

## ‘Reimagine: I am the Change’ Bringing new life to a community in recovery

East Buffalo was thoroughly devastated by the racially motivated shooting perpetrated at the Tops Market two years ago.

In mere moments, the senseless attack claimed 10 lives and injured three others, leaving a community mourning the loss of neighbors, family, and friends – victims of a racist act of terror and hate. The attack also reopened wounds from the past that had never healed in the predominantly Black community.

The ‘Reimagine: I am the Change’ initiative was created in the wake of this horrific event to address the mental trauma collectively experienced in East Buffalo, and to confront other deep-seated stress and trauma that existed well before the horrific attack on May 14, 2022. These grassroots community-driven programs were tailored to the needs of residents, promoting mental well-being, and providing the tools to heal a community struggling with many forms of trauma.

These initiatives include establishing a culturally sensitive mental health outreach-and-response team and providing training to expand the number of community members equipped to offer emotional support and psychological first aid.

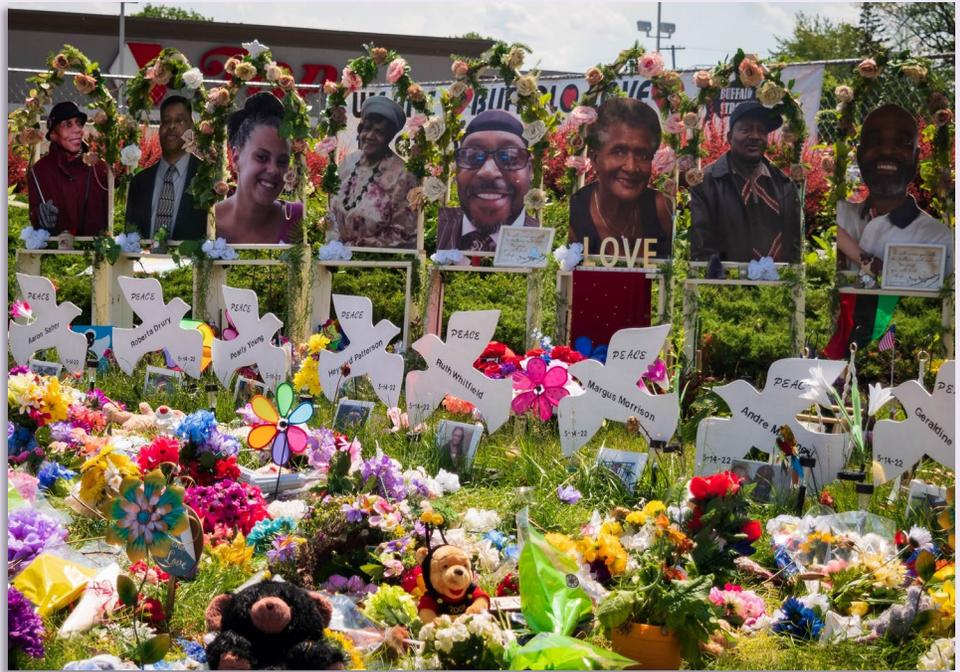
Also included are six unique community-based projects that take a non-traditional approach toward improving mental wellness in the tightknit community.

“The projects and initiatives launched as part of ‘Reimagine: I am the Change’ are addressing gaps in services and promoting resilience to counter the inequities and race-based traumatic stress that have negatively impacted this community for many years,” **Governor Kathy Hochul** said of the programs.

### Healing together in the aftermath of horror

The victims of the shooting varied greatly in age and background, but all shared something in common: They were Black residents of East Buffalo targeted by a racially motivated attack.

The deceased included **Pearl Young, Ruth Whitfield, Margus Morrison, Andre Mackniel, Aaron Salter Jr., Geraldine Talley, Katherine Massey, Roberta Drury, Heyward Patterson, and Celestine Chaney**; three others – **Zaire Goodman, Jennifer Warrington, and Christopher Braden** – were injured, but survived the attack.



*Memorial of flowers and dove cut-outs with the names and faces of the victims of the May 14, 2022, mass shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo. Val Dunne Photography - Shutterstock.*

New York State provided help in the immediate aftermath in the form of financial assistance and support. But as this help materialized, it became clear the healing process for East Buffalo would be a long-term endeavor.

The state Office of Mental Health successfully applied for funding through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, which then provided a \$2.35 million Emergency Response grant and a \$4 million Resiliency in Communities After Stress and Trauma award – also known as ReCAST. Paired together, these grants fund ‘Reimagine: I am the Change,’ a community-driven approach toward healing.

“While nothing can erase the pain and suffering inflicted by this tragedy,” **OMH Commissioner Dr. Ann Sullivan** explained, “the outcome of these grants will be a stronger, more resilient community.”

Among the first developments to materialize from this work was the Black Mental Health Response Team. Established in October 2022 and operated by BestSelf, this dedicated group of clinicians and other mental health staff is now providing rapid access to professional, culturally appropriate mental health outreach, engagement, and clinical support. To date, the team has received more than 136 community referrals, provided treatment to 212 individuals, and engaged nearly 1,000 others with their services.



Program Coordinator **Dr. Jennifer Lewis Johnson** (center) with recipients of the first cycle of grants under the 'Reimagine: I am the Change' program. From left: **Dawn Berry-Walker, Brenda McDuffie, D.Q. Grant, and Nicole Jordan** from Erie County Mental Health; **Kayla Kennon, Vanessa Jones** from OMH; **Anthony Peirce, Dr. Johnson, Yolanda Smith, Alexa and Edreys Wajed, Dr. Eric Frimpong, and Dr. Grace Rowan** from OMH; and **Margaret Smith**.

## 'Non-Traditional Wellness Fund'

Through Reimagine: I am the Change, OMH continues to work with the community to develop ideas for unique projects that promote emotional wellness and address mental health stigma. The Reimagine Non-Traditional Wellness Fund was created to provide one-time funding to support interventions promoting mental wellness and healing by respecting and integrating Black/African American traditions and culture.

From this work, six projects were established and have had tremendous outreach in the community, including:

- **Cultrve, Inc., the New Masters: Healing Buffalo through the Arts** - Workshops centered in arts-based therapy, using creative and expressive arts practices to promote emotional wellness and healing.
- **Buffalo Federation of Neighborhood Centers, Healing Together** - A project aimed at engaging various community stakeholders, including establishing community 'wellness champions' from local churches to serve as points of contact with their ministry and the community it serves.
- **Community Health Center of Buffalo, Arts that Heal** - An arts-based emotional wellness program for individuals in the community 55 and older.
- **Pappy Martin Legacy Jazz Collaborative, Celestial Jazz Series** - An accessible program that creates opportunities for diverse, inclusive and community engagement through jazz, which is presented as a tool to unite, uplift, and achieve mental wellness.
- **Erie Niagara Area Health Education Center, Student Mental Health Internship Program** - A recruitment program aimed at enrolling black, indigenous and people of color into mental health care careers.

- **Buffalo Prenatal-Perinatal Network, Inc., Mental Health and Wellness for Boys and Men Initiative** - A community-based intervention and partnership that fills the gap in services for men, fathers, sons, and boys and young men of color on East Buffalo, including mental health talks at barbershops throughout its neighborhoods.

## 'Stress, Resilience, and Psychological First Aid'

OMH's **Dr. Jennifer Lewis Johnson**, program coordinator of Reimagine: I am the Change, has worked with the Institute of Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz to develop a unique, culturally relevant 'Train the Trainer' curriculum to address the chronic and cumulative impact of stress and trauma on communities of color. 'Stress, Resilience, and Psychological First Aid,' is creating a local, community-based resource of individuals to provide support to help those in emotional need in a manner that is knowledgeable and culturally-representative of the East Side community.

The ReCAST grant will run through September 2027 and is supporting a coalition of diverse community stakeholders to develop programming that is recovery-oriented, trauma-informed, and equity-based behavioral health and wellness that focuses on youth and families of East Buffalo. This funding has enabled a partnership between University Psychiatric Practice, SayYes Buffalo, and the Buffalo Public Schools to provide clinical supports for students struggling with community trauma and training for educators. ReCAST also provides funding to expand Best Self's Black Mental Health Response Team to serve youth and families and allows for the development of additional non-traditional wellness programs.

"Incredible work has been done – and continues to be done – through this program," Johnson said. "One of the most thrilling aspects is that most program offerings have been developed by providers and grassroots organizations in the community. There are many, many great stories to tell as a result."