

2015 Community Needs Assessment

Pocono Services for Families and Children

As Monroe County Head Start approaches its 50th anniversary, the demand for this life-changing program in our community keeps growing. As a Keystone Star 4 and NAEYC accredited organization, we continue to provide the highest quality preschool education. Our services will continue to expand as we plan to widen our reach to serve infants and toddlers through Early Head Start.

There has never been an Early Head Start program in Monroe County and this additional program is sorely needed to supplement traditional Head Start. There is a definite void in our community because of this. While there are some social, developmental and educational services for infants and toddlers, these are limited and Early Head Start is needed to fill the gaps in service to families and our area's youngest children.

Of the 8,688 children under the age of 5 in our county, 61.8% live in economically challenged households, according to the August 2014 Reach and Risk Assessment from the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. The current overall risk level for our county is now moderate-high, upgraded from a moderate-low risk in the past year.

Three areas of Monroe County— where our agency has preschool centers — show a high at-risk population when you look at the poverty index/statistics by zip code. In Mount Pocono Borough (18344), of the 209 children under age 6, 136 or 65.1 percent are living at or below the Federal Poverty Level (FPL). In neighboring Tobyhanna Township (18466), of 1,390 children under the age of 6, 256 or 18 percent are living at the Federal Poverty Level (FPL), while 1,056, or 76 percent, are at 300 percent of the FPL. In East Stroudsburg (18301), of 1,338 children under age 6, 214, or 16 percent, are living at the FPL, while 840 or 62.8 percent are at 300 percent of the FPL. In the Pleasant Valley area (18322) where we operate another center, 50 young children (30 percent of the 166 children under age 6) are living at 300 percent of the FPL. Even this lower number shows the financial difficulties of our families.

Our Head Start program was serving 222 children at the end of school year 2013-14. This represents only about 2.4 percent of the eligible population under 5 and is below the statewide figure of nearly 5 percent. Clearly, there is a need to serve many more vulnerable preschoolers.

In terms of the needs of infants, recent statistics from the Reach and Risk Report show how underserved this population is in our county. For example, of the 5,069 children under the age of 2, only 140 infants/toddlers, or 2.8 percent, receive services through the Nurse-Family Partnership. NFP helps low-income families, with an emphasis on parent education/goals and the healthy development of the child (just like Head Start). About 136 families have recently been served, with the demand for services exceeding the available staff and funding resources.

Regarding early intervention, Reach and Risk data show that 8 percent, or 692 children, receive such services locally. Early intervention serves children with disabilities and developmental delays, also taking into account the needs of the family. The need for services provided to autistic children in our area has definitely been growing. Case in point, the Pennsylvania Autism Action Center recently moved to larger offices in Monroe County's West End to offer more programming and services.

According to Ellen Erb, early intervention coordinator for Carbon-Monroe-Pike MH/DS, their agency is also seeing an increased demand for assistance, with the number of clients growing. A total of 289

infants/toddlers are being served, with an additional 53 pending evaluation and 97 being tracked for at-risk delays.

Another indicator of need for birth through school-age children is the number of low-income working families receiving child care subsidies through the Child Care Works initiative. According to recent statistics, a total of 941 children, or 10.8 percent, under age 5 were covered by these subsidies. Child Care Works is funded by state and federal monies and is administered by Child Care Information Services of Carbon/Monroe Counties. There is generally a waiting list of eligible families/children.

The need for high quality early childhood education programs (like Head Start) is paramount as well. Unfortunately, out of children under age five enrolled in child care, only 14.6 percent (an estimated 1,269) are enrolled in Keystone STARS programs in Monroe County. As of January 2015, there were 41 Keystone STAR providers in Monroe County, about half of the approximately 80 centers in operation. All of PSFC’s centers and classrooms have earned a STAR 4 rating, the highest possible. Only nine providers countywide are at the STAR 4 level. The chart below gives a breakdown by STAR ranking.

STAR 1	STAR 2	STAR 3	STAR 4
15	5	3	15
			(7 PSFC sites are included)

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, only 150, or 4% of the eligible population.

County At-Risk Factors

There are several factors that negatively impact our county, which has become a bedroom community for many “transplants” from the New York metropolitan area. Rising taxes and a high foreclosure rate have been adverse trends. The loss of some higher-paying positions (through business relocation or closure) has been another detriment. Tourism is one of our main industries and many of these jobs do not pay more than minimum wage.

Regarding health issues, our oldest residents have higher rates of lung cancer and high cholesterol than the state average (according to a Pocono Record article from June 2013). High blood pressure is another ailment, with 56 percent of Monroe County elderly suffering from this condition. This is a concern since several of our preschool students are raised by their grandparents. In 19 disease categories, however, the elderly fare close to or better than the state average, based on the latest statistics.

Our youngest residents face complications from poor pre-natal care and a need for more education for expectant mothers. For example, Monroe County has a high birth outcome risk (based on very pre-term births before 32 weeks) of 1.9 percent or 3, with a rating of 4 being the highest. Likewise, the number of babies born at low birth weight is 8.6 percent, a risk level of 4. This is higher than the state average of 8.2 percent. Regarding infant mortality, our county’s percentage of 0.8 is slightly higher than the state percentage of 0.7, for a risk level of 3. Pocono Medical Center addressed these risks by establishing a Level III Neonatal Intensive Care Unit (NICU) in 2010 to provide specialized care for

babies who require specific medical attention. Level III indicates that the hospital is equipped to provide care for the most critically ill and fragile newborns. An Early Head Start program would have an impact in addressing this need as well.

Among older children, obesity is a concern. In fact, 19.19 percent of kindergartners through sixth graders (who were screened) had a Body Mass Index (BMI) of greater than the 95th percentile. BMI measures body fat based on height and weight and the 95th percentile is considered obese. Our county's numbers are higher than the state average of 16.68 percent. The most recent percentage of K-6 grade students considered overweight, with a BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile, is 18.44 percent, compared to a state average of 15.91 percent. These statistics were based on screenings of 14,947 children during school year 2010-11.

Another risk factor concerning our county's children is our third graders' performance on the PSSAs. Recent reports show a below proficiency percentage of 24.7, or a risk level of 2. Third grade statistics often determine success in school and beyond and are used as a benchmark.

The number of students in special education in our school districts is an additional warning sign and indicator of how important high quality early childhood education is for school success. We can't stress enough that research shows that for every \$1 invested in quality early education, there is a \$7 savings in special education, public assistance, corrections and lost taxes. The chart below shows the percentage of students in special education in our four local school districts. We are addressing this concern in our community, with our agency operating centers in the districts with the three highest numbers.

School District	# of Students in Special Education	Current Enrollment	Percent of enrollment
East Stroudsburg	1392	6997	19.9%
Pleasant Valley	1167	4762	24.5%
Pocono Mountain	2,000	9293	21.5%
Stroudsburg	780	5038	15.5%

Unemployment in Monroe County is usually higher than the state and federal averages. Tourism and retail are two of our main occupations and the seasonal nature of these industries affects our employment rates. According to an article in the Pocono Record on April 30, 2015, our county's jobless rate remained at 6.6 percent in March, for the third consecutive month. Pennsylvania's rate was 5.3 percent, up a tenth of a percent, but still well below Monroe's. Our rate tied that of the Johnstown MSA for the highest among Pennsylvania's 18 Metropolitan Statistical Areas in February. In

November 2014, our county's jobless rate was slightly lower at 6.2 percent due to seasonal factors. These numbers are down significantly from January 2014, when the unemployment rate was 8.8 percent. Unfortunately, many of the county's jobs do not pay well and it is hard for families to make a living wage. Economic issues have come up in the recent campaign for Monroe County commissioner.

Representatives from East Stroudsburg University's Health Studies Department conducted a Food Insecurity Needs Assessment last year, reporting on their findings in December 2014. Residents living below the poverty line rose from 9 percent in 2007 to 11 percent in 2011. Since 2007, Monroe County's average income level has been about \$10,000 less than Pennsylvania's average \$40,000 income level. In addition, the cost of Monroe's Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program has risen from \$24.7 million in 2009 to \$34 million in 2013, as the eligible population increases. The number of residents eligible for Medicaid increased from 11 percent in 2009 to 17 percent in 2013, with medical assistance program costs rising from \$133.6 million in 2009 to \$217.8 million in 2013.

The Food Insecurity Needs Assessment showed that the six local food pantries are struggling to meet increased numbers of homeless and financially-strapped residents. For example, an April 12 article in the Pocono Record described the growing need at the food pantry at St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Tannersville. The small pantry had to reduce its operating hours from four days a week to one day because it couldn't keep up with the need. Like most area pantries, donations are welcome, from boxed and canned foods, to toiletries and disposable diapers. A neighboring church has stepped-up by opening a clothing closet, with free community-donated items available to the less fortunate two Saturdays a month. Eglise Evangelique De La Renaissance Church in Swiftwater has also started to offer free food donations from Second Harvest in Allentown.

A goal of the Food Insecurity Needs Assessment was to find ways to battle poverty and unemployment. It was shared with more than 100 representatives from community organizations and charities. About 40 area agencies were involved in collecting information for the study. The Monroe County Homeless Initiative is also working on solutions. And Pocono Alliance's Bridges Out of Poverty and Getting Ahead programs are helping local residents with self-sufficiency, financial stability and goal-setting. Several of our Head Start parents have participated in and graduated from these programs.

Homelessness is a big issue/problem in Monroe County, not just for adults, but for children. According to a February 26 Pocono Record article, in January 2015, 162 people – including at least nine children – were living on the street. The data came from a Winter Point-in-Time Homeless Count. About 75 volunteers from four agencies conducted the count of unsheltered people in places like abandoned structures, under bridges, in the woods, vehicles or rented campers. Volunteers also visited shelters, food pantries and churches. The newspaper article reported that this is the highest number of homeless people counted since the counts began in January 2013. Much of the indigent population was found in the Stroudsburg/East Stroudsburg area and on the Mountain, where our agency serves the most children.

According to 2012 statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau, roughly one in 7 county residents – and one in 5.5 children under 18 – lives in poverty. This figure is worse than the state and national poverty rates. The Pocono Record reported that our county's poverty rate grew by 78 percent between 2007 and 2011 and by 76 percent for children. In 2007, less than one in 10 county residents lived in poverty.

Homelessness is even a concern in our own program/classrooms. A total of 18 of our currently enrolled children/families are considered homeless.

Another indicator of need in our county continues to be the number of free and reduced price luncheons provided to youngsters in the four area school districts. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education, this economic risk factor is 50.2 percent for our county, or a risk rating of 4 (the highest level). Below is a table showing the breakdown by school district:

Students receiving free and reduced price lunch

School District	Free in 2014-15	Reduced in 2014-15	Percent of enrollment in 2014-15	Percent of enrollment in 2010	Percent change
East Stroudsburg	3285	599	55.5% (6997 total enrollment)	46%	+9.5%
Pleasant Valley	1094	458	32.6% (4762 total enrollment)	32%	+.06%
Pocono Mountain	4,908	593	59.2% (9293 total enrollment)	47%	+12.2%
Stroudsburg	1889	270	43% (5038 total enrollment)	34%	+9%

The physical health and well being of our community is another area of concern. A recent Health Needs Assessment done by East Stroudsburg University and commissioned by Pocono Medical Center showed alarming trends/high rates in some areas. These were: mental health, substance abuse (including smoking) and vehicular accidents. This report was shared with the public in January 2015. The findings also showed that our county does not have enough primary care physicians.

Pocono Medical Center does provide many educational resources, workshops and support groups for various medical/health conditions. For the population that would be served by Early Head Start, childbirth and breastfeeding education are among the available programs. Enrollment in childbirth education averaged 70 people annually from 2010 to 2014. The number of women enrolled in breastfeeding education averaged 38 during the same period. If Early Head Start were established in Monroe County, these numbers could be increased by sharing information with parents and parents-to-be.

Regarding substance abuse, drug trafficking has become an issue that has impacted some of our families. Drug arrests have put a few of our parents in jail, so the grandparents are caring for the children. Heroin, crack cocaine and marijuana are the major drugs involved and our proximity to the Philadelphia and New York is part of the problem. Arrests have often been made in the East Stroudsburg and Tobyhanna/Coolbaugh Township areas that PSFC serves. For example, in January 2015, Pocono Mountain Regional Police broke up a heroin trafficking ring, arresting five people in Coolbaugh Township. At the time of the arrest, a 14-year-old child was in the home, the Pocono Record reported in a Jan. 27 article.

Resources in our Community for Young Children/Families

There are many resources available in our community for families with preschoolers, but fewer for children from birth to age 3. The local libraries have age-appropriate programs for young children, such as story time and featured musical artists. Music Together for moms and babies/toddlers is a local offering, but there is a charge.

Several churches and nonprofit agencies have children's clothing closets, some specifically for babies. The county has a car seat program for residents who need assistance with affording an infant or toddler car seat.

Healthy Start Screenings are provided through Pocono Alliance, with the assistance of our Head Start program. The number of developmental, vision and/or hearing screenings for 2014-2015 totaled 1065, with 106 children referred for further assessment. Screenings are in the areas of: speech and language, fine and gross motor, social/emotional, cognitive, vision/hearing and self-help.

Our local state representatives have been sponsoring an annual Family Expo to provide information about services and activities in our community for children and their families. This April, State Representative Rosemary Brown held an inaugural Health-Palooza, an event to promote health/wellness and education. This was in conjunction with the new Monroe campus of Northampton Community College. Some special events in our county are geared to young children, such as Pocono Raceway's Kids Day in June (which PSFC has participated in for seven years) and our own Family Fun Day in October.

Inquiries throughout the county to the Pocono Info referral network include assistance in the following major areas: heating, rent/housing, utilities, food and medical. Construction on a St. Luke's Hospital location in the Bartonsville area and new Pocono Medical Center locations throughout our county show the demand for more medical/health services.

A key resource is our partnership with the East Stroudsburg School District and the district's Keystones to Opportunity grant. This initiative has provided a literacy coach and professional development opportunities for our teachers in literacy and English as a second language. Educational/classroom materials were purchased to support literacy success. As a result, children who attended Head Start scored higher (70.4 percent) than their non-Head Start peers (60.8 percent) in reaching literacy benchmarks on standardized tests in first grade.

Surveys of our families show needs/wants such as affordable housing, better-paying jobs, more public transportation routes, more support groups, and better access to health care. Our Head Start program strives to help our families with their needs/goals and an Early Head Start program would do the same.

Our parent surveys have also indicated an interest in the establishment of an Early Head Start program. This has also been an area of interest when our agency has participated in community events throughout the county.