



Community Wide Strategic Planning & Needs Assessment 2020 Update

COVID-19 Update:

2020 has brought with it completely unforeseen changes and challenges. The world at-large has been struggling with COVID-19 and the personal, economic, and other devastating losses that have resulted from this health crisis. Daily life, established routines, creature comforts, and feelings of safety and security have been tried and tested, leaving people feeling exhausted, unsure, and scared. As 2020 comes to a close, we have had to learn how to be flexible, how to change direction at the drop of a hat, and how to be creative in times of need. Some of the bigger impacts the pandemic has had on Otsego County are listed below; this is by no means an exhaustive list as guidance and regulations are often amended based on current conditions, but it is meant as a general outline of the impact COVID-19 has had on our area:

- Based on the recommendation from the Otsego County Department of Health, all public schools K-12 closed for an initial 2-week period on March 16. On May 1, Governor Cuomo announced all K-12 schools and college facilities were to remain closed for the remainder of the academic year.
- A State of Emergency for Otsego County went into effect March 14, closing all non-essential business. A phased re-opening plan went into effect in May, slowly lifting restrictions and setting guidelines for re-opening different industries.
- While many businesses re-opened, families were faced with difficult decisions as schools and child care facilities remained closed.

- In August public schools were required to submit re-opening plans to the State for full in-person services, full remote services, and a blend of in-person and remote services.
- While many public schools opted to begin the school year incorporating a blend of remote and in-person services, most districts in Otsego County have been through at least one shut-down to date due to increased COVID-19 cases in the area.
- Child care facilities are slowly starting to re-open, but the New York State Office of Children and Family Services (the licensing agency for the state) has imposed reduced capacity limits for the number of children allowed in classrooms/facilities.

Other impacts on the community have included rising unemployment rates throughout the county, small business closures, a major hit to summer tourism (which is one of the main economies in Otsego County), reduced public transportation services, additional strain on our already overtaxed healthcare system (Otsego County is a designated “medically underserved area”), and a reduction in the availability of community resources, to name a few. As of December 1, there have been a total of 1,325 positive cases and 8 deaths in Otsego County.¹

Since many of Opportunities for Otsego’s (OFO’s) Head Start (HS) centers are located in public schools, we were unable to open these sites at the beginning of the program year due to the strict Department of Education regulations which were in direct contrast to both HS Program Performance Standards and New York State Office of Children and

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.otsegocounty.com/> on 12/1/2020.

Family Services (OCFS) regulations. For example, as schools re-opened, most required that children sit at a desk, with limited materials, wearing a mask, for the duration of the school day. As leaders in the early childhood education field, HS knows children learn best through engaging in and having some degree of control over their environment. Another requirement was that classroom doors be propped open for maximum air flow, which is a safety concern considering the age group we serve and against OCFS regulations. We have offered a blended model of virtual and home visits to enrolled families as a way to continue offering services, establishing relationships with families and children, and preparing for a transition back to in-person services when possible. Home visits were conducted outside while the weather was nice and transitioned indoors when the cooler temperatures arrived. Staff conduct one home visit per day and offer virtual services to other families during that same day as a way to reduce possible spread and contamination. In mid-October, OFO opened all classrooms at our stand-alone sites (3 sites, 5 classrooms), with the exception of our center on the SUNY Oneonta campus, since we have more control over procedures and how we comply with regulations in these spaces. SUNY Oneonta closed early in September due to a massive surge of positive COVID-19 tests among its students, and we have been unable to access that site; campus personnel will reassess the situation in early January and make a determination about re-opening at that time. HS class sizes were reduced based on OCFS mandates, and program hours were also reduced to be in compliance with OCFS requirements about rest periods (it was not possible to place napping mats 6-feet apart in the classrooms we occupy in order to comply with social distancing recommendations). At the end of November, OFO re-opened two classrooms located in school districts due to those districts lifting some of their previously established

restrictions. While we have been moving towards re-opening all of our classrooms, there have been setbacks – certain school districts in Otsego County have closed for periods of time due to increased numbers of COVID-19 cases in their communities. In an effort to instill strong school readiness skills and help limit the spread of the virus, OFO follows the guidance and direction of the school district each center is located in – when a school district closes, the center in that district also closes and transitions back to a blend of virtual and home visits until the school re-opens. Currently, the largest school district in the county, and OFO’s largest enrollment area, Oneonta, has moved to virtual-only services until January 19.

OFO’s Early Head Start (EHS) program has had a slightly easier time in regards to re-opening. Program services were suspended in March due to New York State directives; however, staff returned to work and started providing a blend of virtual and home visits in June. Home visits were conducted outside while the weather was nice and have transitioned indoors now that the cooler temperatures have arrived. Staff conduct one home visit per day and offer virtual services to other families during that same day as a way to reduce possible spread and contamination. During the more temperate months, in-person socializations were offered in outdoor spaces to capitalize on the fresh air. In-person socializations followed social distancing guidelines, all adults and children over the age of 2 were required to wear masks, maximum capacity limits were set, and several sessions of each socialization were offered in order to reduce group sizes while still providing the opportunity to all that would like to attend. Now that we are approaching the winter months, socializations are occurring virtually.

Community-wide Update:

According to the United States Census Bureau, 21.8% of children ages 5 and younger in Otsego County are living in poverty.² The New York State Kids' Well-being Indicators Clearinghouse reports that 1.7% of the birth – 17 age group in Otsego County are receiving public assistance, 18.2% are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, 1.9% are receiving Supplemental Security Income, and 45% are receiving free or reduced-price school lunch (children enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade).³

Compounded by poverty issues, transportation continues to be a hurdle many families in Otsego County grapple with. Transportation presents a barrier in many ways - 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 weather leaves many main roadways in terrible condition, contributing to the wear-and-tear of vehicles. Additionally, low-income families continue to struggle with maintenance costs and tend to purchase less reliable vehicles due to the lower price associated with these vehicles. Many families own and share one vehicle, forcing them to prioritize employment or attaining needed services on a far too consistent basis. The Opportunities for Otsego (OFO) Community Needs Assessment cites cost-efficient public transportation options, public transportation routes and schedules, cost of vehicle maintenance, and no access to a car as the greatest community challenges faced by county residents in regards to

² Retrieved from <https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?q=Otsego%20County,%20New%20York%20Income%20and%20Poverty&tid=ACSST5Y2018.S1701&hidePreview=false> on 12/1/2020.

³ Retrieved from https://www.nyskwic.org/get_data/county_report_detail.cfm?countyID=36077 on 12/1/2020.

transportation.⁴ For income eligible families living outside of Oneonta, this can pose a hardship in attaining HS/EHS center-based services for their children. Enrolled families 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.

OFO's HS program competes for enrollment with the county's UPK programs as income eligible families tend to choose UPK services over HS services. While HS provides more support and health services, UPK's full day schedule and door-to-door transportation services are attractive program components that appeal to not only working parents, but those that struggle with transportation issues. UPK capacity county-wide has declined since last program year. While not every district has seen a reduction in their number of funded slots, 50% of programs in Otsego County have seen a decrease in the number of children they are funded to serve. Additionally, in light of the pandemic, UPK programs in Otsego County have been struggling to meet funded enrollment this program year, leaving many UPK slots open. Many parents are hesitant to send their children to in-person programs, or are overwhelmed and are opting not to enroll their children in virtual programs. There are currently 8 school districts within the county that offer UPK services, with a total capacity to serve 242 four year olds through 17 classrooms. During the 2019-2020 school year, these districts had the capacity to serve 271 children through 18 classrooms; this represents a loss of 29 funded slots and 1 classroom during the current program year. While 7 of these 8 districts provided full-day UPK programs last year, programs this year have offered a blend of virtual and in-person services and have had to fluctuate operations based on positive COVID-19 cases in individual

⁴ "Otsego County Community Needs Assessment 2017." *Opportunities for Otsego, Inc.* October 2017.

communities and subsequent Department of Health recommendations. While the programs in these school districts are currently only serving four year olds, UPK has been expanding across the state to start providing services to three year olds as well. In an effort to be more responsive to parents needs and to be proactive about meeting the new regulation laid out in the HS Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) released in September 2016, OFO elongated program hours in 7 of its 12 classrooms since September 2017. These classrooms shifted from 4 hours of programming per day to 6.5 hours, however as mentioned earlier in this narrative, all classrooms have currently reduced program hours in order to bypass the OCFS-required rest time and adhere to social distancing recommendations.

Under-enrollment in HS has been an ongoing challenge for OFO over the past eight program years. The program has experienced chronic under-enrollment during all program years starting in 2015-2016. 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. Despite having these Enrollment Action Plans 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. 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 the new enrollment number. For the first time, both OFO's HS program and UPK programs in Otsego County are struggling to meet respective funded enrollment numbers, which is reflective of the fear and hesitancy parents are feeling right now in regards to sending their children to school during the pandemic.

There is an identified lack of licensed day care centers in Otsego County. Historically, this lack of licensed care applied especially to the availability of centers that provide services to infants and toddlers, however now we are seeing a loss in regards to the availability of preschool-age child care slots as well. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services reports a total of 5 day care centers in the county, with a total capacity to serve 40 infants, 54 toddlers, 275 preschoolers, and 97 school-aged children.⁵ This represents an increase of 8 infant slots and a decrease of 11 toddler slots, 27 preschool slots, and 10 school-aged 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 9 licensed Family Day Care providers and 13 licensed Group Day Care providers, with a capacity to serve 54 and 156 children (ages 6 weeks to 12 years) respectively.⁶ This represents a decrease of 3 Family Day Care facilities, and a total loss of 18 child care slots in these categories since last year. There is a community center and an extended day program that offer school-age only child care for a capacity of 80 additional children in this age group.⁷ This represents an increase of 1 school-aged child care facility, for an increase of 40 school-aged slots in the past year. The Community Foundation for South Central New York's Needs Assessment states that

⁵ Retrieved from <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/childcare/looking/ccfs-search.php> on 12/8/2020.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

there are 4,243 children in either unregulated care or not receiving services at all, 1,512 of which are under 5 years of age.⁸

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 to individuals and families in need of housing. Additionally, some families are sheltered in area motels, for an average of 20 people sheltered per day.⁹ According to the OFO 2018-2019 Annual Report, during the October 2018 – September 2019 time period: 137 homeless households were provided housing through the agency's domestic violence shelter and emergency housing shelter; 88 homeless households secured housing through the support and financial assistance offered by the agency; and 16% of clients served were homeless.¹⁰ An average of 77 school-aged children experience homelessness each year in Otsego County, with the highest concentration in the Oneonta City School District, closely followed by the much smaller, rural school districts of Otego/Unadilla, Edmeston, Milford, and Richfield Springs.¹¹ OFO's Emergency Housing Assistance Program also serves as Otsego County's Code Blue Shelter – this means they provide housing for anyone who finds themselves without any place to go in inclement weather and when the temperature/wind-chill reaches 32° or below, regardless of county of residence.

⁸ Retrieved from [www.donorswhocare.org/cms-documents/CFSCNY Needs Assessment - Otsego County rev.1.19.16pdf](http://www.donorswhocare.org/cms-documents/CFSCNY_Needs_Assessment_-_Otsego_County_rev.1.19.16pdf) on 12/8/2020.

⁹ Retrieved from [www.donorswhocare.org/cms-documents/CFSCNY Needs Assessment - Otsego County rev.1.19.16pdf](http://www.donorswhocare.org/cms-documents/CFSCNY_Needs_Assessment_-_Otsego_County_rev.1.19.16pdf) on 12/8/2020.

¹⁰ "Opportunities for Otsego: 2018-2019 Annual Report." *Opportunities for Otsego, Inc.* 2019.

¹¹ "Opportunities for Otsego: 2017-2018 Annual Report." *Opportunities for Otsego, Inc.* 2018.