

# 2016 Community Needs Assessment

## Pocono Services for Families and Children

Fifty years ago, the Head Start program in Monroe County, Pennsylvania, served approximately 30 children for six weeks during the summer. There was just one location, first in Stroudsburg and then at East Stroudsburg State College. In 2016, Pocono Services for Families and Children (which oversees the local Head Start program) provides services for 319 children in 16 classrooms and two home-based options—year-round. The number of staff has also increased tremendously, from four employees in the early 1970s to 73 full and part-time personnel today.

The greatest need is in the Pocono Mountain and East Stroudsburg Area School Districts. This year alone, PSFC has opened five new classes to keep up with demand for high quality childcare for the most vulnerable families in our community. Classrooms are sometimes filled before they have even opened. There is also a great need for Early Head Start, which has never been offered in Monroe County. Plans are for this program to start in the fall. Social, developmental and educational services for infants/toddlers are limited and Early Head Start is needed to fill the gaps in service to families and our area's youngest children.

Why is there such a demand for our services? Part of the answer is economic (albeit various community/social factors have an impact). According to Pre-K for PA data, 1,910 or 52 percent of the 3,645 three and four year olds in Monroe County are from families whose income is below 300 percent poverty (\$72,750 for a family of four). Of this number, a whopping 78 percent of these children (1,487) do not have access to a publicly-funded, high quality pre-kindergarten program. This is higher than the state percentage of 69 percent. Clearly, there is a need to serve many more preschoolers from low-income households.

### **High-Risk Households**

Of the 8,688 total children under the age of 5 in our county, 15.5 percent live in economically *high-risk* families/households and 63 percent live in economically *at-risk* families/households. This data is from the 2014-15 Reach and Risk Assessment from the Pennsylvania Office of Child Development and Early Learning. Based on this report, updated in May 2016, the current overall risk level for our county continues to be moderate-high. Contributing risk areas include: educational/academic, medical/health, financial/monetary, and lifestyle/quality of living.

Additionally, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that approximately 13.3 percent of Monroe County's residents live at the Federal Poverty Level (2014 statistics). The areas of Monroe County where our agency has preschool centers – East Stroudsburg, Mount Pocono area, and Tobyhanna/Coolbaugh Townships – are considered high-risk based on poverty indexes. As research shows, giving more children access to high quality early childhood education can help break the cycle of poverty and help these children succeed both in school and life.

Of the 319 preschoolers we serve, 40 are in Pre-K Counts classrooms, while the remaining 279 are in Head Start classes. Unfortunately, we are only reaching about 2.9 percent of three and four year olds, although this is up slightly from the 2.4 percent we were serving at the end of school year 2013-14. In terms of the needs of infants/toddlers, OCDEL's Reach and Risk Report shows how underserved this population is in our county. For example, only 229 children age 2 and under, or 4.5 percent, receive services through Nurse-Family Partnership. This is an increase, however, compared to the 140 young children (2.8 percent) previously served, as reported in our 2015 Community Assessment. 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 are being served by the local Nurse-Family Partnership, reports Manager Virginia Sosnowski, RN, BSN. This number is the same as last year, but state and federal funding resources are not sufficient to meet demand, she explains. Ms. Sosnowski also emphasized the need for Early Head Start, noting the gap in services between 2 and 3 years of age.

Regarding early intervention, Reach and Risk data show that 6.9 percent, or 602 children, receive such services locally, a slight decrease from last year. Early intervention assists children with disabilities and developmental delays, also taking into account the needs of the family. The need for services provided by our own Child Well Being Management System, which provides screenings and expertise in mental and behavioral health, has increased tremendously during the last couple years.

According to Ellen Erb, early intervention coordinator for Carbon-Monroe-Pike MH/DS, their agency continues to see a constant demand for assistance, with the number of clients growing. Presently, 350 infants/toddlers are being provided services through Individual Family Service Plans, with 71 more awaiting evaluations and 102 being tracked for at-risk delays. This is an increase over last year's figures of 290, 53 and 97 respectively. An Early Head Start program would be beneficial to these families.

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. A total of 709 children (8.2 percent) under age 5 are 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. Single-parent households are among those families who qualify, with 31.5 percent of local children living in such households.

### **School Statistics**

Our Community Assessment shows a need among our littlest residents, but what is the picture at the local school districts?

Student performance on the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) is a gauge of individual achievement and school success. The test is given to third graders, a grade which researchers often point to as a benchmark of whether a student will do well in school/life or end up being in poverty and even in prison. In Monroe County, 38.3 percent of third graders scored below proficient on the test's reading portion. This is a risk level of 3, with the highest risk level being 4. As for math performance, half (50.3 percent) of third graders scored below proficient, another risk level of three. Statewide, 36.7 percent of third graders were below proficient in reading, while 49.9 percent were below proficient in math. Our results were somewhat worse than the state averages. Clearly, this is an area of concern and there is much room for improvement on the PSSA scores.

High school graduation rates are another factor in how well our county is doing academically and economically. In this category, we are at a risk level of 4, the highest or worst ranking. The number of students who do not graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma is 13.2 percent. Only 12 counties in Pennsylvania, out of 67, have higher percentages. Having at least a high school diploma is key in getting a job, earning more money, and not being in poverty.

The number of students receiving either free or reduced price school lunch also gives insight into our county's economic picture and community needs. The chart below contains data from Monroe

County's four public school districts. It is interesting to note that the number/percentage of students receiving free lunches has increased greatly in each school district. Many students who were receiving reduced lunch prices a year ago now qualify for free lunch. The East Stroudsburg Area and Pocono Mountain School Districts, where we have the greatest number of Head Start families, have the highest percentages of children who qualify for this assistance.

### **Students receiving free and reduced price lunch**

School District	Free in 2015-16	Reduced in 2015-16	Percent of enrollment in 2015-16	Percent of enrollment in 2010	Percent change
East Stroudsburg	3416	455	57.3% (6973 total enrollment)	46%	+11.3%
Pleasant Valley	2131	360	54.8% (4542 total enrollment)	32%	+.06%
Pocono Mountain	5,557— this includes reduced		60.8% (9134 total enrollment)	47%	+13.8%
Stroudsburg	1998	252	44.9% (5005 total enrollment)	34%	+10.9%

The number of special education students in the four local school districts is an additional concern and a predictor of how important high-quality early childhood education is for school success. With the exception of East Stroudsburg Area School District, these numbers have increased.

School District	# of Students in Special Education	Current Enrollment	Percent of enrollment
East Stroudsburg	1288	6973	18.5%
Pleasant Valley	849	4542	18.6%
Pocono Mountain	2,012	9134	22.0%
Stroudsburg	800	5005	15.9 %

## County Overview

Several factors continue to negatively impact our county, which has become a bedroom community for many families from the New York metropolitan area. Rising taxes and a high foreclosure rate have been recent, adverse trends. Unemployment rose during March 2016, up four-tenths of a percent to 5.9 percent in April. A total of 4,800 workers were unemployed, reports the PA Department of Labor and Industry. The January figure was 5.4 percent. Monroe County's jobless rate in March placed it as 33<sup>rd</sup> among the state's 67 counties. Our unemployment is usually higher than the state and federal averages. The rate in March 2015 was 6.6 percent, according to the Pocono Record.

Tourism is one of our main industries in our community and although more jobs have been created, the majority of these positions do not pay livable/family-sustaining wages. New indoor waterpark resorts/conference centers and medical facilities have spurred some of the recent, local commercial growth. Expansion also includes retail stores and hotels – but these businesses also traditionally pay low wages for non-management jobs.

Homelessness remains a major obstacle to the county's health and the rate is higher than surrounding areas per capita. The United Way of Monroe County is completing a needs assessment that identifies this as a continuing problem that needs to be addressed. Forty-eight of our own Head Start families have been homeless during the past year. (*Families living with other relatives are considered homeless.*) The Monroe County Homeless Initiative is trying to identify 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 and graduated from these successful programs.

Regarding health/well-being concerns, behavioral health has been identified as a major issue by the United Way and other human service agencies. Depression and suicide rates are higher in our county than the rest of the country, states an April 24 story in the Pocono Record. Recent teen suicides in our community have prompted public forums and discussions. The Pocono Record also reports that tobacco use and alcohol abuse are also more prevalent in our county than nationwide. Parental heroin addiction is the leading cause of new foster care cases handled by Monroe County Children and Youth Services. In fact, 10 infants recently being placed in foster care were born heroin-dependent, according to a May 8, 2016 article in the Pocono Record.

Some of our youngest residents face complications from poor prenatal care and/or a lack of sufficient education among their expectant mothers. Monroe County continues to have a high birth outcome risk (based on very pre-term births before 32 weeks). The state's updated Reach and Risk Report lists this percentage of births at 2.3 percent, the highest risk level. Likewise, the number of babies born at low birth weight is also a risk level of 4, or 8.5 percent (compared to a state average of 7.9 percent). The numbers reported by Nurse-Family Partnership are higher, with 9.1 percent of their clients having premature births and 12.7 percent having low birthweight babies. The percentage of children born to young and single mothers is 6.4 percent. An Early Head Start program would have an impact in providing much needed education, resources and assistance.

Among school-age children, obesity continues to be a concern. According to the most recent data, about 20 percent of kindergartners through sixth graders (who were screened) had a Body Mass Index (BMI) of greater than the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile. BMI measures body fat based on height and weight and the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile is considered obese. Our county's numbers are higher than the state average of roughly 17 percent.

Regarding crime, Monroe County's violent crime rate is 336.4 per 100,000, considered the "worst" category ranking by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Substance abuse and drug trafficking are part of the problem, and crime has become an issue that has impacted some of our families. Fifteen of our parents/guardians were incarcerated at some point during the past year.

There are diverse resources available in our community for families and children, but more are needed, especially in the areas of medical help, insurance, transportation and emergency aide. There continues to be a shortage of primary care physicians and specialists. The opening of a local St. Luke's Hospital in Bartonsville in fall 2016 should be beneficial to residents. Inquiries to the Pocono Info referral network include assistance in these major areas: heating, rent/housing, utilities and food. Our state legislators have been addressing some of these issues, with special events/fairs in the areas of health, family activities, careers, and wellness.

Surveys of our families show wants such as affordable housing, better-paying jobs, more support groups, and better access to quality health care. Additional parenting resources and mental health information are other requests. Obtaining childcare with nontraditional hours – for parents who work late shifts or on weekends – is another need.

Our Head Start program strives to help our families with their needs/goals and an Early Head Start program would do the same. We have created a Job Club to help parents with getting a job and skills such as resume writing. Increased parent/family engagement with activities, workshops, training and special events has been one of our agency's priorities the last couple years. Our annual Family Fun Day and Wellness Fair continue to be very successful, with new festivities and participation by more community groups.

As we serve an increasing number of children and families in Monroe County, we see the need for services growing – in and out of the classroom. The demand for Head Start's high quality early childhood programs will not lessen. Our community's requirements, challenges and opportunities will keep increasing as well. And we will strive to keep meeting all of those needs and growth, especially among our children, as we have done during the last 50 years.