



Community Wide Strategic Planning & Needs Assessment – 2021 Update

COVID-19 Update:

Across the globe, COVID-19 continues to challenge communities in new and diverse ways. While life seems to be returning to a more normal routine as the workforce returns to the office, children return to public school, and some health and safety measures are lifted or relaxed, the pandemic continues to test communities' and individuals' resilience and flexibility. The availability of vaccines and the expanding eligibility for both vaccines and booster doses seems to be slowing the rates of infection, but the emphasis on return to in-person services/contact means we continue to struggle to contain and eradicate COVID.

On August 16th, Governor Cuomo announced a vaccination mandate for healthcare workers, requiring employees at hospitals and long-term care facilities to receive their first COVID vaccine dose by September 27, 2021. On October 5th, New York's newly instated Governor Hochul expanded that mandate to include employees working in facilities that offer healthcare to individuals served by the Office of Mental Health and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities, setting a deadline of November 1, 2021 for these personnel to receive at least one dose of the vaccine. Already designated a "health professional shortage area" and "medically underserved area" by the Health Resources and Services Administration, these mandates have exacerbated the situation in Otsego County. The county's main medical provider, Bassett Healthcare, was forced to cut services at the end of September due to the loss of over 100 staff who chose not to

get vaccinated.¹ Otsego County is now suffering from an even greater shortage of healthcare workers, which has had a negative effect on an already struggling geographic area, resulting in a loss of available services, a reduced number of open facilities, increased wait times at provider offices, and decreased availability of appointments.

Since the pandemic started, impacts on Otsego County have included rising unemployment rates, small business closures, a hit to summer tourism (which is one of the main economies in Otsego County), reduced public transportation services, a strain on our already overtaxed healthcare system, and a reduction in the availability of community resources. As of December 3, 2021, the county's transmission rate was considered "high", and there have been a total of 6,796 positive COVID cases and 89 COVID-related deaths.² This represents a 413% increase in the number of positive cases and a 1,013% increase in the number of deaths in Otsego County since the same time last year. The graph below demonstrates the number of monthly COVID cases reported in Otsego County since January 2020. Currently, 78% of New York's population has received at least one dose of a COVID vaccine, and 68% of the total population have been fully vaccinated.³ These percentages are slightly lower for Otsego County, where 62% of the population have received at least one dose, and 58% are fully vaccinated.⁴

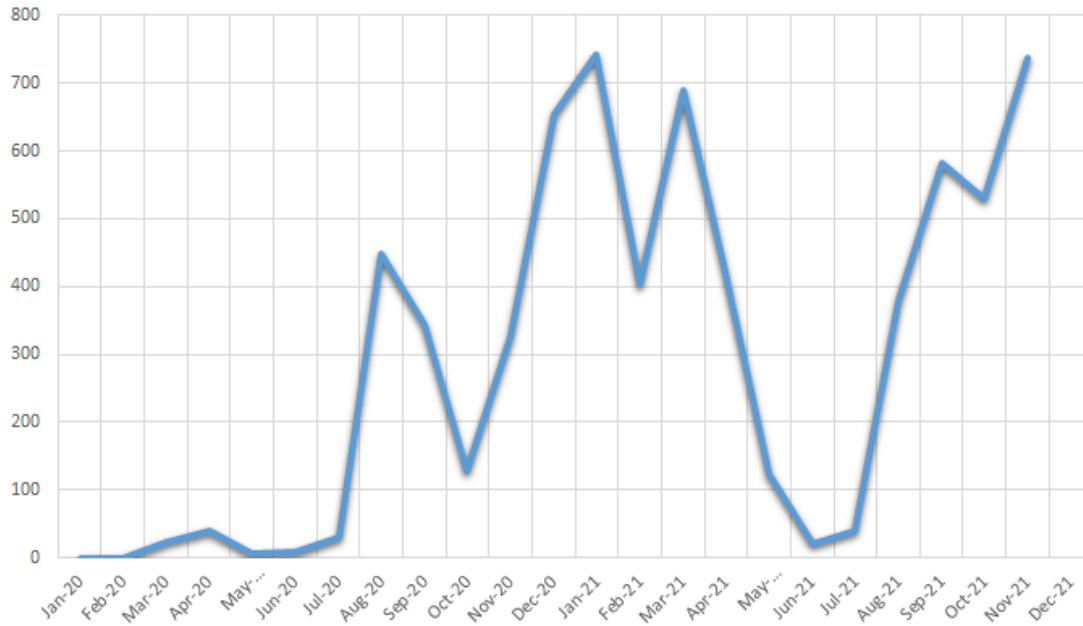
¹ Retrieved from <https://www.allotsego.com/bassett-healthcare-forced-to-cut-service-because-of-worker-shortages/> on December 6, 2021.

² Retrieved from https://www.otsegocounty.com/departments/d-m/health_department/covid19.php on December 3, 2021.

³ Retrieved from <https://usafacts.org/visualizations/covid-vaccine-tracker-states/state/new-york> on December 6, 2021.

⁴ Retrieved from https://covidactnow.org/us/new_york-ny/county/otsego_county/?s=26461550 on December 6, 2021.

COVID-19 Cases Reported per month



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Since many of Opportunities for Otsego’s (OFO’s) Head Start (HS) centers are located in public schools, we have had to comply with district mandates in regard to operating these centers. Some of these mandates have included smaller class sizes, mask requirements, designated spaces for children (including desks to ensure they are maintaining 6 feet of distance), and a reduction in the number of people allowed in the building/classroom. Although regulations have been more stringent than usual, we were able to open all of our centers for in-person services in September 2021, and full-day classrooms returned to their normal 6.5 hours/day schedule. Except for a closure here or there (for either confirmed COVID cases in our HS classrooms or in the school district buildings where classrooms are located) we have been fortunate to continue offering consistent, face-to-face services to allow children the hands-on experiences they need to establish a strong educational foundation.

⁵ Retrieved from https://www.otsegocounty.com/departments/d-m/health_department/covid19.php on December 3, 2021.

Community-wide Update:

According to the American Community Survey, 21.7% of children ages 5 and younger in Otsego County are living in poverty, which is only slightly higher than New York State's rate of 20.8%.⁶ 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, 16.5% are receiving Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits, 2.2% are receiving Supplemental Security Income, and 41.0% are receiving free or reduced-price school lunch (children enrolled in Kindergarten through 12th grade).⁷ Additionally, 2.4% of children ages birth-21 years in Otsego County are in foster care, which is lower than New York State's rate of 2.9%.⁸

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 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. Many families own and share one vehicle, forcing them to prioritize either employment or attaining needed services on a far too consistent basis. The Community Foundation for South Central New York's Community Assessment states that transportation is a significant barrier to employment,

⁶ Retrieved from https://data.census.gov/cedsci/table?tid=ACSDP5Y2019.DP03&g=0400000US36_0500000US36077 on December 6, 2021.

⁷ Retrieved from https://www.nyskwic.org/get_data/county_report_detail.cfm?countyID=36077 on December 6, 2021.

⁸ Ibid.

particularly for lower-income workers, and access to transportation is considered an issue for all counties in the South Central region.⁹ Rising gasoline prices have also impacted families and created another layer of hardship when it comes to transportation. The Consumer Price Index for gasoline increased an astounding 49.6% as of October 2021.¹⁰ Over the last 3 years gasoline prices have fluctuated, with the lowest price point at \$2.08 and the highest price point at \$3.24, representing a 56% increase during that time period.¹¹ According to the OFO Otsego County Community Needs Assessment, 72.3% of survey respondents see transportation as a problem in this area.¹² Bus routes that don't meet needs, bus schedules that don't meet needs, and cost of taxis/public transportation were cited as the greatest community challenges faced by residents in regard to transportation.¹³ For income eligible families living outside of Oneonta, this can pose a hardship in attaining 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.

In addition to barriers to transportation and healthcare, 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 hardships for many households in regard to access to high-speed or reliable internet services, this became alarmingly clear during the height of COVID-19. To limit

⁹ Retrieved from <https://donorswhocare.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Fostering-Leadership-in-CFSCNY-Region-Final-Report-with-Appendices.pdf> on December 7, 2021.

¹⁰ Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/charts/consumer-price-index/consumer-price-index-by-category-line-chart.htm> on December 7, 2021.

¹¹ Retrieved from <https://www.gasbuddy.com/charts> on December 7, 2021.

¹² Retrieved from https://ofoinc.org/files/3516/3604/6177/CNA_2021-Summary.pdf on December 7, 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

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 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) virtually during the 2020-2021 school year. 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. Although the percentage of households with a computer is similar to New York State (86.2% in Otsego County vs. 86.8% in New York State), fewer households in Otsego County have a broadband internet subscription (75.4% in Otsego County vs. 78.9% in New York State).¹⁴ Furthermore, 38% of residents don't have access to fixed wireless internet service.¹⁵

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 and New York's rising minimum wage moves families out of eligibility for HS services. While HS provides more family, 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 to those that are experiencing transportation issues. 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 7 of its 12 classrooms since September

¹⁴ Retrieved from <https://cms2files.revize.com/otsegocountyny/OCDOH/2019%20CHNA-CSP-CHIP%20AOF-BMC-Otsego%20Co%20FINAL.pdf> on December 6, 2021.

¹⁵ Retrieved from https://ofoinc.org/files/3516/3604/6177/CNA_2021-Summary.pdf on December 3, 2021.

2017 as funding was released to support those increases. These classrooms shifted from 4 hours of programming per day to 6.5 hours. For the second year in a row, UPK capacity county-wide has declined since last program year. While not every district has seen a reduction in their number of funded slots, 56% of districts 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 the county have continued to struggle to meet funded enrollment this program year, leaving most districts with numerous UPK slot vacancies. There are currently 9 school districts within the county that offer UPK services, with a total capacity to serve 251 four year olds.¹⁶ During the 2020-2021 school year, these districts had the capacity to serve 261 children; this represents a loss of 10 funded slots since this time last year. In spite of an overall loss of funded slots, a recent UPK expansion provided funding for the Otsego-Unadilla district to start providing UPK services, for a total of 27 new slots. Eight of these 9 districts provide full-day UPK programs. 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. There are three more school districts that currently do not offer UPK programs in Otsego County (Cooperstown, Laurens, Gilbertsville-Mount Upton) that will be implementing UPK in September 2022 as a result of increased UPK funding. This means that of the 12 school districts located in the county, all of them will be offering at least one UPK classroom in the 2022-2023 school year. This expansion will allow for the addition of 60 UPK slots county-wide.¹⁷ OFO currently has a HS classroom in both Cooperstown and Laurens; the Cooperstown district has not shared information

¹⁶ Retrieved from <http://www.nysed.gov/early-learning/state-administered-prekindergarten-programs-allocations-and-financial-forms> on December 9, 2021.

¹⁷ Ibid.

about how they plan to proceed yet, but Laurens notified us that they will not renew our contract and will be cutting ties with HS when the program ends in June 2022. This UPK expansion will mean the reduction of at least one HS classroom with the capacity to serve 17 children in Laurens, but will more likely mean the reduction of two HS classrooms (Laurens and Cooperstown) with the total capacity to serve 34 children.

Under-enrollment in HS has been an ongoing challenge for OFO over the past nine program years. The program has experienced chronic under-enrollment each year, starting in 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. In the pandemic era, families have also been enrolling and withdrawing their children based on their comfort level (or lack thereof) with in-person services, numbers of children and staff in classrooms, 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 the new enrollment number. For the second year in a row, 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 regard 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 regard to the availability of preschool-aged and school-aged child care slots as well. The New York State Office of Children and Family Services reports a total of 6 day care centers in the county, with a total capacity to serve 40 infants, 54 toddlers, 293 preschoolers, and 97 school-aged children.¹⁸ This represents an increase of 1 facility and 18 preschool 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 7 licensed Family Day Care providers and 9 licensed Group Day Care providers, with a capacity to serve 42 and 108 children (ages 6 weeks to 12 years) respectively.¹⁹ This represents a decrease of 2 Family Day Care facilities and 4 Group Day Care facilities, and a total loss of 60 child care slots in these categories since last year. There is an extended day program that offers school-age only child care for a capacity of 40 additional children in this age group.²⁰ This represents a decrease of 1 school-aged child care facility, for a decrease of 40 school-aged slots, in the past year. The Community Foundation for South Central

¹⁸ Retrieved from <https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/childcare/looking/ccfs-search.php> on November 23, 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

New York's Need Assessment states that 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.²¹

OFO operates the county's only homeless shelter through its Emergency Housing Assistance Program. The shelter is located in the city of Oneonta and typically provides 18 beds to individuals and families in need of housing through 2 family rooms (with a total of 8 beds) and 5 individual/couple rooms. Due to COVID restrictions, capacity has been reduced and double occupancy rooms have been turned into single/couple rooms, leaving current capacity at 14 beds. When a need arises for more space, families are sheltered in area motels, for an average of 20 people sheltered per day.²² According to the OFO 2020-2021 Annual Report, during the October 2020 to September 2021 time period: 79 homeless households were provided emergency housing through the agency's domestic violence and emergency housing shelters; 23 homeless households attained permanent housing through support and financial assistance offered by the agency; and 19% of clients served were homeless.²³ During the 2019-2020 school year, there were 99 homeless students in Otsego County.²⁴ The largest population of homeless students were in the Oneonta City School District (38), Richfield Springs Central School (17), Edmeston Central School (15), and Otego-Unadilla Central School (14), with the highest rates of homeless students in Edmeston (4.2%), Richfield Springs (4.2%), and Laurens (3.0%).²⁵ Kindergartners have the highest rate of homelessness among school-aged children in Otsego County (12.9%), followed by first graders (11.8%), and third, fourth,

²¹ Retrieved from <https://donorswhocare.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/CFSCNY-Needs-Assessment-Otsego-County-rev.1.19.16.pdf> on December 6, 2021.

²² Ibid.

²³ Retrieved from https://ofoinc.org/files/3116/3879/6099/AR_2020_2021_FINAL_12062021.pdf on December 7, 2021.

²⁴ Retrieved from <https://nysteachs.org/topic-resource/data-on-student-homelessness-nys/> on December 7, 2021.

²⁵ Ibid.

and sixth graders (each at 9.7%).²⁶ The majority of these children (83.9%) were doubled up in regard to primary nighttime residence.²⁷ OFO's Emergency Housing Assistance program also serves as Otsego County's Code Blue Shelter, providing 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. Oneonta opened a Warming Station in March 2021 (open 5:30pm-7:30am, 7 days a week) to offer homeless people a warm, safe place to sleep on nights when it is too cold to sleep outside, including nights that don't qualify as code blue.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.