jackie had worked episodically in the retail sector on a part-time basis. But now, as an older divorcee, she was confronted by the need to return to full-time employment.

## JACKIE'S STORY

Jackie discovered the SCSEP program through friends. She shared with me, “I thought nobody would ever hire me before hearing about SCSEP.” Her previous work had offered her few chances to use current technologies and the thought of having to use computers simply terrified her. However, once enrolled in the program and, with the support of her colleagues and supervisors, Jackie’s proficiency—and confidence—began to improve.

With her newly-acquired computer skills, Jackie returned to college and completed her undergraduate degree. She proudly informed me that “I even took several on-line courses in order to graduate.” Today, Jackie no longer participates in the program. She is now employed by Supportive Services Corporation, and serves as an inspiration to many older residents seeking to embark on a journey she once made: the journey back into the the workforce.

# THE PATH FORWARD

There is a Jackie in every community across this nation. Older workers bring with them a wealth of life and work experience. We should not forget to include their unique capabilities in our efforts to revitalize and expand Buffalo's workforce. As we celebrate Labor Day, let us honor the continued contributions of older workers to our nation's economic well-being.

## REFERENCES

- [1] "Poverty: A State of Extremes" Institute Policy Brief, Partnership for the Public Good, October 2016. Online at [https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/povertylowwageworkincomeequality-\\_poverty.pdf](https://ppgbuffalo.org/files/documents/povertylowwageworkincomeequality-_poverty.pdf)
- [2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate in Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY (MSA), retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis; <https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/BUFF336URN> , August 21, 2019.
- [3] Local Area Unemployment Statistics for the Buffalo-Cheektowaga-Niagara Falls, NY Metropolitan Statistical Area. Online at <https://www.bls.gov/web/metro/laummtrk.htm>
- [4] Bruce Katz, "Five Transitions" Online at <https://www.thenewlocalism.com/newsletter/five-transitions/>
- [5] Bruce Katz, "Rethinking Capital and Geography" Online at <https://www.thenewlocalism.com/newsletter/rethinking-capital-and-geography/>
- [6] "Governor Cuomo Announces \$50 Million East Side Corridor Economic Development Fund to Improve Quality of Life on Buffalo's East Side" Press release. Online at <https://www.governor.ny.gov/news/governor-cuomo-announces-50-million-east-side-corridor-economic-development-fund-improve>

Senior Service America, Inc. (SSAI) is the largest and most experienced workforce development organization dedicated exclusively to the 50+ community.

SSAI has launched an affiliated nonprofit organization called Senior Service America Community Partners (SSA-CP) to innovate new approaches, advance best practices, and tackle the challenge of bringing underserved Americans of all ages into the workforce.

Learn more about SSAI, SSA-CP, and our innovative approach to workforce development at [www.seniorserviceamerica.org](http://www.seniorserviceamerica.org)

