

Conklin Foundation Fills the Gaps

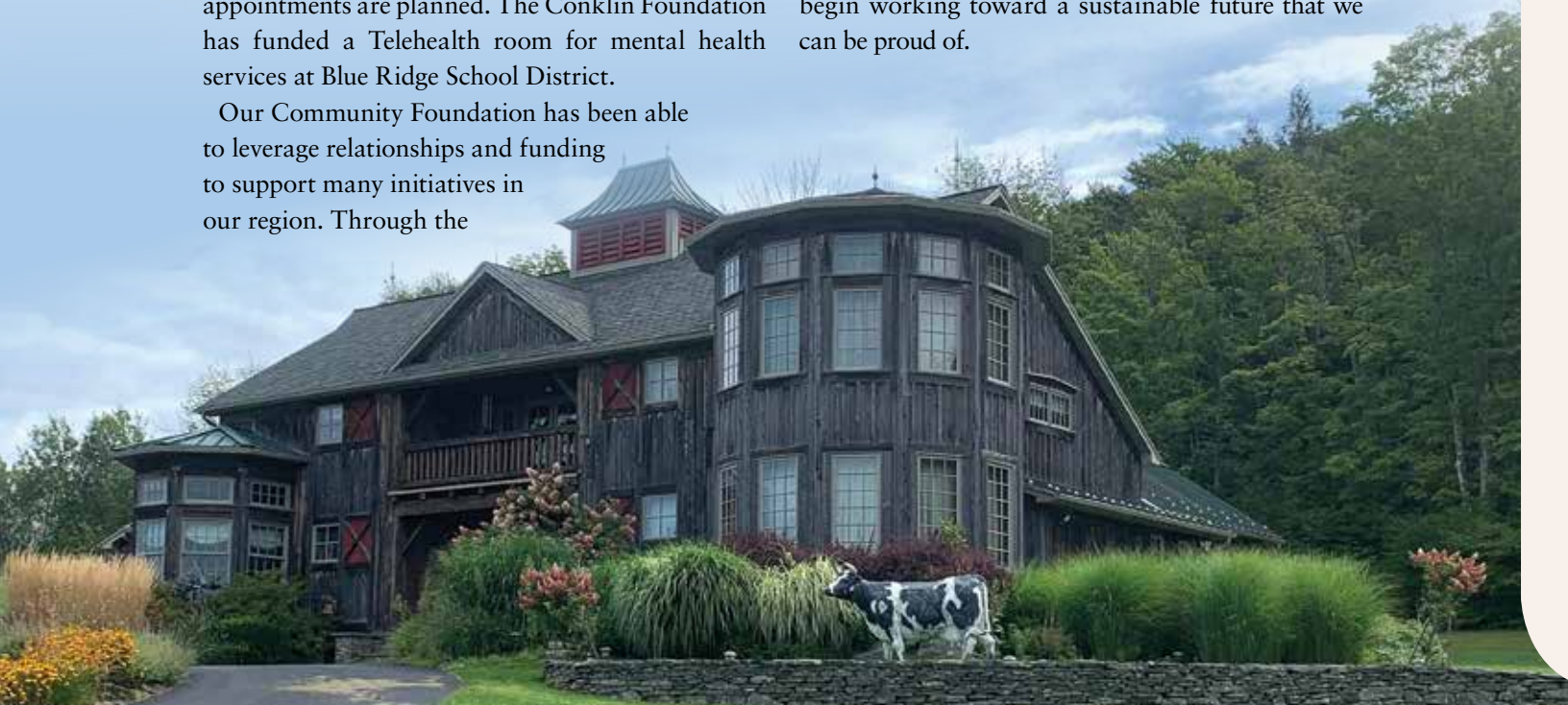
When Leo and Sandra Conklin donated their New Milford property to create an endowment, they had a very serious purpose. Sandra, in particular, wanted to fill the gap in local mental health services for children. She wanted no child to suffer who could be helped by counseling, training or treatment they required. The Conklins' desire and their generous gift have launched a regional collaboration, anchored by the Community Foundation's team. Its goal is, step by step, to transform a quite dire mental health "ecology" into what could become a model of sustainable, accessible, rural healthcare for children and adults—one that is robust, locally led, and community funded and staffed.

A first step over the last year involved identifying the mental and behavioral resources that already exist, and determining specific needs. As the data comes in and models such as a school-based clinic set up at Elk Lake School are rolled out gradually, it becomes clear what will work. Tele-medicine appointments are planned. The Conklin Foundation has funded a Telehealth room for mental health services at Blue Ridge School District.

Our Community Foundation has been able to leverage relationships and funding to support many initiatives in our region. Through the

Pennsylvania Neighborhood Assistance Program, Coterra Energy has pledged \$60,000 to support the salary of an additional mental health professional at NEPA Community Health Care. Several foundations including our own have committed to jointly provide a grant that will fund a new WVIA reporter position to raise awareness and spread the good news about the progress being made to address healthcare needs in our region. The United Way of Susquehanna County's See to Succeed initiative is an encouraging development addressing the lack of eyecare among children which can inhibit a child's learning and affect behavior and dropout rates. We are delighted to report upon these successes which chip away at obstacles.

There are many ways you can be a part of this effort. We urge you to read the stories on pages 22 through 29 so that you are up to date on our progress. Thanks to our leadership and extensive network of caring collaborators, the Conklins' vision and financial commitment have allowed us to begin working toward a sustainable future that we can be proud of.





LYDIA MCFARLANE / WVIA NEWS

NEPA Community Health Care CEO Kristen Follert and Elk Lake School District superintendent Bob Galella stand in front of the entrance to the district's school-based health center.

School-Based Health Centers Make Care Accessible

BY LYDIA MCFARLANE, WVIA NEWS



LYDIA MCFARLANE
Healthcare Reporter,
WVIA News

Katie Upright regularly drove 45 minutes from her Montrose home across the New York border for her children's doctors' appointments. Her new "commute" to healthcare takes minutes. Now Upright meets her children down the hall from the classroom where she teaches special education at Elk Lake School District for their appointments, as well as her own. Upright and her children receive their care at a health center located in Elk Lake School District run by Susquehanna County-based nonprofit NEPA Community Health Care.

The inconvenience of crossing state lines for health care typically forced her to take at least a half day off work, but in many cases a full day was needed. Her children's pediatrician's office would only schedule two

consecutive appointments, so with three children, she would be making the commute at least twice in a given week for regular checkups and other specialized care. "NEPA [Community Health Center] is convenient for our family," Upright said. "I have scheduled appointments before school, immediately following and during the day. While the during the day appointments do impact my work schedule, leaving my classroom for an hour-commute included is far better for me and my students than a half or full day(off)."

Elk Lake's school-based health center opened first in 2017. It closed during the pandemic before reopening in 2023. It's open 40 hours a week from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. every day during the week (except for Wednesday) to ensure students, staff and families can get to appointments before, during and after the school day. Regular staff include a medical provider, nurse and front desk receptionist.

COLLABORATIONS

LACK OF ACCESSIBLE CARE

In rural Susquehanna County, the closest healthcare to the school, the Endless Mountains Health System in Montrose is nearly 15 miles away. The other closest facility, the Barnes-Kasson Hospital in Susquehanna, is almost an hour away from school. Elk Lake's Superintendent, Bob Galella wants community members to view the school as a gathering space, rather than just a place their children go to learn. "We are the main hub for our school district," Galella said. Just because Endless Mountains Health System is relatively close to the school, doesn't mean that it is close to students' homes. According to Galella, buses start picking students up at 6:10 a.m. for an 8:15 a.m. start to the school day. Students travel at most 45 minutes to an hour to get to school.

"Endless Mountains Health System is about 12 to 14 miles [away from the school], which isn't too bad, but when you're looking at a low income community with transportation restrictions, that can be pretty daunting," said Kristen Follert, the CEO of NEPA Community Health Care. Her organizations' goal is to reach under-served communities with accessible healthcare. Transportation is just one of many barriers to care that rural Pennsylvanians face.

"In rural communities, we see a lot of people struggle to get to doctor's appointments because of transportation, because of work, because of child care situations. And then, we also have barriers such as financial and

insurance coverage, but by placing health centers in the school environment, we're able to bring care closer to the communities so that they don't necessarily have to travel as far," said Follert.

Even if students travel to Scranton for care, they might not find what they need. There is a lack of pediatric care that came with cuts to the Community Health Systems owned hospitals, Regional Hospital and Moses Taylor Hospital.

"I was a pediatric nurse before this at Moses Taylor, and we've since lost that unit," said Chelsea Hafner, a family nurse practitioner and a primary care provider at The Wright Center's school-based health center located in West Scranton Intermediate School. "There's not much around; we don't have a lot of pediatric specialists. We may have pediatricians, but we lack pediatric specialists, so it's really tough in this area to actually get the care sometimes."

The Wright Center's Scranton school district locations are along bus routes. The center at West Intermediate is also within walking distance of West Scranton High School. Students can walk between buildings to the health center with parental permission. "We are on the bus route," Hafner said. "We're right up from West Scranton High School. We're very fortunate that when we work with our community health workers, we do offer bus passes for those that do need help with transportation."

PHOTOS BY LYDIA MCFARLANE / WVIA NEWS *Elk Lake's school-based health center has a lab room, two exam rooms and a vaccine fridge.*



Elk Lake's health center offers primary care, sick visits for acute illness and OBGYN care. According to the Hospital and Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania, Susquehanna County is at risk of being a maternal healthcare desert.

The Hospital Healthsystem Association of Pennsylvania found that, "47.6 percent of women in rural counties live more than 30 minutes from a birthing hospital." Many Susquehanna County residents have to travel to Scranton or over the New York border to give birth. Two of Upright's children were born in New York. Having gynecological care at the school has helped provide county residents with the option of prenatal checkups close to home. "We have no hospitals that do deliveries, so our patients still have to travel upwards of an hour to go deliver their babies, but at least now they can get their prenatal care closer to home. And that really encourages the people who live here to engage in that very important prenatal care otherwise they go without," Follert said.

The Wright Center tries to offer as much treatment to pediatric patients as possible, so they do not have to go elsewhere for further treatment. "Patients with asthma, those with childhood obesity, issues like that, if we can kind of tackle them here in the home based setting, then they may not need that specialist referral, because a lot of our patients don't have the transportation or the means to actually get to these appointments," Hafner said.

SERVING UNDERPRIVILEGED COMMUNITIES

Both school districts are Title 1 schools, which fall under a certain poverty level and receive federal funding to improve outcomes for students in low-income school districts. The districts' residents cover both ends of the insurance spectrum. Both The Wright Center and NEPA Community Health Care serve even uninsured patients. "We have different levels on the scale, the lowest level being, we won't charge someone anything," Follert said. "They can come and receive their care for free. Our collective mission is to provide good quality health care to underserved areas and underserved people." At Scranton school-based health centers, people are served



CHELSEA HAFNER,
DNP, CRNP, FNP-BC
The Wright Center

regardless of their ability to pay.

"We see all and we do not push anybody away," Hafner said. "We see those that are insured and uninsured. We see all insurances. We see pretty much anybody and everybody we can, because we want to make sure that everyone should get the care that they do deserve." NEPA Community Health Care receives

Section 330 grant funding from the federal government to help offset uninsured patients' costs or those with the inability to pay out of pocket costs once insurance has been applied. The organization is considered a Federally Qualified Health Center, or FQHC.

Elk Lake does not charge NEPA Community Health Care rent. The district provides them with internet, electricity and heat to run the clinic. This helps the nonprofit cut costs and compensate for patients that are unable to pay their bills. Having health centers in the schools also makes appointments more convenient for parents, many of whom cannot afford to take off of work.

"A parent can call in or video conference in when their student is coming to the health center for a well-child check or whatever. It saves them from having to take a day off work or pull the child out of school to go to an appointment," Follert said.

Galella, whose role as superintendent in a district with a student population of 1,100 has morphed into both a community leader and public health official, is proud of the services his district is able to provide to the greater community, even with limited resources. "We are a poor, rural school district," Galella said. "We have to get creative and innovative to find ways and measures on how to provide the best education and the best resources to our kids. And when I look around, we struggle financially, however, what we're providing to our community and right here in house, I'm so impressed with what has been going on in this district."

To access the complete audio file of this article, please go to wvia.org

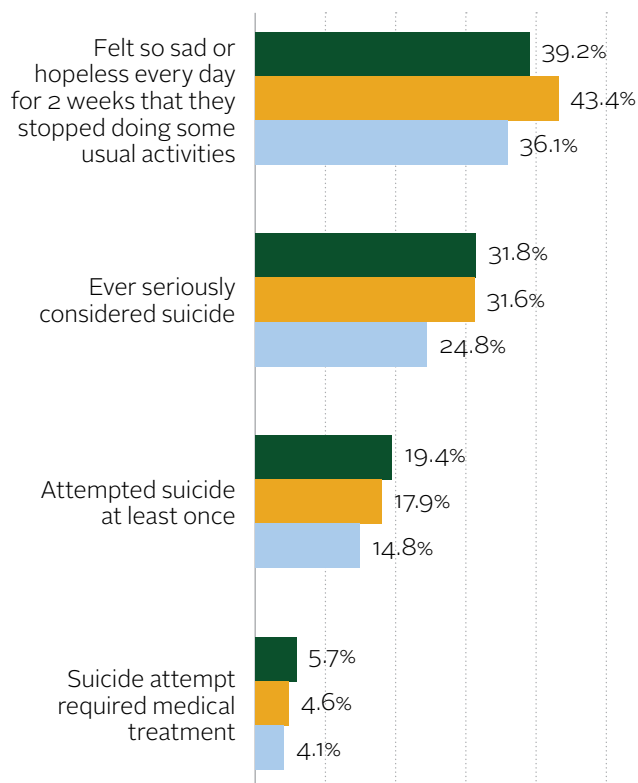
Mental Health and Substance Use in Susquehanna County



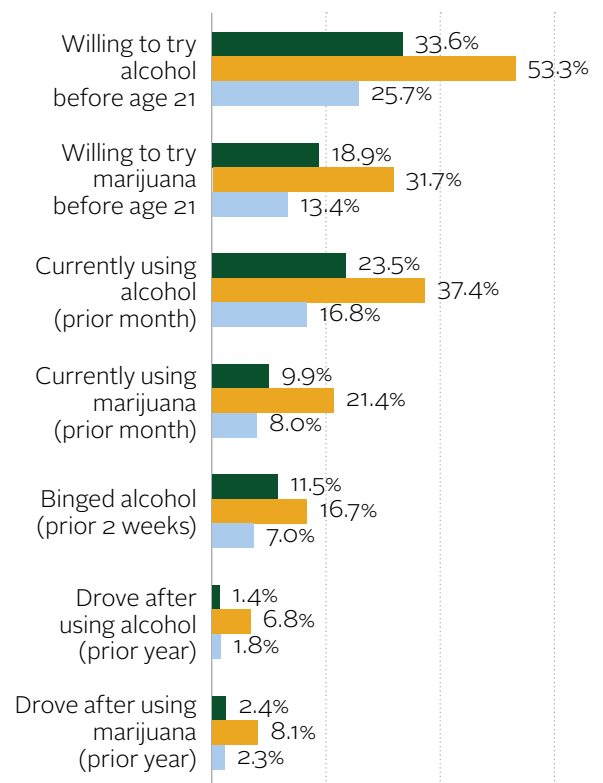
The Leo and Sandra Conklin Foundation has established a permanent endowment at the Community Foundation to support safety programs that address emotional, physical and sexual abuse of students in Susquehanna County.

Inspired and enabled by the Conklins' magnanimous estate gift, our staff has been working with local stakeholders to enhance a sustainable, accessible, affordable mental and behavioral health infrastructure for this region. That requires gathering the best people, and working with the best data available. The charts below are the results of a 2021 Pennsylvania Youth Survey (PAYS) of Susquehanna County youth in 6th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades. They are reproduced with permission.

MENTAL HEALTH & SUICIDE RISK



SUBSTANCE USE & RISKY BEHAVIOR



■ 10th ■ 12th ■ All Susquehanna Students (grades 6-12)



<https://www.pccd.pa.gov/Juvenile-Justice/Documents/2021%20PAYS/CountvA2oReports%202021%20PAYS/Countv962oReports>

The Institute Needs Assessment

In 2024, NEPA Community Health Care, Interfaith and the Community Foundation were awarded the Inspire Grant from the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). With this grant, they engaged The Institute of Public Policy and Economic Development to do a needs assessment of mental and behavioral health care in Susquehanna County. They identified several challenges as well as opportunities. Also, they made constructive recommendations which community stakeholders plan to address. This magazine will report on that progress in future editions. Meanwhile, the following are some key results.

LACK OF PROVIDERS:

81.4 mental health providers per 100,000 residents vs 269.6 providers statewide

RECOVERY ECOSYSTEM INDEX SCORE = 4

1 REPRESENTS THE STRONGEST ECOSYSTEM, 5 REPRESENTS THE WEAKEST

DRUG-INDUCED DEATHS*

	'19	'20	'21	'22	'23
SUSQ. CO.	ND	ND	35.6	41.3	50.5
PENNSYLVANIA	36.2	41.8	43.7	40.7	36.8

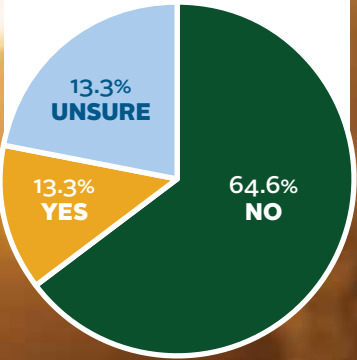
SOURCE: PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH | * PER 100,000

FAIR OR POOR GENERAL HEALTH

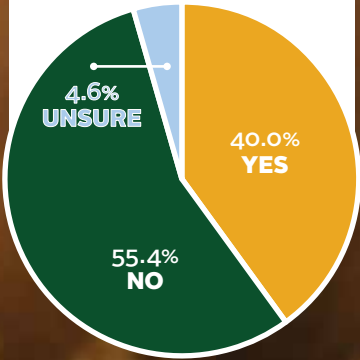
	'11-'13	'14-'16	'17-'19	'20-'22
PIKE, MONROE, SUSQ., WAYNE COS.	19%	23%	19%	23%
PENNSYLVANIA	17%	17%	19%	16%

SOURCE: PENNSYLVANIA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

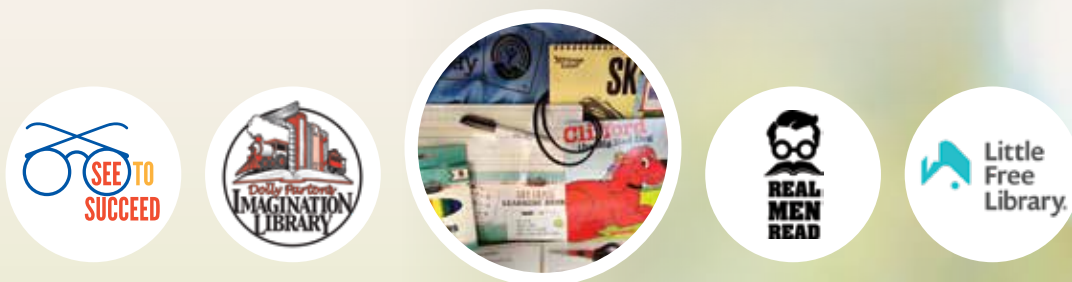
DO YOU FEEL THERE ARE ENOUGH HOUSING OPTIONS IN THE COUNTY?



DO YOU HAVE ANY BEHAVIORAL AND/OR MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS?



COLLABORATIONS



United Way Finds Many Ways to Meet Children's Needs



TOM FOLLERT
Regional Manager,
United Way of
Susquehanna County

Tom Follert of United Way of Susquehanna County is opening eyes. Do you know there is only one optometrist in all 826 square miles of Susquehanna County? Do you know that only 30 percent of children identified by school nurses as having eye problems are able to follow up and actually purchase glasses? And 70 percent of kids being referred for glasses are either uninsured or under-insured?

United Way's See to Succeed initiative is changing all that. A licensed optometrist visits all six school districts in the county to examine children conveniently in the school setting. The doctor can efficiently test 30 pre-screened students each day and prescribe the glasses they need. If the family has no insurance or is under-insured, United Way covers the remaining cost for two pairs of glasses; one for home and one for school. Kids choose their frames and two weeks later, the glasses are delivered to the school. A portion of this cost is reimbursable by Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). United Way donors are helping by funding See to Succeed.

Last year, this creative collaboration of school districts, school nurses, optometrists from Northeast Eye and Hazelton Eye Specialists, the United Way, and all its sponsors and donors made sure that 117 youngsters in Susquehanna County opened their eyes upon a brighter future.

Children's Literacy Programs

Reading matters, yet 61 percent of America's low income children grow up in homes without books. United Way of Susquehanna County is getting involved early and often to fill that gap.

■ **DOLLY PARTON'S IMAGINATION LIBRARY** is an early literacy initiative that provides free age-appropriate books each month to children from birth to age five. These are the critical years during which 90 percent of a child's brain development occurs.

■ **LITERACY KITS** provided by the United Way contain a children's book, classroom supplies and fun learning activities to support letter and number recognition, counting, and pattern recognition. The kits can kick-start the learning process and redirect kids who would otherwise be on a path to dropping out of school or not graduating on time.

■ **REAL MEN READ** brings local male volunteers into the K-3rd grade classrooms to read stories. This MENToring encourages literacy, demonstrates that men value education, and brings positive male role models into children's lives.

■ **LITTLE FREE LIBRARIES (LFL)** The United Way has established 13 LFL's throughout the county, creating opportunities to access books in what would otherwise be a book desert. These libraries are well used and have reading materials for all ages.