

2014 Community Needs Assessment Pocono Services for Families and Children

From Washington, DC to Harrisburg to East Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania, “high quality Pre-K” has increasingly become a buzzword during recent months. President Obama continues to support universal access to high quality preschool and Pennsylvania has just launched a “Pre-K for PA” public awareness campaign. In Monroe County, PA, the need for excellent child care – and programs that are also affordable – is mirroring state and national trends. For example, the importance and value of high quality preschool programs has been emphasized by the local LEARN (Local Education and Resource Network) team, which is led by PSFC/Monroe County Head Start.

In a recent study, PA Partnerships for Children reported that only one in six preschool children in the Commonwealth have access to publicly funded, high quality pre-kindergarten programs. Preschoolers in Monroe County are actually faring better, with one in three (34%) participating in publicly-funded quality early education programs (according to 2011-12 data from the PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning/OCDEL). About 20 percent of these children are enrolled in Keystone Stars programs, which PSFC is part of as a Star 4 program. However, only 2.5 percent of these children are being served by our Head Start program, due to funding levels that are not keeping up with our needs.

The importance of continuing to have a top-notch, growing Head Start program in our county cannot be underestimated. Given our area’s still-challenging economic conditions, there continues to be a waiting list for Head Start classes and subsidized child care. This demand was clearly seen when PSFC opened a new classroom in Coolbaugh Township in December 2013 and every seat was filled within just a couple of weeks. More state and federal funding is needed to help us serve this demand. Research consistently shows that “at risk” children benefit from quality early learning opportunities, with economic and educational benefits that extend to families and communities.

Regarding subsidized care in our county, our local Child Care Information Services reports that approximately 670 families and 1,250 children are being served, with 78 children on the waiting list. Our Head Start program has a waiting list of 50 youngsters. CCIS representative Barbara Cullin reports that more parents are asking about high-quality providers when looking for care. They are inquiring about those centers that participate in Keystone Stars and/or are accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children. This is a noteworthy trend, which we have seen with our own families who appreciate the rigorous standards of excellence that PSFC/Monroe County Head Start has met. Cullin said families are also looking for unique features and convenience, such as operating hours and location. There are a total of 94 regulated provider sites, four fewer than in 2013 and 11 fewer than in 2012.

Every year since 1965, when our agency started serving the community, the need for our services by families has increased. In 2014, this is seen through data which is provided below, such as the rate of unemployment and the number of free/reduced lunches in the school districts. Besides publicly funded/subsidized child care, the demand for other social services for economically-challenged families continues to grow.

Unemployment in Monroe County has dropped slightly from 9.6 percent in November 2012 to an estimated 8.7 percent as of November 2013, based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Only three counties in Pennsylvania have a higher unemployment rate. Statewide, unemployment was estimated at 6.8 percent in the fall of 2013, compared with a nationwide rate of 6.6 percent. The lack of jobs with liveable wages continues to be a concern in our county, especially with many tourism-related positions that pay only minimum wage. Impacts of the recession are still found, from a lack of jobs and flat salaries to sluggish business development. The bright spots in our local economy are expansion in the medical/health field, some new businesses in the retail sector and growth in the hospitality industry, such as new water parks being developed. Foreclosures still remain high, although they have stabilized. According to January 2014 data from Realty Trac, Monroe County has the third highest foreclosure rate in Pennsylvania, with 1 of every 427 housing units in foreclosure. Foreclosures are highest in the East Stroudsburg area and Pocono Mountain School District, areas where PSFC has Head Start classes. Many of our families rent homes/apartments and rental costs have even become prohibitive. The current median rent in our county is \$1,045 a month, according to data from Zillow Real Estate Network

While Monroe County consistently was among the top two counties in population growth in Pennsylvania, that trend has been reversed as people have left the Poconos. The most recent statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau show 168,798 residents in 2012, with 4.8 percent under the age of five. This represents a 0.6 percent decrease from 169,843 residents in 2010. The closure of schools among the four local school districts is a noticeable trend of the slower growth. A bright spot is that the demand for preschools and child care continues to be high.

As for poverty levels, data from the Census Bureau from 2008 to 2012 shows that 11.7 percent of Monroe County residents were below the poverty level. Median household income was at \$57,773 during that period. The number of children living in economically at risk families in our county is 58.5 percent total, with those living in high risk families at 17 percent, according to OCDEL's Reach and Risk Report. (These are the latest statistics available.)

Another indicator of financial hardship in our county is shown in statistics for free and reduced lunches from the four area school districts, kindergarten through 12th grade. The need is greatest in the mountain area and in the East Stroudsburg vicinity, where many of our Head Start classes are located.

In the Pocono Mountain School District, 49% of the 9,489 enrolled students receive free lunches and 7% qualify for reduced price lunches, for a total of 56% receiving assistance. These numbers have grown in the last few years (47% total in 2010). Of the 7,176 students enrolled in the East Stroudsburg Area School District, 3,300 are eligible for free lunches and 662 are eligible for reduced price (a total of 54.3%). This percentage has only gone up slightly from 53% in 2013, but has increased about 8% since 2010. In the Pleasant Valley School District, 1,713 students receive free lunches, while 324 qualify for reduced prices, for a total of 2,037 out of a student population of 4,988. The overall percentage of students receiving lunch assistance is 41%, up from 32% in 2010. As for Stroudsburg School District, 2,028 students are eligible for free lunch and 275 qualify for reduced lunch costs. This represents 44.7% of the student population of 5,154. The percentage was slightly higher in 2013 (47%), but much lower in 2010 (34%).

Besides economic concerns, many children in Monroe County face challenges emotionally, physically, mentally and/or socially. The number of special education students – both school-age and preschool – has increased in recent years in Monroe County and so has the demand for related services. This also reflects a statewide and national trend.

The number of students with special needs within the area school districts (as of February 2014) is as follows: Pocono Mountain, 2,277; East Stroudsburg, 1,415; Pleasant Valley, 950 and Stroudsburg, 800. These numbers all represent increases compared to 2013. Within our own classrooms, 24 children have Individual Education Plans (IEPs), 20 have pending IEPs, 11 have behavior treatment plans, and 137 are being monitored for social emotional/behavioral concerns.

Increased special education services in the public schools are a concern because of the direct correlation between high quality child care/preschool and a lesser need for special education in later years. If more children benefited from quality Pre-K programs, there would be fewer students requiring special education services in higher grades. Research shows that high quality pre-kindergarten can reduce special education placements by nearly 50% through second grade (March 2011, Pew Center on the States, Partnership for America's Economic Success). In addition, every \$1 invested in quality early education saves \$7 in special education, public assistance, corrections and lost taxes. Studies have shown that quality Pre-K has a lasting impact on school readiness, greater academic achievement, high school graduation rates, college attendance, employment and higher earnings, and owning a home.

Such data reinforces the need for publicly funded, high quality preschool/Pre-K programs for our children in Monroe County, as well as statewide and nationally. A recent focus group of some of our parents reiterated the importance of our Head Start classes and our Keystone Star program for economically-challenged families. The safety of our centers, our open-door policy and the assistance we provide parents were other features that families love about our program.

Besides quality, accessible preschool/Pre-K, residents in our county have other community needs that remain unmet. Pocono Alliance reports that the following requests were among the top needs in the last few months: heating assistance, rental assistance, electric and other utility assistance, homeless shelters/housing, and food/food pantries.

As in past years, surveys of our parents show that their greatest “wants” include: affordable housing, access to health care, available employment, and jobs that pay a livable wage. Regarding health care, a continuing issue is that many physicians don't accept Medical Assistance. This still applies to general practitioners, pediatricians and dentists. A lack of public transportation access in more rural areas of the county is still another concern.

A homeless initiative/task force in our county is gaining momentum and social service agencies continue to do the best they can in meeting diverse clients' needs. Community partnerships continue to be a key to success, and PSFC/Monroe County Head Start is involved in such relationships with fellow nonprofits, government entities and the business sector.

Since the long-term benefits of affordable, high quality preschool/early education have a ripple effect in the community, this issue will remain urgent for years to come. PSFC's goal is to keep meeting this need through more classrooms/centers as more funding becomes available. Our belief is that every single child in our community deserves a Head Start.