



Community Wide Strategic Planning & Needs Assessment – 2023 Update

COVID-19 Update:

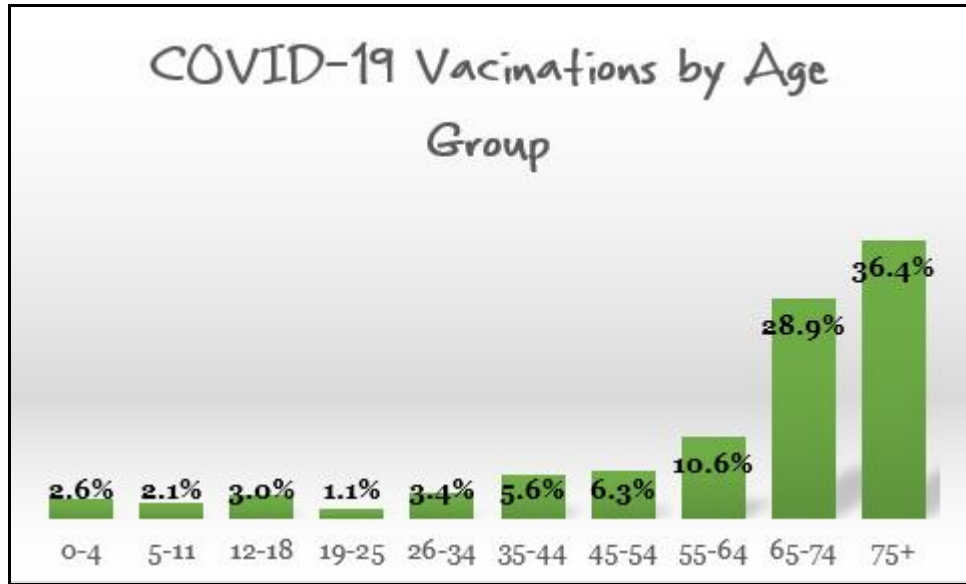
While COVID-19 continued to present challenges and barriers during the 2022-2023 program year, we are finding that operations and procedures are finally starting to resemble something closer to “normal” so far during the 2023-2024 program year. The availability of vaccines, boosters, antiviral medications, and COVID testing kits, and the modifications to COVID guidelines regarding exposure seem to have helped slow the rate of infection, making it easier to keep both center-based and home-based program options open and operating. As a result of a better understanding of the illness, how it spreads, the effectiveness of vaccines, and continued efforts to slow the spread of infection, the service industry has slowly been returning to consistent in-person operations.

As of November 27, 2023, the county’s risk level was considered “low”, with a total of 1,499 positive COVID cases and 9 COVID-related deaths so far in 2023.¹ Otsego County is trending slightly higher than New York State in regard to vaccination status – 10.6% of Otsego County residents have received at least one dose of a vaccination as compared to 9.3% of New York State residents.² The graph below demonstrates the percentage of individuals who have received at least one dose of a vaccination by age group.³

¹ Retrieved from <https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/b8437dc9fdb4f00adc4f002b2d0d6bo> on November 27, 2023.

² Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/updated-covid-19-vaccination-data> on November 27, 2023.

³ Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/updated-covid-19-vaccination-demographics> on November 27, 2023.



Community-wide Update:

According to the American Community Survey, 20.2% of children under the age of 5 in Otsego County are living in poverty, which is slightly higher than New York State’s rate of 19.1%.⁵ The New York State Kids’ Well-being Indicators Clearinghouse reports that 1.1% of the birth-17 age group in Otsego County are receiving public assistance, 16.9% are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, 1.9% are receiving Supplemental Security Income, and 45.0% are receiving free or reduced-price school lunch (children enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade).⁶ Additionally, 2.3% of children ages birth-21 years in Otsego County are in foster care, which is only slightly lower than New York State’s rate of 2.7%.⁷

Compounded by poverty issues, transportation continues to be a hurdle many families in Otsego County grapple with. Transportation presents a barrier in many ways

⁴ Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/updated-covid-19-vaccination-demographics> on November 27, 2023.

⁵ Retrieved from https://data.census.gov/table/ACSDP5Y2021.DP03?g=050XX00US36077_040XX00US36 on December 4, 2023.

⁶ Retrieved from https://www.nyskwic.org/get_data/county_report_detail.cfm?countyID=36077 on December 4, 2023.

⁷ Ibid.

– the vast land area of Otsego County makes obtaining goods or services to meet basic needs hard for many families; accessing employment and/or education can pose a challenge; families often seek housing in more affordable rural areas that do not have access to public transportation; the harsh upstate New York winter leaves many main roadways in terrible condition, contributing to the wear-and-tear of vehicles; high maintenance costs mean low-income families tend to purchase less reliable vehicles due to the lower price associated with these vehicles; the lack of public transportation services and limited bus routes leave much of the county without access to transportation options. Many families don't own a vehicle; those that do typically share one vehicle per household, forcing families to prioritize needs and make difficult decisions concerning employment, school, meeting basic needs, or obtaining needed services. Gasoline prices have increased over the past year, however there haven't been as many rapid and sharp increases as we saw the year before. In New York, the Consumer Price Index for gasoline increased 3.2% from October 2022 to October 2023.⁸ Gasoline prices have fluctuated in New York over the last three years, with the lowest price point at \$2.72 and the highest price point at \$5.01, representing an 84% increase during that time period.⁹ The Community Foundation for South Central New York's Community Assessment states that transportation is a significant barrier to employment, particularly for lower-income workers, and access to transportation is considered an issue for all counties in the South Central region.¹⁰ According to the OFO Otsego County Community Needs Assessment, 77% of survey respondents see

⁸ Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/regions/northeast/news-release/consumerpriceindex_newyork.htm on December 4, 2023.

⁹ Retrieved from <https://www.gasbuddy.com/charts> on December 4, 2023.

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://donorswhocare.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Fostering-Leadership-in-CFSCNY-Region-Final-Report-with-Appendices.pdf> on December 4, 2023.

transportation as a problem in this area.¹¹ Bus routes that don't meet needs, the cost of gasoline, and bus schedules that don't meet needs were cited as the greatest community challenges faced by residents in regard to transportation.¹² Adding to transportation hardships, 7.5% of households in Otsego County don't own a vehicle; of those, 3.4% are homeowners and 18.9% are renters.¹³ For income eligible families living outside of Oneonta, this can pose a hardship in accessing HS/EHS center-based services for their children. Families enrolled in part-day classrooms have reported on annual parent satisfaction surveys that they often have a hard time justifying the cost of two round-trips to the nearest HS/EHS center each day considering the relatively short amount of time their children attend the program. When full-day classrooms are forced to operate for a half-day based on staffing shortages or other unexpected situations, attendance reports show that most parents elect not to send their children to school that day. Reasons given when touching base with families about why their child is absent that day almost always relate to hardships with transportation.

In addition to barriers to transportation, it has become increasingly apparent in the wake of COVID that Otsego County also struggles with connectivity and broadband access. While we know that the rural and expansive nature of the county has created difficulties for many households in accessing high-speed or reliable internet services, this became alarmingly clear during the height of COVID-19. To limit exposure and reduce the need for in-person services, many healthcare centers in the county opted to offer telehealth services. In theory, this was a good work-around to continue providing services during a pandemic, however due to the lack of broadband access, many

¹¹ Retrieved from https://ofoinc.org/application/files/3216/9841/3294/CNA_Board_Approved_2023.pdf on December 4, 2023.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

households were unable to utilize these services to meet their medical needs. This was also an issue when school districts operated (at least in part or during certain times of the year, i.e. after holiday breaks) virtually during the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 school years. Children struggled to join virtual classrooms or submit classwork electronically throughout Otsego County, falling behind peers with reliable internet access and creating undue frustration for many families during already turbulent and unsure times. Otsego County is trending slightly behind New York State when it comes to households with a computing device (desktop, laptop, smartphone, tablet or other portable wireless computer, or other type of computer) of some kind and a broadband internet subscription: 90.2% of Otsego County residents own a computing device compared to 92.2% of all New York residents, while 83.0% of Otsego County households have a broadband internet subscription compared to 86.9% of all New York households.¹⁴ Furthermore, 9.8% of Otsego County residents don't have a computing device of any kind (compared to 7.8% of all New York residents), and 16.6% do not have an internet subscription (compared to 12.9% of all New York residents).¹⁵

In Otsego County, 70.6% of residents live in a low population density area (500 or fewer people per square mile and less than 2,500 people).¹⁶ Like many other rural areas, the county has struggled to meet the housing needs of its residents in regard to available, affordable, and safe housing. About 24.2% of households are cost-burdened, meaning they spend 30% or more of their income on housing.¹⁷ People who spend 30% or more of their income on housing are often financially insecure, making it difficult to

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2021.S2801?q=broadband%20access%20in%20new%20york&g=050XX00US36077> on December 4, 2023.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/new-york/otsego?year=2023> on December 5, 2023.

¹⁷ Retrieved from <https://www.winmeasures.org/housing/New%20York/Otsego-county> on December 5, 2023.

cope with unexpected expenses or save for the future.¹⁸ Additionally, 25.6% of the housing units in Otsego County have suboptimal conditions.¹⁹ Housing is considered suboptimal when at least one of the following four conditions exists: a lack of complete plumbing facilities; a lack of complete kitchen facilities; with 1.01 or more occupants per room; and monthly owner costs or rent make up more than 30% of a household's income.²⁰ Oneonta, the county's largest community and only city, is home to two four-year colleges – Hartwick College (1,185 full-time students²¹) and the State University of New York College at Oneonta (6,208 full-time students²²). The second largest community in Otsego County, Cooperstown, is home to the Baseball Hall of Fame and Cooperstown All Star Village, a summer baseball tournament camp and family resort. Housing for college students and families participating in youth baseball camps has created a shortage for full-time residents as available housing has been converted to accommodate these more profitable populations. These factors have forced low-income families to seek housing in more isolated areas of the county, which are inadequately serviced by public transportation and often lack access to a reliable internet connection.

In New York, there is currently enough federal and state Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) funding available to serve 80% of the state's four year old population.²³ OFO's HS program competes for enrollment with the county's UPK programs as eligible families tend to choose UPK services over HS services. While HS provides more family, health, and support services, UPK's full day schedule and door-to-

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/highered-enrollment.php?year=2021&instid=800000039834> on December 5, 2023.

²² Retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/highered-enrollment.php?year=2021&instid=800000039836> on December 5, 2023.

²³ Retrieved from <https://www.nysed.gov/sites/default/files/programs/early-learning/nys-administered-prekindergarten-fast-facts.pdf> on December 5, 2023.

door transportation services are attractive program components that appeal to not only working parents, but to those that are experiencing transportation issues. Another hardship HS is facing is the rising New York minimum wage, which is quickly moving families out of eligibility for HS services and forcing them to enroll children in UPK because of the less stringent requirements. In an effort to be proactive about meeting new regulations laid out in the HS Program Performance Standards released in September 2016, and in order to be competitive with UPK hours of operation, OFO expanded program hours in 6 of its 11 classrooms since September 2017 as funding was released to support those increases. These classrooms shifted from 4 hours of programming per day to 6.5 hours. Unfortunately, with additional funding released in 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 to support expanding programming, UPK capacity has continued to increase and negatively impact our enrollment. The Laurens school district received funding to establish a UPK program (20 full-day slots), which prompted the school district to cut ties with OFO in June 2022 because they needed the space our HS program occupied for their new UPK classroom. This UPK expansion meant the reduction of one HS classroom with the capacity to serve 17 children in Laurens. Three other school districts in Otsego County received funding to establish UPK programs in their communities; while two of these districts are now running UPK classrooms, one district still has not implemented UPK because they are having a hard time finding space for a classroom. Currently 12 out of 12 (100%) school districts within the county receive funding to provide UPK services, but only 11 out 12 (91.7%) districts have implemented and are running UPK classrooms. There is a total capacity to serve 224 four year olds in half-day programming and 161 in full-day programming, or 273

when half-day slots are converted to full-day slots.²⁴ Although the programs in these school districts are currently serving four year olds, UPK has been expanding across the state to start providing services to three year olds as well.

Under-enrollment in HS has been an ongoing challenge for OFO over the past eleven program years. The program has experienced chronic under-enrollment since the 2015-2016 program year. The last time OFO was able to report full enrollment for HS was in March 2015. Based on direction and guidance from Regional Office, the program developed and submitted several Enrollment Action Plans laying out action steps with the intent to be fully enrolled with viable wait lists. Addressing under-enrollment, ensuring viable wait lists, and finding new outreach and recruitment methods have also been program goals since 2014 and built into annual Program Improvement Plans. Despite having Enrollment Action Plans and program goals in place, OFO has continued to struggle to meet funded enrollment. The number of families enrolling and withdrawing from HS has increased considerably over the past several program years; primary reasons given are that the family is moving out of the service area, that children require an alternate more intensive program setting (recommended through the CPSE process), and barriers to transportation which are preventing families from accessing HS services. Following the pandemic era, families have also been enrolling and withdrawing their children based on their comfort level (or lack thereof) with in-person services and general health and safety concerns. OFO submitted a Change of Scope application in June 2018 seeking to reduce HS funded enrollment from 295 to 206; this request was approved in July 2019. Despite reducing enrollment, the program has yet to meet that new enrollment number. With the

²⁴ Retrieved from <http://www.nysed.gov/early-learning/state-administered-prekindergarten-programs-allocations-and-financial-forms> on December 5, 2023.

assistance of Regional Office, our program developed a new Under-enrollment Action Plan in April 2023 with the goal to reach 97% of our funded enrollment by April 2024. Unfortunately, enrollment continues to dwindle, making it likely that we will not be able to meet that goal and will need to submit another Change of Scope application to further reduce our enrollment.

Historically there has been an identified lack of licensed day care centers in Otsego County, especially centers that provide services to infants and toddlers. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services (NYS OCFS) reports a total of 6 day care centers in the county, with a total capacity to serve 63 infants, 86 toddlers, 346 preschoolers, and 84 school-aged children.²⁵ This represents a decrease of 1 facility, 8 infant slots, 2 toddler slots, 9 preschool slots, and 37 school-age slots in the past year. Additionally, HS provides services to 206 preschoolers and EHS provides services to 8 toddlers in a center-based setting. Otsego County has 8 licensed Family Day Care providers and 6 licensed Group Day Care providers, with a capacity to serve 48 and 72 children (ages 6 weeks to 12 years) respectively.²⁶ This represents an increase of 1 Family Day Care facility and a decrease of 2 Group Day Care facilities, for a total decrease of 18 child care slots in this category since 2022. While the number of school-age child care slots has been decreasing over the last several years, 2023 finally saw a slight increase in day care capacity for this age group. Two new school-age child care programs opened, increasing the capacity for this age group to 164 and representing a total increase of 43 slots.²⁷ According to Child Care Aware's 'Mapping the Gap in New York', there is a greater demand than there are available slots in Otsego County in

²⁵ Retrieved from <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/childcare/looking/ccfs-search.php> on October 20, 2023.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

regard to infant/toddler care. Based on census numbers and available infant/toddler child care slots, there is a shortage of approximately 824 child care slots for this age group.²⁸ NYS OCFS reports that 70% of census tracts in Otsego County are considered a child care desert and 21.5% of families are living below 200% of the federal poverty level.²⁹

Our program has seen an upswing in the number of children who have been diagnosed with a disability in the last several years, especially in regard to children enrolled in HS. The increased number of children with special needs in classrooms has required us to secure supplemental funding to build additional support staff into existing classroom structures to ensure active supervision is taking place at all times, and to allow teaching staff to spend more one-on-one time with children who need more hands-on assistance. During the 2020-2021 program year, 19.0% of HS children had an IEP and 12.8% of EHS children had an IFSP; in 2021-2022 10.8% of HS children had an IEP and 19.0% of EHS children had an IFSP; and in 2022-2023 21.7% of HS children had an IEP and 12.9% of EHS children had an IFSP.³⁰ In 2020-2021, students with disabilities made up 17.2% of the Kindergarten through twelfth grade population; in 2021-2022 16.8% of students had a diagnosed disability; and in 2022-2023 16.9% of students had a diagnosed disability.³¹

OFO operates the county's only homeless shelter through its Emergency Housing Assistance Program. The shelter is located in the city of Oneonta and provides 18 beds

²⁸ Retrieved from <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=f598bce2a0bb43c1944f95235aad7bd6&extent=-9047033.8128%2C5000877.5401%2C-7872961.0584%2C5568957.5343%2C102100> on December 6, 2023.

²⁹ Retrieved from <https://nysccf.maps.arcgis.com/apps/webappviewer/index.html?id=b0281149b595404e9d1c26fbef8b9735> on December 6, 2023.

³⁰ Head Start Program Information Report, 02CHO11436-000 Opportunities for Otsego, Inc. (2020-2021) (2021-2022) (2022-2023).

³¹ Retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?county=47> on December 7, 2023.

to families in need of housing through 2 family rooms (with a total of 8 beds) and 10 couple/small family rooms. When the homeless shelter is at full capacity, the county's Department of Social Services houses families in area motels until better accommodations can be made. According to the OFO 2023 Annual Report, during the October 2022 to September 2023 time period: 43 homeless households were provided emergency housing through the agency's domestic violence and emergency housing shelters; 27 previously homeless households secured affordable, permanent housing; and 20.7% of clients served were homeless.³² During the 2021-2022 school year, there were 38 homeless students in Otsego County.³³ The largest population of homeless students were in the Oneonta City School District (13) and Richfield Springs Central School (8), with the highest rates of homeless students in Richfield Springs (2.0%) and Oneonta (0.8%).³⁴ First and sixth graders tied for the highest rates of homelessness among school-aged children in Otsego County (1.1% each), and second graders came in next at 1.0%.³⁵ The majority of homeless children (52.6%) were doubled up in regard to primary nighttime residence.³⁶ Oneonta opened a Warming Station in March 2021 (open 5:30pm-7:30am, 7 days a week, November-April) that currently serves as Otsego County's Code Blue Shelter. Code Blue Shelters provide housing for anyone who finds themselves without a place to go in inclement weather and when the temperature/wind-chill reaches 32° or below, regardless of county of residence. OFO provides Code Blue Shelter services when the Warming Station is not in operation as needed. In addition,

³² Retrieved from https://ofoinc.org/application/files/4617/0058/5047/FINAL_Annual_Report_BOD_Approved_11162023.pdf on December 6, 2023.

³³ Retrieved from <https://www.nysteachs.org/data-on-student-homelessness> on December 6, 2023.

³⁴ Retrieved from <https://data.nysed.gov/profile.php?county=047> on December 7, 2023.

³⁵ Retrieved from <https://www.nysteachs.org/data-on-student-homelessness> on December 6, 2023.

³⁶ Ibid.

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the Warming Station offers homeless people a warm, safe place to sleep on nights when it is too cold to sleep outside but the weather conditions don't qualify as code blue.