

## 2017 Community Needs Assessment

### Pocono Services for Families and Children

As part of a recent in-service program, PSFC's early childhood education professionals participated in a poverty simulation. The activity simulated what it is like to live in poverty and experience what it is like to be homeless, unemployed and/or unable to make ends meet. Some staff were parents, other were children, and some worked for social service agencies. Although this was a pseudo-activity, this life is all too real for many of the families served by our organization.

Monroe County is classified as a moderate-high risk rural county, according to the 2015-16 Reach and Risk Assessment compiled by the PA Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL). The county also held this designation in the 2014-15 analysis. Within the region, the areas of Tobyhanna/Coolbaugh Township and East Stroudsburg are at highest risk based on factors, such as unemployment, home foreclosures, lack of transportation, education, and students receiving free lunch.

PSFC has recognized these pockets of need and has concentrated its services in these two areas. Our agency opened the new Mountain Center in Tobyhanna at the start of the 2016-17 program year and serves about 150 preschoolers and infants/toddlers at that location. In East Stroudsburg, approximately 170 children from birth through age 5 are served at a center in the borough, at three different nearby schools, and in a home-based program. The most vulnerable, struggling families in our community are looking for free and affordable, high quality childcare — and our Head Start/Pre-K Counts classes fill up almost immediately.

Besides housing eight preschool classes and two birth to age 3 classes, The Mountain Center (TMC) offers health and human services that address other needs in this underserved community. Fourteen nonprofit organizations are under one roof. These include: Habitat for Humanity, WIC, Women's Resources, Feeding Families Ministry, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, Pocono Alliance, Catholic Social Services, AARP and the office of State Rep. Maureen Madden.

Just a look at TMC's statistics shows the great need for assistance, whether for Head Start, counseling, constituent services or nonperishable food. A total of 2,164 people received some type of help in January 2017, 2,844 received help in February and 5,957 were assisted in March. Coolbaugh Township has been a neglected location for years and PSFC is working to provide necessary family and community services. Of the 146 families who have youngsters enrolled in Head Start, Pre-K Counts or our infant/toddler program, 80 used the food pantry in January, 57 in February and 68 in March.

Why is there such an ongoing demand for PSFC's programs and health/human services in general? As stated, a large part of the answer is financial, albeit various community/social factors have an impact. According to OCDEL's data, 15.5 percent of the 8,688 children in Monroe County under the age of 5 live in economically high-risk families (100 percent federal poverty level). And a whopping 63 percent of those children reside in economically at-risk families (300 percent federal poverty level). Contributing risk factors include: educational/academic, medical/health, financial/monetary, demographics, and lifestyle/quality of living.

Study after study shows the impact that financial hardship has on children and their families. For instance, more than one-third of children living in poverty enter kindergarten already behind their classmates. By fourth grade, more than half of these children will not meet the standard for reading proficiency. Children in poverty are 3.6 times more likely to have poor health and 1.6 times more likely to have developmental delays and learning disabilities. Our agency's/program's focus on

nutrition, health, development, and the entire family is so crucial in helping children succeed in school and life. Children receiving high quality early education are more likely to be prepared for and do better in school, graduate high school, attend college or job training, and have higher earnings, according to PA Promise for Children. Unfortunately, we are still only reaching about three percent of eligible three and four-year-olds in Monroe County. Our infant/toddler program was added because of the increasing need for an early Head Start-type program.

More pertinent data is available in the United Way of Monroe County’s 2016 Monroe County Community Profile. This document reports that 15.42 percent of the population under age 18 lives in poverty, with one of the highest concentrations in Tobyhanna. It also states that about four of every 10 children – and in some cases more than half -- are living in households with income below 200 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. This is higher than the state average of 38.97 percent. East Stroudsburg and the mountain region are again among those areas with the greatest concentrations. The United Way also reports that in some communities in the county, more than 20 percent of the residents are living in households with income below the Federal Poverty Level. Also significant is how economic conditions in Monroe County are worsening, with the percent of children below 100 percent FPL increasing from 13.3 percent in 2010 to 16.6 percent in 2014.

**Public School Statistics**

A look at the statistics (see chart) for students receiving free or reduced price lunches in the local school districts is another indicator of need. These numbers keep increasing and several families who previously qualified for reduced price meals are now eligible for free lunches. In the East Stroudsburg Area School District alone, 300 more students are receiving free lunch compared to a year ago. As for the Pocono Mountain School District, 200 more students are now classified as low-income. In the western part of PMSD – the area primarily served by PSFC – more than 60 percent of the student population in every school receives free or reduced price lunch. The numbers are startling, especially for the Clear Run campus, from where students are bused for PSFC’s new school-age program:

Clear Run Elementary: 75.82 percent      Clear Run Intermediate: 78.87 percent      West  
 Junior High School: 74.40 percent      West High School: 71.89 percent      Tobyhanna  
 Elementary: 64.28 percent

School District	Free lunch in 2016-17	Reduced in 2016-17	Percent of enrollment in 2015-16	Percent of enrollment in 2010	Percent change
East Stroudsburg	3777	409	55.8% (7498 total enrollment)	46%	+9.8%
Pleasant Valley	1733	227	44.7% (4388 total enrollment)	32%	+12.7%
Pocono Mountain	5,746— this includes reduced		63.7% (9024 total enrollment)	47%	+16.7%
	2128	226	46.2% (5093 total)	34%	+12.2%

Stroudsburg			enrollment)		
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According to the 2015 Monroe County Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) report, students reported higher rates of being worried about running out of food (than their state peers reported) in every grade:

6<sup>th</sup> grade—17.7% compared to 13.4%      8<sup>th</sup> grade—21.5% compared to 14.9%  
 10<sup>th</sup> grade—20.6% compared to 13.1%      12<sup>th</sup> grade—22.3% compared to 13.6%

Students in each grade also reported skipping a meal (due to family finances) at a higher level than the state average:

6<sup>th</sup> grade—7.1% versus 5.4%      8<sup>th</sup> grade—10.2% versus 6.6%  
 10<sup>th</sup> grade—9.8% versus 6%      12<sup>th</sup> grade—11.1% versus 8.1%

The estimated percentage of households receiving benefits countywide through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program is 11.22 percent. These numbers are higher in the areas where PSFC has classrooms and serves families.

Besides food insecurity, the number of special education students in the four local school districts is a concern. It is a predictor of how important and necessary high-quality early childhood education is for school success. Every dollar invested in quality early education saves \$7 in special education costs, public assistance, corrections and lost taxes. The chart below shows the number of students in special education for the current school year. These numbers have increased in three of the districts, with the percentage remaining steady in East Stroudsburg.

School District	# of Students in Special Education	Current Enrollment	Percent of enrollment
East Stroudsburg	1361	7498	18.1%
Pleasant Valley	870	4388	19.8%
Pocono Mountain	2,022	9024	22.4%
Stroudsburg	869	5093	17%

High school graduation rates are another factor in how well our county is doing academically and economically. According to the United Way of Monroe County’s report, the percentage of our population age 25 with no high school diploma is 10.37. Having at least a high school diploma is key

in getting a job, earning more money, having more opportunities, and not being in poverty. Roughly 32 percent of the population have attained at least an associates' degree.

## **County Overview**

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, 168,947 people reside in our county, with the percentage of males and females almost even. Those between the ages of 5 and 17 and between 45 and 54 comprise the highest totals in the population. The median age is 40.6 years old. Caucasians represent about 79 percent of the population, with African-Americans at 13.37 percent and Asians at 2.14 percent. Hispanics or Latinos comprise 13.57 percent of the residents. Families with children make up 35.13 percent of all households, based on recent Census Bureau data.

Several factors continue to negatively impact our county. Rising school property taxes, expensive housing and a high foreclosure rate have been recent, adverse trends. The percentage of cost-burdened households, in which more than 30 percent of income goes to housing, is 41.71 percent. This is higher than both the state and national averages of 31.89 and 35.47 percent respectively (based on the Census Bureau's American Community Survey from 2009-13.) The unemployment rate was 5.7 percent in March 2017, six-tenths of a percent lower than in December 2016, according to the Pocono Record. This was slightly less than in April 2016, when the rate was 5.9 percent. Growth in the tourism, service industry and health care sectors have helped lower unemployment rates in Monroe County, reports the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry's Center for Workforce Information and Analysis. Hospitality professions, retail stores and hotels continue to be major sources of jobs, but the majority of these positions do not pay livable/family-sustaining wages. Per capita income is \$25,493—lower than both the state and national averages (based on U.S. Census and United Way data).

Transportation continues to be a challenge for residents and our families. The United Way's Community Profile reports that about 5 percent of households have no motor vehicle. While some bus routes service Tannersville, Stroudsburg, and parts of East Stroudsburg, public transportation in the county needs to be expanded to the Mountain region and outlying areas of East Stroudsburg, such as Marshalls Creek. PSFC is working with the Monroe County Transit Authority to serve this need in Coolbaugh Township.

Regarding the well-being of residents, behavioral/mental health continues to be identified as a major issue by the United Way, Interagency Council of Monroe County, and other human service agencies. Depression and suicide rates are higher in our county than the rest of the country. Recent teen suicides in our community have prompted public forums and discussions. The Pocono Record has reported that tobacco use and alcohol abuse are also more prevalent in our county than both statewide and nationwide. Heroin addiction is another growing trend.

Some of our youngest residents face complications from poor prenatal care and/or a lack of sufficient education among their expectant mothers. According to the state's Reach and Risk Report, Monroe County continues to have a high birth outcome risk (based on very pre-term births before 32 weeks). 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/weight and the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile is considered obese. Obesity and high cholesterol are also concerns for adults, especially those who are physically inactive.

Regarding crime, Monroe County's most recent statistics for violent crime show a rate of 336.4 per 100,000, considered the "worst" category ranking by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Substance abuse and drug trafficking continue to be part of the problem, and crime has become an issue that has impacted some of our families. It also is an indicator of more serious economic and social problems. Decreasing poverty rates and increasing educational opportunities would both have a positive impact.

There are diverse resources available in our community for families and children, but more are needed, especially in the areas of primary care doctors, medical specialists/dentists, health insurance options, transportation and employment. The opening of a local St. Luke's Hospital in Bartonsville has been beneficial, along with the opening of several urgent care centers. Inquiries to the Pocono Info referral network include assistance in these major areas: basic needs, rent/affordable housing, utilities, income/cash assistance, medical help, and food. A total of 436 people were assisted through Pocono Info in February 2017. The agency recorded more than 21,665 visits to its website that month.

PSFC continually strives to help our families/children with their needs and goals, and strives to solve difficulties. Our family advocates and family engagement team keep working on innovative ways to do this. They work closely with social service agencies throughout the county and at The Mountain Center. Our Job Club has been very successful, as we help parents with getting employment and skills such as resume' writing. Parent lounges at both our Tobyhanna and East Stroudsburg Centers have been welcome additions for networking and sharing with other parents/caregivers.

Our annual Family Fun Day and Wellness Fair are highlights of the program year, with lots of activities and participation by more community groups. Nature/fitness trails and a community garden are being planned for The Mountain Center. A free coat closet for young children (through Anthony's Coats) has been added to the East Stroudsburg Center. Partnerships with community organizations, individuals, and businesses continue to develop and positively impact our families. For instance, Read Across Monroe offers free books to all ages in a library at TMC.

As PSFC continues to serve an increasing number of children and families in Monroe County, we see the need for services growing – in and out of the classroom. That is part of the reason we established The Mountain Center, to provide important support services in one location for all ages—from Pre-K students to their grandparents. This facility has become a source of relief, hope and support for many of our local, struggling neighbors. It reflects our goal to meet the needs of our community/county through high quality early childhood education like Head Start and a network of resources.

Ensuring our children's and families' success in school and life is a priority every day in all of our classrooms, playgrounds and programs. Besides providing the best possible early childhood education, we want to help reduce poverty and increase options for a better quality of life. We strive to be a "place of hope" and a "place of opportunity."