



PSFC
212 West Fourth Street
East Stroudsburg, PA 18301
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2020 COMMUNITY NEEDS ASSESSMENT



Needs, challenges and strengths based on data, info from families, and community input

(Note...this report is done annually, with a more comprehensive report prepared every five years, to determine the "State of Monroe County," PA and its impact on early childhood education.)

Almost every day at PSFC's centers in Tobyhanna and East Stroudsburg, a mom, dad or guardian stops by or calls to inquire about registering a child in our infant/toddler or preschool classrooms. Unfortunately, there is a long waiting list for both. Until Monroe County receives more funding for Head Start, HSSAP and Pre-K Counts slots, the waiting lists won't get any shorter.

Nearly 160 preschoolers and 40 infants/toddlers are on our waiting lists. This is an ongoing source of frustration for low-income, vulnerable working families who are looking for high quality, publicly-funded child care. Free or subsidized preschool/Pre-K is a necessity for the children in these disadvantaged households. In a 2017 Child Care Aware of America report, child care is one of the largest expenses in a family's monthly budget. It is often higher than the cost of housing, college tuition, transportation or food. During the 2020 Democratic presidential debates, the topic was discussed, with all candidates agreeing that affordable, accessible child care and pre-K is essential.

Of the 1,351 children under age 5 who are eligible to be enrolled in Head Start in our county, only 20.7 percent are registered, according to the 2016-17 Reach and Risk report issued by Pennsylvania's Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) in January 2019. And only 1.8 percent are served through HSSAP. The percent of children under 5 served by direct impact early childhood education programs in our county is just 33.6 percent or 2,548. For just 3 and 4 year-olds, the percentage in ECE programs is 40.3, one of the lowest in the state. Pre-K for PA reports that 95,000 kids across the Commonwealth don't have access to a high-quality, publicly funded pre-K program.

Year in and year out, this report shows the tremendous need for the Head Start program in our county and how the need is not keeping up with funding. The fact that our classes are Keystone STAR 4 — the highest-quality state rating available — adds to this demand. Sadly, families can be on our waiting list for up to a year or more.

Waiting lists for other local, high quality child care providers are also long. For instance, there is a continual waiting list for the infant/toddler classes at the STAR 4 Hannig Family Children's Center at Northampton Community College's Monroe Campus in Tannersville. Part of this is due to the lower teacher/child ratio and the fact that many providers don't offer infant/toddler services.

We have taken steps to address this issue. Last August, we began an Early Head Start/Childcare Partnership with OCDEL, but more funding is necessary. PSFC is a designated HUB agency for our county, so once our facilities are filled, we will partner with other child care providers to enroll the youngest children in their programs. As the "quality EHS/CCP", we would provide monitoring and guidance to raise their quality of care.

We also recently established a new ERSEA specialist position (Eligibility, Recruitment, Selection, Enrollment and Attendance) to help facilitate our recruitment efforts and try to reduce waiting periods. In the current program year, our agency is serving 231 Head Start preschoolers and 28 infants/toddlers.

Our families tell us all the time how vital our agency and programs are to their lives. Here's just one testimonial: "I absolutely love this place! They care so much about the children, their emotional well-

being and education. They also do so much to help the families. Everyone I have ever encountered there truly cares and is willing to help or find you someone who can. Kids are the future and this place truly helps the kids become their best selves as much as they can.”

EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT RISK FACTORS

61.4 percent of the children under age 5 in our county live in economically at-risk families, while 17.8 percent reside in economically high-risk families

Poverty, lack of affordable housing, a disparity between low wages and the rising cost of living—these are a few reasons for our county’s challenges/needs. The latest state Reach and Risk report categorizes Monroe County’s risk level for children’s low academic performance in school as moderate-high, with a rating of 2.60. It has remained in this category for the last few years. This level is calculated by taking into account 16 risk factors in areas such as economic, academic, and maternal well-being. When young children are hungry, don’t have a secure place to live or their home life is unstable, their learning suffers and they lag in achieving developmental milestones, falling behind their peers.

Roughly 19,000 or 11.5 percent of our approximately 167,000 residents live in poverty, according to the most recent Monroe County Community Needs Assessment. The poverty rate for children from birth to age 4 is higher, at 18.1 percent. It is also higher for those from 5 through 17 years old, at 15.2 percent. Here’s another startling statistic: the population under age 18 living at or below 200 percent fpl is 35.88 percent. The number of households in poverty is 6,200 or 10.9 percent of the 56,770 total. And the largest amount of these households are ones led by a woman. Those with income at or below 185 percent of the federal poverty level is 25.01 percent or 41,315 people, while the number for income at or below 50 percent of the federal poverty level is 5.09 percent or 8,411 people. The poverty rate increased by 1.6 percent from 2000 to 2017. The U.S. Census reports our current poverty rate as slightly higher, at 12.3 percent. In Coolbaugh Township and East Stroudsburg Borough, where our two centers are located, the poverty rate is reported as 13.1 and 21.7 percent respectively (U.S. Census Bureau Quick Facts).

Of the 7,587 children under the age of 5 in our county, 61.4 percent live in economically at-risk families (300 percent fpl), while 17.8 percent reside in economically high-risk families (100 percent fpl). The state number for economically at-risk families is 59.4 percent. This data is from the PA Reach and Risk Assessment. Here’s the breakdown in the school districts where PSFC classes are held:

- Pocono Mountain – 20.8 percent are economically high risk, while 69 percent are at risk
- East Stroudsburg – 18.1 percent are economically high risk, while 59.6 percent are at risk

The number of households qualifying for benefits through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is 18.83 percent or 10,834, as reported in the county’s community needs assessment. Regarding medical assistance, 37,544 individuals or about 25 percent are eligible. As of February 2020, the number of adults and children eligible for SNAP was 21,501 and 568 were eligible for TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), according to the PA Department of Human Services. Regarding medical care, 19 percent of the population is receiving Medicaid.

Poverty is a major issue that “creates barriers to accessing health care services, dental services and healthy and nutritious foods, and it has contributed to an increase in the homeless population within Monroe County” ... (as stated in the Comprehensive Community Health Needs Assessment done by Lehigh Valley Health Network— Pocono). The community investments made by Pocono Mountains United Way in 2018-19 show the greatest impact areas: Support for Working Families, \$212,574; Help when Needed Most/Basic Needs, \$388,982; and Access to Healthy Food, \$177,540.

Maternal wellness and education also have an impact in the success of the young children receiving, or eligible to receive, our services. The number of children in our county who are born to young and single mothers is 8.1 percent. Nearly 6 percent of those moms have not earned a high school diploma. The percent of babies considered very pre-term (less than 32 weeks) is 2.1, while babies born at a low birth weight is 9.3 percent, compared to state percentages of 1.6 and 8.2. Five years ago the number of babies born at a low birth weight was actually lower, at 8.6 percent. And 32.5 percent of pregnant women receive late or no prenatal care in Monroe County (LVHN—Pocono CHNA). Child welfare is a concern, shown by the number of substantiated cases of abuse and neglect for children under age 5, at 19.05 percent. This is higher than the 13.58 statewide percentage and among the worst 15 out of 67 counties.

The number of single moms in our program is 140 and has remained fairly consistent for the last few years. Overall, the amount of children in our county that live in a house with a single parent is 30 percent (County Health Rankings and Roadmaps 2019).

The negative effects on children living in a single-parent household include low self-esteem/confidence, poor school performance, lack of discipline and financial hardship. Most single parents spend more hours working to support their family, which can mean that children aren't given enough attention, time and guidance with school work, states an article in *Modern Mom*. But there can be positives, such as more bonding between parent and child and increased responsibility/maturity on the part of the child, reports Beingtheparent.com.

QUALITY ECE CAN BRIDGE THE AT-RISK GAP

Despite these troubling statistics, there is hope. If disadvantaged children can receive high-quality preschool and pre-K instruction, at-risk factors can be mitigated. Expanding access to high-quality, early childhood education has been a priority for Governor Wolf, who has consistently touted its importance as a proven investment for Pennsylvania.

A total of 43.3 percent of our county's regulated centers participate in the Keystone STARS program. Seventeen of the 76 child care providers are STAR 3 or 4, according to state data. Our agency is the only one with a STAR 4 ranking at multiple sites. These numbers are encouraging, but more centers need to participate in Keystone STARS. Approximately 825 children are enrolled in STARS programs, less than the approximately 1200 enrolled five years ago. Another quality child care program is Pennsylvania Pre-K Counts, targeting at-risk preschoolers (like Head Start does). Here again, the number of children being served is very low, at only 150.

In terms of NAEYC accreditation, only our agency and one other local provider have earned this distinction from the National Association for the Education of Young Children. Across the country, NAEYC accreditation is recognized as a gauge of high-quality standards. It represents the strongest system available to review the excellence of early childhood education programs and give them the resources and support they require to continually improve their child care.

We have tracked some of our Head Start graduates attending elementary schools in the East Stroudsburg Area School District and they have consistently outperformed their peers on test scores and grade-level achievements. Part of the reason is the highest quality preparation for kindergarten that they receive in our program. Our proven outcomes in 10 areas of development and learning are another factor. And our kindergarten transition efforts and collaborations with the East Stroudsburg and Pocono Mountain school districts make a positive difference.



What about early intervention efforts, when there are disabilities and special needs? The latest Reach and Risk report says out of the 7,587 youngsters under age 5 in our county, 591 were receiving such assistance. The number of 3 and 4 year-olds is at 251. Children predominately are served through Colonial Intermediate Unit 20. A total of 46 PSFC children had IEPs and received services for special needs as follows in the 2018-19 program year: 16-- developmental delays; 20-- speech; 3-- social/emotional; and 7-- cognitive delays. We regularly conduct "Healthy Start" developmental screenings for child care centers in Monroe County in

partnership with Pocono Alliance/the United Way. Recognizing the importance of inclusion, since September 2019 our agency has been partnering with IU 20 in a couple of our classrooms at The Mountain Center, with several autistic children (and even a blind child) learning alongside more typically developing preschoolers.

Our county has the 7th highest need in the state when it comes to Child Care Works assistance. And we have the 6th highest need for services from Nurse-Family Partnership.

Regarding the needs of infants/toddlers, 190 local children (4.9 percent) under the age of 2 receive important services through Nurse-Family Partnership. Our need in this category is the sixth highest in the state, based on the recent statistics from the Reach and Risk report. This represents an increase, with just 140 infants/toddlers, or 2.8 percent, receiving such help five years ago. NFP helps low-income families, with an emphasis on parent education/goals and the healthy development of the child (just like Head Start).

Closing the gap between at-risk families and obtaining excellent pre-K services also depends on subsidies received through the Child Care Works program. A total of 776 children under age 5 (10.2 percent) in our county are served through CCW. There is a waiting list of 60 youngsters. Our county has the seventh highest need in the state, according to Reach and Risk data. More CCW subsidies are needed for low-income working families. Five years ago, 941 local children (10.8 percent) under age 5 were covered by this assistance. Child Care Works is funded by state and federal monies and is administered by Child Care Information Services of Carbon/Monroe Counties. The initiative enables needy families to find reliable, quality child care near their home or work and provides financial assistance for affording it. Through Child Care Works, families have access to quality care programs that would otherwise be out of reach, helping to minimize the achievement barrier. Forty of our families at The Mountain Center (Tobyhanna) and four at our East Stroudsburg Center receive this benefit.

WHAT ABOUT THE SCHOOLS?

While our agency can help mitigate risk factors at the pre-K level, what is the outlook at the elementary school level? Even if children are prepared for success in kindergarten, what happens when they enter the public schools?

Test scores on the PSSAs in third grade are one benchmark that schools look at for potential concerns when it comes to students' academic performance. Those scores can indicate possible learning delays/disabilities. Some research has even shown a connection between poor literacy skills in the third grade and incarceration rates. According to Reading Partners (a nonprofit), a student not reading at grade level by the end of third grade is four times less likely to graduate from high school on time. For

students from low-income families, the rate is six times less likely. A 2009 study done at Northeastern University found that high school dropouts were 63 times more likely to be imprisoned than college grads, leading to a correlation between literacy rates and incarceration rates.

The percentages of third graders scoring below proficient on the PSSAs in our four area school districts are as follows:

<i>East Stroudsburg</i> —	Math...44.8	Language Arts...28.7
<i>Pleasant Valley</i> —	Math...33.0	Language Arts...29.1
<i>Pocono Mountain</i> —	Math...54.3	Language Arts...46.1
<i>Stroudsburg</i> —	Math...54.2	Language Arts...41.4

How many of our students don't graduate high school in four years? Here are the numbers, from the Reach and Risk report:

<i>East Stroudsburg</i> —	10.9%
<i>Pleasant Valley</i> —	8.5%
<i>Pocono Mountain</i> —	7.5%
<i>Stroudsburg</i> —	10.2%

Another indicator of need is the number of students who receive free or reduced price school lunches. Out of the four local school districts, these numbers are consistently highest in the two districts where our centers and classrooms are based (Pocono Mountain and East Stroudsburg Area).

According to OCDEL, 51.1 percent of school children statewide receive free or reduced price meals. In Monroe County, the breakdown is as follows:

Students receiving free and reduced price lunch

School District	Free in 2019-20	Reduced in 2019-2020	Percent of enrollment in 2019-20	Percent of enrollment in 2010	Percent change
East Stroudsburg	3135	289	51.3% (6668 total enrollment)	46%	+5.3%
Pleasant Valley	1660	168	44% (4154 total enrollment)	32%	+12%
Pocono Mountain	4,399	592	56.7% (8807 total enrollment)	47%	+9.7%
Stroudsburg	2187	294	48% (5161 total enrollment)	34%	+14%

As seen in the chart, in two of our school districts the total number of students receiving free or reduced price meals is more than 50 percent and higher than the state average. While not over 50 percent, the numbers have increased for both the Pleasant Valley and Stroudsburg school districts. In

the last 10 years, the percentages have gone up considerably. Within the Pocono Mountain School District, the schools in the western half continue to have the highest number of students in need and eligible for this food assistance. (The only exception is Tobyhanna Elementary Center.) Below are the number of free lunches received, more than half the district's total.

- Pocono Mt. West High School: 961
- Pocono Mt. West Junior High: 502
- Clear Run Intermediate School: 738
- Clear Run Elementary Center: 424

The Clear Run campus is just down the road from The Mountain Center and several children who attend CRIS and CREC participate in our school-age program and summer camp there.

Within the East Stroudsburg Area School District, the need for free and reduced price lunches is greatest at the South High School and JTL Intermediate School. Both of these schools are located in East Stroudsburg Borough, not far from where our center there is located.

Being hungry has a huge impact on a student's ability to learn and can be considered as necessary for success as textbooks or curriculum. Students who go to school hungry and/or cannot afford to purchase a lunch may not be able to concentrate and often fall behind. They are more likely to miss school because of illness, suffer from depression, and develop behavioral problems throughout their academic career, according to Kids Count. The importance of the free and reduced price meal program cannot be overestimated. Free summer meal programs, like the one we run at TMC, are also vital.

The number of students receiving special education services is another risk factor in terms of educational achievement. This chart shows the percentages in each K-12 school district. They are all higher than the average for Pennsylvania, at about 17 percent, according to the Department of Education. (It should be noted that enrollment in three of the school districts has gone down, except for Stroudsburg, where there has been a slight increase.)

School District	# of Students in Special Education	Current Enrollment	Percent of enrollment
East Stroudsburg	1360	6668	20.4%
Pleasant Valley	919	4154	22.1%
Pocono Mountain	2,048	8807	23.3%
Stroudsburg	979	5161	19%

Studies show that for every \$1 spent on early childhood education, the return is about \$7 in money saved for expenses like special education/intervention, grade repetition, teen pregnancy, delinquency and incarceration. For example, the National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs found that quality ECE programs can yield a \$4 – \$9 dollar return per \$1 invested.

COUNTY RISK FACTORS & ASSETS

Pockets of poverty, not enough affordable housing, and many low-wage jobs are issues we have touched on. What are other concerns – as well as advantages – of living in Monroe County?

The 2019 Economic Scorecard for our county states that unemployment did decrease from 8,000 to 4,400 people from 2010 to 2018, a percentage change from 9.7 to 5.4. During the same period, employment rose by 2,900 people. Unemployment nationwide was at 3.9 percent and at 4.3 percent in Pennsylvania in 2018; both lower than our county. The average compensation per job as of 2017 was \$55,115, compared to \$50,835 in 2010. The state average was higher at \$66,191, as was the national average at \$68,463. The median household income is \$61,430 and the average per capita income is \$27,439 (Data USA and US Census Bureau).

Regarding educational attainment, American Community Survey data from 2019 reports the following academic achievements for those age 25 and up:

- Bachelor's degree or higher—24.4 percent
- Associates' degree or some college— 29.5 percent
- High school diploma or GED—35.4 percent

According to the Pocono Mountains Economic Development Corporation, the top employers in our county are primarily in education, medical care, tourism and government:

- | | | | | |
|--|---|-------------------|------------|----------------|
| Federal Government (i.e. Tobyhanna Army Depot) | Wal-Mart (distribution center & stores) | | | |
| School Districts | Hospitals | Mount Airy Casino | Waterparks | Sanofi Pasteur |

The best job growth from 2013 to 2018 was in accommodations/food service, health care/human services, and transportation/warehousing.

As of 2018, 10,308 employees worked in food service or hotels/motels, 9,299 worked at retail establishments and 8,370 had careers in health care or social work/assistance. These areas accounted for the three leading employment sectors, at 17.1 percent, 15 percent and 13.6 percent respectively. Next in ranking were positions in educational services at 8.3 percent, public administration at 7.1 percent, and transportation/warehousing at 5.8 percent. The best job growth from 2013 to 2018 was in these areas: accommodations/food service, with an increase of 1,702 positions; health care/human services, with 1,238 openings added; and transportation/warehousing, with 605 new jobs. Our labor force comprises 82,400 people, with total employment at 78,500. Many of the tourism related and retail jobs are part-time, with few benefits and low pay.

Major development includes a recent expansion to Kalahari Resorts' conference/event space, doubling its size for a total of 205,000 square feet. Plans for a Pocono Springs complex – featuring an aquarium, entertainment, themed restaurants and retail/specialty shops – are in the works for a 75-acre site in Tobyhanna Township. New supermarkets have opened in 2019: an Aldi in Pocono Summit, Giant in East Stroudsburg (at the site of a former Kmart) and a large ShopRite in Stroud Township's Stroud Mall (where Bon-Ton department store had been). Wineries and breweries and outlet stores are also doing well in our area.

There is wealth in our community and some high-paying jobs, depending on the profession. Residents who commute to New Jersey and New York make considerably more money than those who work locally. The large number of low-paying jobs is tied to the predominance of opportunities in tourism, food/beverage, retail and service industries. Workers in those jobs find it hard to make a living wage.

Pocono Mountains United Way and other United Ways in Pennsylvania have brought attention to a rising and alarming trend: Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed or ALICE individuals. A 2019 study reports that 24 percent of Pennsylvanians are part of the ALICE population. They earn an income above the federal poverty level, but struggle to afford basic household essentials. In Monroe County, 41 percent are below the ALICE threshold. A rising cost of living and wages that don't keep up with those costs are contributing factors. These families are living paycheck to paycheck and can't get ahead. They don't have a safety net if a crisis happens. They often work at more than one job.

Food insecurity in our area affected 10.9 percent or 18,180 people in 2016, according to Feeding America. A United Way community needs assessment in 2017 found that residents have difficulties in meeting basic needs, especially enough food, so this became a priority through at least 2020. One positive outcome was establishing the Monroe County Summer Meals Program, with locations throughout the county, including The Mountain Center. This service provides free, healthy breakfasts and lunches to children age 18 and younger during the months when school is not in session. The United Way's assessment also reported that food agencies/pantries need to work more cooperatively in tackling hunger. The Pocono Mountains Hunger Coalition spearheads efforts to end hunger in our community. One goal is to provide families with access to more nutritious and lower calorie foods, such as more fruits and vegetables, and to teach them how to cook healthier meals. Insufficient food access, affecting those who live more than a half mile from the closest grocery store or supermarket, is another challenge in the rural townships. The percentage of our population with low food access is 23.96 (Monroe and Pike Counties Community Needs Assessment data, 2018-20). On average, five percent of those residents do not have a vehicle.



Our agency will now be coordinating the Getting Ahead program formerly run by Pocono Alliance. This initiative provides classes to at-risk parents/individuals, providing information and resources on topics like financial stability, self-sufficiency and goal-setting. Several of our Head Start parents have participated in and graduated from this program (formerly Bridges out of Poverty).

A number of local nonprofits are working to fight homelessness, such as RHD Street2Feet, God's People Helping People, the Salvation Army, Family Promise and Pocono Area Transitional Housing. During the winter months, the Stroudsburg Wesleyan Church has a shelter at the YMCA in downtown Stroudsburg. Unfortunately, there are limited shelters for the homeless and waiting lists for public housing.

Ten of our families are currently homeless and living in shelters or with relatives or friends. Most of the indigent population is found in the Stroudsburg/ East Stroudsburg area and on the Mountain. During the Winter 2020 Point in Time Count, there were 41 unsheltered individuals in our county, according to Street2Feet. In 2018, there were 79 homeless households and 102 individuals, 98 over the age of 25.

For those residents who do have a home, the number of households where housing costs exceed 30 percent of their total income is 39.46 percent in Monroe County (Monroe and Pike Counties Community Services Block Grant/Community Needs Assessment). Neighboring Pike County's percentage is 34.82, while the state percentage is only 30.12. The rate of housing in substandard condition is 39.06, 10 percent higher than the state average.

HOW IS OUR COUNTY'S HEALTH?

Critical health concerns in our county and the regions of northeast Pennsylvania served by Lehigh Valley Health Network include: increasing mental health needs (including substance use disorders), rising costs of medications, lack of healthy food access, unhealthy behaviors, and alarming diabetes and obesity rates. These issues were all identified as priorities in LVHN's 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment (CHNA).

That report ranks Monroe County 57th out of 67 counties when it comes to overall health outcomes and 65th out of 67 counties in terms of overall quality of life. Twenty percent of the adult population reports not having sufficient social and emotional support. Other interesting findings: 11 percent of adults report having asthma, 10 percent report having diabetes, 3 percent report having heart disease, and 43 percent having high cholesterol. Over a quarter of adults report they have not had a dental exam in the past year.

Breast cancer is the most prevalent cancer in our county, with the second highest being prostate cancer. The rates of breast, prostate, cervical, lung and colon cancer here are higher than statewide or nationwide. LVHN's Mobile Mammography Coach is one solution to reach underserved women. The coach has visited TMC and the nearby Pocono Mountains Public Library. The Pennsylvania Department of Health listed cancer and heart disease as the top two leading causes of death in Monroe County as of 2016.

The 2019 Community Health Needs Assessment done by Saint Luke's University Health Network identifies these four primary needs: improving access to care, preventing chronic disease, improving mental health, and promoting healthy lifestyles. According to the CHNA, 5.25 percent of the Monroe service area's population has no health insurance and about 9.6 percent of those people are under the age of 19. Of those surveyed, 13 percent said the top reason for postponing medical care was because their share of the cost was too high.

Key Findings:

Childhood Obesity—

- Out of 13,522 kindergarteners through sixth graders who were screened in September 2019, 15.49 percent or 2,095 were considered overweight based on Body Mass Index. A total of 2,879 students or 21.29 percent were considered obese. (PA Department of Health statistics)
- Out of 12,931 students screened in grades 7-12, 17.55 percent or 2,269 were considered overweight. And those having BMIs at obese levels totaled 3,059 students or 23.66 percent.

Diet & Exercise—

- Based on survey results, only 9 percent of respondents consumed the recommended daily amount of five or more servings of fruits and vegetables.
- A healthy diet is linked to income. Twelve percent of respondents making over \$60,000 consumed the recommended servings of fruits/vegetables per day, compared to only 6 percent of those making less than \$15,000.
- Only 12 percent of respondents reported regularly exercising five or more days per week and 33 percent reported not exercising at all.
- Seventy-seven percent of respondents were overweight or obese according to BMI calculations (32 percent overweight and 45 percent obese). The highest rate of obesity (48 percent) was found among people earning less



than \$25,000, while the lowest rate (38 percent) was found for those earning more than \$60,000 a year. The incidence of diabetes was related to this finding, with those earning less than \$25,000 having significantly higher reported diagnoses of diabetes (40 percent), compared with those making over \$60,000 (12 percent).

Mental Health—

- Forty percent of those surveyed reported having missed one or more days of normal activities due to poor mental health, in a month's time period.
- According to 2017 PA Youth Survey data, 44 percent of all students in Monroe County felt depressed or sad most days during the year.
- The suicide rate in our county is higher than the statewide and national averages.

Smoking and Drug Use—

- In 2018, 17 percent of adults in Monroe County were smokers (Robert Wood Johnson University Foundation)
- Smoking is linked to income: 27 percent of respondents earning less than \$15,000 were smokers, compared to 7 percent of respondents with incomes over \$60,000.
- Survey responses showed that the highest rate of electronic vapor product use (8 percent) was in the 18-24 age group.
- Six percent of 12th graders reported using a vapor product at least once a week in the past month.
- There has been an increase in Monroe County opioid overdose death rates from 6.5 (2007-11) to 16.2 (2012-16) per 100,000 residents.
- Eighteen percent of respondents reported at least one episode of binge drinking behavior and 6 percent reported more than three episodes of binge drinking behavior within a month.

Since opioid prescription abuse is the fastest-growing drug problem in Monroe County and the country, our local United Way compiled an Opiate Community Resource Guide in November 2019. In our county, 65 out of every 100 people were prescribed opioids in 2017. The guide is a reference tool to help those who are impacted by opiate use and addiction, including family members. It provides important resources, services and treatment options. Taskforce meetings are also held to discuss programs, plan events and find solutions.

An insufficient number of primary care physicians to serve our community is another concern, as reported in the latest County Economic Scorecard. The ratio of the population to one primary care doctor was 2,340 in 2019, increasing steadily from 2,019 in 2012. This is higher than the ratio for Northeast PA (2,023) and the state (1,230). However, there has been an increase in the number of hospital beds per 1,000 people.

Those older than age 50 comprise the largest segment of our population, with roughly 31,900 men and 34,000 women. Those ranging in age from infants to 14 comprise the second largest number of residents, with 13,740 boys and 13,336 girls. (American Community Survey data from 2013-18.) The median age is 42.6. The racial breakdown is 67.6 percent Caucasian, 14.9 percent Hispanic or Latino, and 13 percent African American (Data USA).

ADDITIONAL TRENDS AND INSIGHTS

Why do people live in Monroe County? The natural beauty of the Pocono Mountains (64 percent) and the quality of life (45 percent) are two main reasons, based on a survey of residents in August 2019. The results were compiled by the Northeastern Pennsylvania Alliance (NEPA). Other top reasons are:

location (42 percent), recreation (39 percent), work (27 percent) and cost of living (27 percent). Most respondents (64 percent) have lived in the county for more than 20 years. However, 86 percent moved to the area from somewhere else in the Northeast, with 38 percent relocating from within the New York, New Jersey, Pennsylvania region.

This influx of people to Monroe County has brought issues like rising taxes, litter, crime, and a lack of adequate infrastructure for increased traffic. The rate of violent crime is 32.6 per 10,000 residents, but still lower than the state and national averages. Crime is ranked on a scale of 1 (low crime) to 100 (high crime). The rate of property crime is 20.8, compared to a U.S. average of 35.4. In the East Stroudsburg area, however, this statistic is higher at 29.9 (bestplaces.net).

A major planned road improvement is PennDOT's half billion dollar I-80 reconstruction project, which calls for widening the interstate in the Stroudsburg area from four lanes to six. But, a local group – the I-80 Project Impact AAA Task Force – is looking at alternatives that will mitigate the negative effects on Stroudsburg Borough. Work along the heavily traveled PA 611 corridor from Tannersville through Swiftwater has been going on for a couple years, but probably won't be done until 2021.

Improvements include full road reconstruction, installing a traffic signal at the Brookdale Road intersection, replacing the bridge near Scotrun Avenue, repairing culverts, and improving drainage. This project is supposed to improve safety and traffic flow for the 25,331 vehicles using this roadway each day.

Regarding property taxes, the first county reassessment since 1989 may bring some relief, starting in 2020. Some residents' county and township bills are already lower. Under the out-of-date system, it was possible for property owners with similar houses to pay different tax amounts. The reassessment should bring more parity and accuracy.

What concerns are our state representatives seeing?

Property tax reform, outdated infrastructure and economic development were cited as major issues by Nancy Parks, district constituent outreach specialist for Representative Jack Rader (176th district). She also said the following needs/challenges are not being fully addressed: mental health, drug use and job creation/new businesses.

Erin DeRosa, district office director for Representative Maureen Madden (115th district), shared these comments... *“People are struggling. Constituents can't pay their rent. They call panicked about their mortgage. There is literally no affordable housing here. The public housing list is years long and the Salvation Army is always full. It is heartbreaking. The lack of good paying jobs is another problem. You can't live on what they pay around here, nor can you live in a decent place. People call here and are desperate. I have nowhere to send them. I tell them to contact 211; they said they have and go to all of the places they are referred to and are referred elsewhere. I am not seeing a good outcome for our constituents.”*

What needs are social service agencies seeing?

The majority of calls received by the PoconoInfo helpline/211 are in these categories: income/cash assistance, housing assistance/shelter, basic needs and medical/mental health. And most of the callers are from the areas where our Head Start families reside, such as Coolbaugh Township, which is very underserved when it comes to health/human services.

A PSFC survey of members of the Interagency Council of Monroe County reported these major issues: insufficient affordable and public housing, inadequate public transportation, not enough well-paying

jobs and lack of affordable child care. The need for comprehensive mental health care services, counseling and more dental providers were among health concerns. More activities are also needed for youth and teens. (The recent merger of Youth Empowerment Services, formerly Youth Employment Services, with our organization recognized this opportunity for additional programming.)

Many IAC members agree that nonprofit agencies need to work together in cooperative ways and pool resources, ideas and expertise. Members do network and share information, events and ways to help each other. Donations of furniture, medical equipment and even appliances – or requests for such items for clients – are often shared on a Listserv. Annual events like Community Night – planned by the Children’s Roundtable – provide lots of great resources for families and children, with several IAC organizations participating.

Unique, innovative ideas and solutions, as well as cooperative efforts, will help solve some of our county’s problems. For instance, SHARE is an affordable housing option that brings together homeowners who want to share their home with home seekers who are looking for housing in exchange for rent, help around the house, or a combination of both. The home seeker receives his/her own bedroom and agreed upon use of the common areas. Every arrangement is unique depending on the needs, preferences, and abilities of the participants involved.

A new Diaper Bank for nonprofits to serve needy clients has been established at TMC, in partnership with St. Luke’s Pediatrics. This pilot initiative is for one year, to determine how great the need is, and funding came through the County Grants Office Emergency Food and Shelter Program. A new walk-in health care and dental clinic run by St. Luke’s at TMC is also in the works, with an opening date planned for some time this year.

The community and educational services offered “under one roof” at TMC (The Mountain Center) earned our agency the NHSA Zigler Award for innovation in delivery of services and impact in 2019. Besides Head Start and Pre-K Counts, the tremendous demand for health and human services continues in our fourth year of operating the building. These numbers from last year show how many clients are being reached:

Feeding Families Ministry (food pantry) —673 a month on average

State Rep. Maureen Madden’s constituent office—as many as 413 in April and 656 in August (highest months of service)

WIC program—809 women and children a month on average

Women’s Resources—33 a month on average

AARP Senior Community Service Employment Program—about 60 each month

Monroe County Area Agency on Aging Senior Center—137 in June, 153 in July and 150 in August (highest months of attendance)

Youth Empowerment Services—16 youth had summer jobs with PSFC (over 60 participated in the work experience program countywide)

TMC has been so successful that the facility is running out of room because of the number of requests from community organizations and groups to have offices, programs, meetings, sports events or functions there. We are truly meeting a need that was unmet before, with one-stop services and assistance. One of these services is a new Pocono Pony bus route running to and from the center that is now in its third year of operation – in response to the limited public transportation options. ESL classes, an on-site job placement company, and a Read Across Monroe Library are other unique offerings.

What about our parents' needs outside of the classroom?

Our family engagement team plans and holds activities for our parents/guardians, including workshops. We surveyed parents during the Health Fairs at our two centers in August 2019. The highest requested workshops – for the second year in a row – were CPR training, Money Management, and Understanding Behaviors (Children's).

Program-wide, the most popular workshop offerings were in the areas of Parenting/Life Management. Here are the top survey results: CPR – 51%; Money Management – 35%; Understanding Behaviors – 32%; Coping with Stress – 32%; Employment Opportunities – 32%; Meal Planning on a Budget – 29%; Time Management – 28%; and Discipline – 23%. Workshop choices were also offered in the areas of education, employment and nutrition/health. Our parents' concerns and interests tend to be representative of many households in our county.

A 2018 Community Needs Survey reported the following as the highest need areas for residents/social service agency clients: food, help with utility bills, help finding a job, help paying rent, help with job skills/training, help finding housing/an apartment and financial education/budgeting/credit counseling. Child care was also ranked as an important need by community partners and residents. Recommendations regarding child care included: expanding programming and after school options, offering non-traditional hours, and developing more subsidy assistance programs. (These results were listed in the Monroe and Pike Counties 2018-20 Community Needs Assessment.)

NEXT STEPS...LOOKING AHEAD

The new decade will bring new challenges, positive outcomes and opportunities. The results of the 2020 Census will determine government assistance levels, political representation and funding for schools, roads and essential health/human services like Head Start. Vital data such as the statistics in this report will also be provided.

A Monroe 2030 Action Team is addressing plans for the future, as explained in the 2019 Economic Scorecard. It has developed a five-year strategic action plan for 2020-2025. The plan focuses on five baseline economic indicators: gross domestic product, labor force, total employment, median household income and per capita income. Eight Strategic Doing Action Teams were also formed to address short-term goals: Public Health, Youth Entrepreneurship, Collaboration, Sustainability, Business Development, Marketing, Housing and Workforce. "The Monroe 2030 Action Team sets its sights on actions that promote the attraction and retention of business, the creation of family sustaining employment, and a living and working environment that attracts millennials, entrepreneurs and commuters while preserving the natural environment and culture of the region."

An extreme challenge we are already facing in our backyard, our state, our nation and the world has been the COVID-19 pandemic. This new reality/new normal has affected our lives in ways we never imagined. It also has shown that our county can pull together in positive, extraordinary ways during difficult times. Monroe County tends to be a generous "can-do" county when it comes to helping both those in need and at the front lines during emergencies and crises.

There were 27,735 cases of Coronavirus in Pennsylvania and more than 900 in our county, according to the latest numbers from the Department of Health. Monroe County already had 28 deaths, the highest in Northeast PA, except for Luzerne County. Our governor issued an order closing the public schools starting on March 16 and our agency followed his directive by closing our centers and programs.

Food has become an even more valuable commodity than usual, with so many people out of work or furloughed because of businesses forced to close down temporarily. And some of these businesses might not be able to reopen, meaning more economic hardships in future months.

The school districts are all providing meals to children/students via drive-through processes. In just the first couple weeks of doing this, the Pocono Mountain School District had served more than 10,000 bagged breakfasts and lunches. Area food pantries are being pushed to the limit to meet the increased demand. Besides helping its 600 active clients, Feeding Families Ministry assisted 40 new families in need during the first two weeks of the state lockdown and expects an increase of 20 to 30 additional families each week until the crisis is over. During the month of March alone, 1,020 people were served. Feeding Families Founder Diane McFadzean shared how one new client spoke about the new normal. “One day you are able to support yourself and you have a good job and everything is going good, and the next day you are laid off and you can’t afford to buy milk for your kids. This whole experience is terrifying and humbling. Thank you so much for being there for us.”

In response to the pandemic, Pocono Mountains United Way has established a Crisis Response Fund and also a special fund that benefits both low-income families in need of food and restaurant owners who are hurting. Donors can buy a \$25 Community Cares gift certificate from a local restaurant that goes to a family in need for curbside pickup of meals. It’s a win/win in this difficult time. Pocono Mountains United Way has also been organizing Community Touchpoint meetings via Zoom to keep various sectors of the community aware of the latest developments and assistance.

To help with the local demand for hand sanitizer, Barley Creek Brewing Company and Vigon International – which are known for their beer and flavor/fragrance ingredients respectively – have been producing the product. Civic groups and restaurants have supplied meals to hospitals to thank their heroic staff. A new Facebook Group for takeout meals has also been established.

Within our own agency, teachers have found innovative ways to keep in touch with our families and children, whether through Zoom circle times, YouTube videos or various apps. We email, text and call our families and kids. We provide vital information and resource connections, and even have delivered household supplies like diapers when necessary, practicing social distancing.

Our county will hopefully come out stronger after this crisis. There is a lot of uncertainty, of course. Recovery will take time.

The pandemic reminds us how important the youngest generation is to our future and how much our families rely on our agency and staff. PSFC’s guidance, instruction and care – even under stay-at-home orders – has still been indispensable.

One of our former Head Start moms – whom we recently honored for the positive achievements she has made personally and professionally – said we literally “saved her life.” We hope our influence and impact makes a significant difference with all our families’ lives.

We know our agency makes a critical imprint on the futures of the children and parents we serve. We can help at-risk families overcome obstacles and achieve success in school and life. **Our work is a vital part of improving the quality of life in Monroe County – we want and need to do more.**