

Community Needs Assessment Lakes Region of New Hampshire 2003

I. Participating Organizations

A number of people representing health and social service organizations in the Lakes Region meet on a regular basis to identify community needs and work together to discuss program planning and resource utilization to meet those needs. The following organizations send representatives who have been meeting for several years:

- ◆ Belknap County Citizen's Council on Children and Families
- ◆ Community Health & Hospice, Inc.
- ◆ Genesis Behavioral Health
- ◆ Health First Family Care Center
- ◆ Lakes Region Community Services Council
- ◆ LRGHealthcare
- ◆ NH Dept of HHS, District Office
- ◆ Taylor Community
- ◆ ServiceLink of Belknap County
- ◆ UpStream

While some of these organizations are not required to submit community benefit plans, we all work together to find ways to creatively meet the needs for our community, especially for those people with limited resources or those with significant needs.

II. Tools and Process

The team has been meeting for the past several years to plan and implement a community needs assessment. We evaluated the needs assessment process that was performed in 2000 and sought to find ways to capture a different segment of the population. In 2000 we had held a number of community open forums which yielded useful results but may not have captured a broad cross section of the community. At that time, we also used a short paper survey that was made available through organization web sites and conducted some key informant interviews.

In 2003, we elected to take an asset-based approach to assessing the community by focusing on current resources as well as current needs. We chose to sample a broader cross section of the community and chose to have the primary tool be a paper survey based on the work done by the Caring Community Network of the Twin Rivers (CCNTR). (Attachment 1) This survey tool asked questions related to individual, family, and community health from a medical and social perspective. We adapted the CCNTR tool and added specific questions related to our region. We then selected 4000 Belknap County and Moultonborough households to receive the tool from a random sampling of community members based on zip codes. A total of 605 surveys were completed and returned for a 15.1% response rate. Additionally, this survey was distributed to members associated with the Taylor Community (seniors) and UpStream (a coalition of service providers to children & families). The survey was also available at some agencies and on their web sites.

We held a number of focus group meetings and solicited responses to the categories on the survey tool. We arranged to meet with the following groups at their regularly scheduled meeting and solicited opinions relative to the health and welfare of the community:

- ◆ Gilford School District staff
- ◆ Shaker Regional School District Staff
- ◆ The Friendship Club (an active senior social group)
- ◆ Spiritual Care Committee (local clergy group)
- ◆ UpStream Leadership Team (risk behaviors)

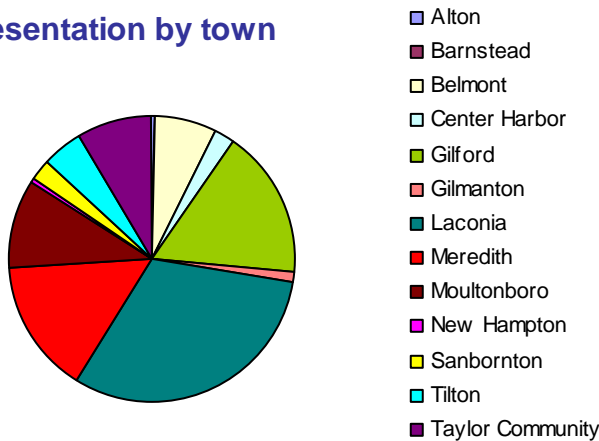
Finally, we made use of data that was available from established state data bases including the New Hampshire Bureau of Vital Records, the Bureau of Primary Care, and the NH Office of State Planning.

III. Results of the Community Assessment

A. Needs and Assets Assessment Survey:

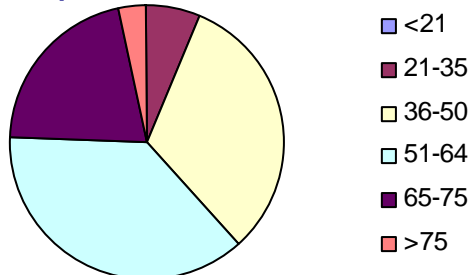
Who Responded to the Survey? Of the 4000 surveys mailed, 605 were returned resulting in a response rate of 15.1%. Over 70% of responders reported that they have lived in the Lakes Region for 11 or more years. The following chart illustrates the communities represented in responding to the survey.

Representation by town



Most of the responders were middle age or older adults, as illustrated in the following graph:

Age of Responders

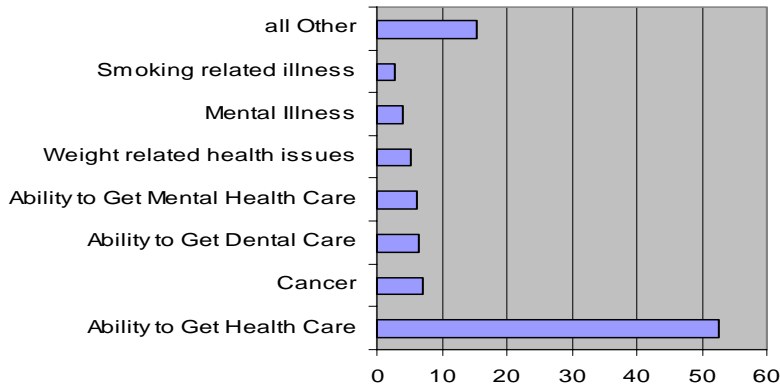


Health Status: Over 90% of responders reported that they were in good, very good or excellent health.

What Issues Concerned Responders? Respondents were asked to identify issues of importance to them in a variety of areas: health care, safety & crime, community, and social & human services. In each category, responders were asked to check all the issues of concern and identify the one area of greatest importance to them.

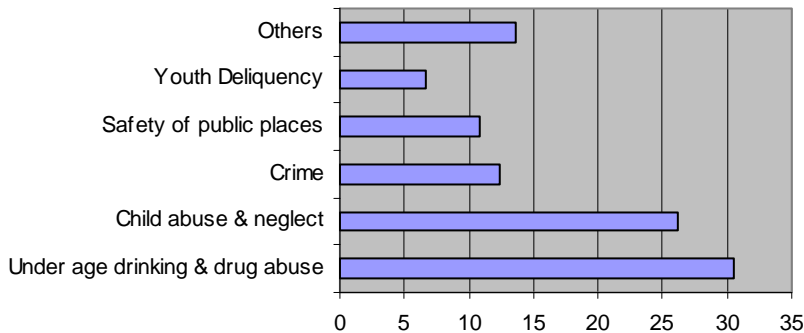
Health Care: Responders were asked to select from a list of 19 items and circle the issue they felt was the most important. While all 19 items were identified as being important, the issue most frequently selected as the *most important* was “ability to get healthcare” – selected by over 50 percent of responders. No other issue on the survey was selected by a majority of the responders. The most important issues are represented in the following graph by the percent of responders selecting that issue.

Most Important Health Care Issues, %



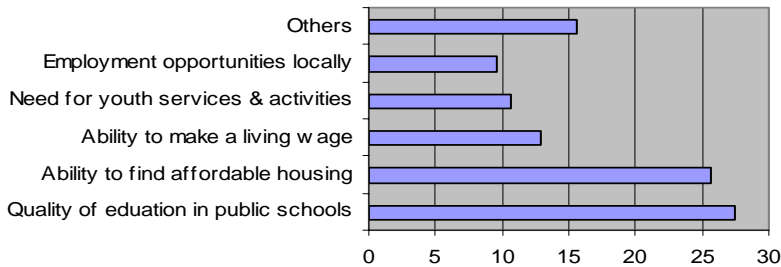
Safety & Crime: Responders were asked to identify the most important safety & crime issues in their community from a list of 9 items. Although all items were selected by at least 5% of responders, the most important issue – selected by 30% of responders - was under age drinking and youth drug use. The following table lists the safety & crime items by the % of responders selecting each item.

Most Important Crime & Safety Issues %



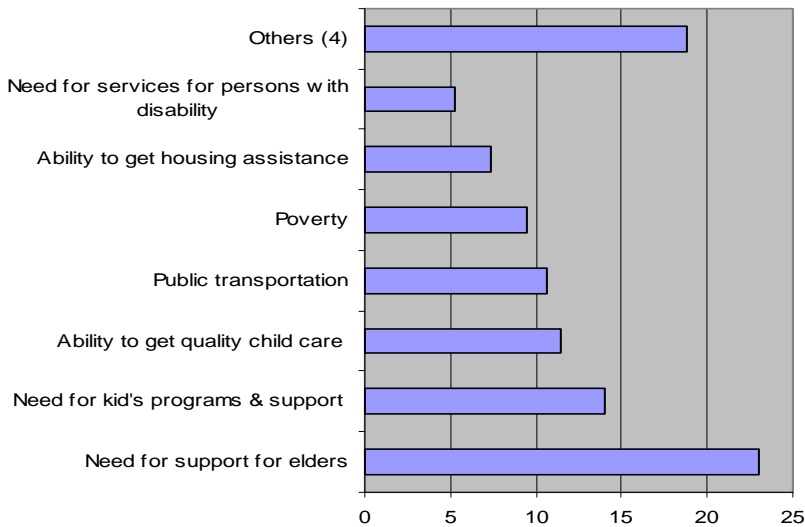
Community Issues: The most important community issues selected by the responders are listed in the following chart. All of the eleven issues listed were identified by some responders as being the most important. As a top issue, the quality of education in public schools was identified by 27%, while ability to find affordable housing followed closely with over 25% of responders selecting this option.

Most Important "Community" Issue %



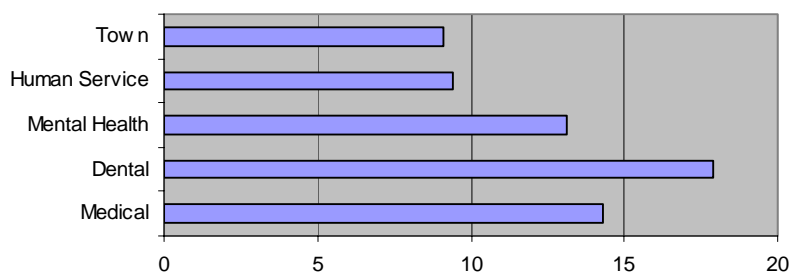
Social & Human Service Issues: Eleven options were listed under the heading of "social & human service issues". Responders chose issues at both ends of the age spectrum in identifying the "need for support for elders" and the "need for kid's programs and support" as the number one and two issues. These are presented below:

Most Important Social Service Issues, %



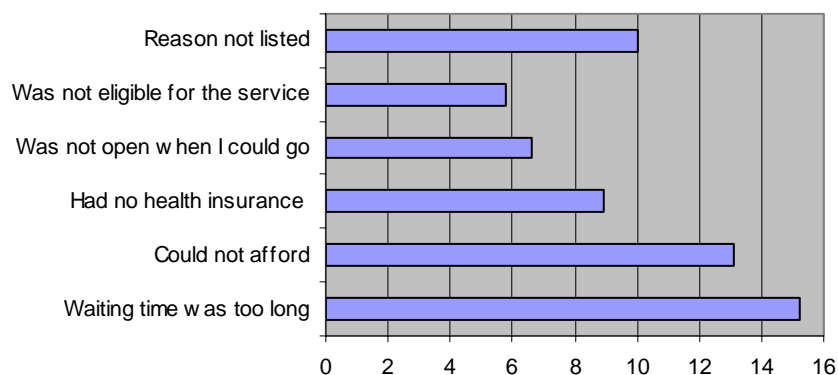
Difficulty Accessing Services: Responders were asked if they had experienced difficulty getting services during the past year from medical, dental, mental health, human service or town providers. Of the 605 responders, about 24% noted that they had *some* difficulty accessing at least one of the services, and 12 % experienced difficulty accessing more than one service. The service reflecting the greatest amount of difficulty in access was dental service – with over 17% of responders indicating a problem accessing dental services.

Difficulty Getting Services by Service Type, %



Further, responders were asked to identify what type of difficulty they encountered when attempting to access services. Fifteen options related to the source of the problem were available, and responders could write in other reasons. The greatest number of responders (15%) noted that the waiting time to receive services was too long, while 13% noted that they could not afford the service. The barriers to access are presented in the following chart.

% Difficulty Accessing Services Due to:

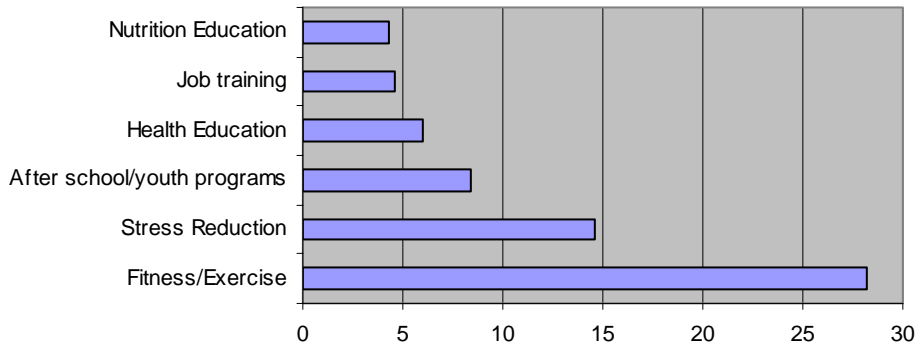


What Did Responders Think Was *Valuable* in the Community? The survey asked responders to identify which programs or services have been important to them by asking them to write in the names of the service. Over one half of all responders mentioned at least one service, and over 40 responders identified three services of importance to them. More than 80 community services and organizations were named, including community libraries, police, fire & rescue, childcare, recreation and organized health care services. The services most frequently identified as being valuable were the local hospital, visiting nurse & hospice services, the wellness center, public schools and youth sports programs. In some cases, an organization was specifically named; in others, the type of service was referenced. Responders were extremely complimentary of the responsiveness of local organizations to community needs.

New Services: The survey invited participants to identify new services and activities that they would use if they existed in the community. To do this, the survey provided a list of 19 items and allowed responders to write in a service if it was not listed. Those

who responded demonstrated considerable interest in health education and illness prevention services. Of all the possible services listed, fitness/exercise classes, stress reduction and after-school programs ranked the highest. The responses are graphed below:

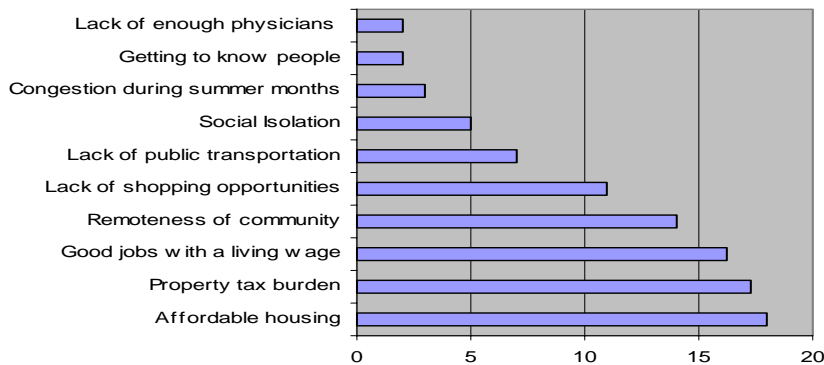
What New Services Would You Use(%)?



The Best Thing About the Community: Responders were asked to identify the ‘best thing’ in the community by writing in their response. Of the 605 persons who responded to the survey, over 85% offered a response to this question, and they were remarkably uniform in their responses. Although the responses were unique in their language, three themes were easily identifiable. Over 35% offered that the natural beauty of the region – the lakes, mountains, trees and streams – were the most valuable asset. Another 34% offered that the sense of community connectedness – friendly people who reach out to one another – was the best part of living here. Finally, another 28% noted that the rural environment – not complicated by urban sprawl – was the most important thing about the community.

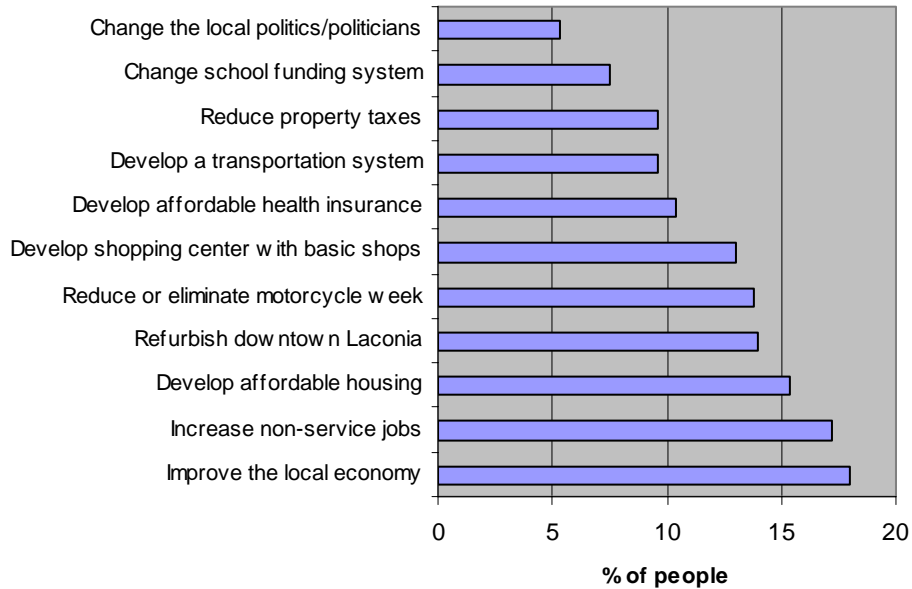
The Hardest Thing about the Community: The survey asked responders to write in the hardest thing about living in the community. Again, over 85% of the 605 responders offered an answer to this question. While the responses were varied, over 95% of them could be classified into 10 categories. While some of these related to economic issues of wages, jobs and taxes, others were tied to the remote and rural nature of the communities in Belknap County. The major responses are graphed below.

The Hardest Thing About the Community, %



What Would You Change? Finally, responders were asked to name what they would change in their own community if they were able to make that change. As might be expected, responses were widely varied and were often specific to the town of the responder. While some responders offered specific service or development suggestions, others were more general in their approach to improvement. Seventy-seven percent offered at least one suggested change, and 25% offered more than one. The majority of responses could be condensed into the areas noted on the graph below.

What Would You Change?



Other Issues of Importance Identified by the Survey

In addition to the results noted above, the survey identified a number of community concerns that surfaced throughout the responses. While none of these were major issues under any one question, the cumulative appearance of these responses throughout the survey deserves attention. Chief among these, based on the number of comments, was the concern about the Lakes Region General Hospital and Anthem dispute. At the time the survey was circulated, the two entities had announced a contract dispute which could have had significant effects on the population. Of the 605 responders, 39 wrote in some type of comment about their concern in having this issue resolved for the good of the community. At the time this report was analyzed and drafted, the dispute had been resolved.

A second theme that emerged was related to local residents feeling that they are being pushed out by the tourism trade which inflates property values and supports service industries which pay low wages. There were many comments about upscale shopping and property that are inaccessible to the local residents yet geared toward the needs of the higher paid tourist population. The situation, to paraphrase one responder, is becoming one where local residents cannot afford to live in their own community.

A third theme that emerged from all the free-text questions was the enforcement of traffic and speeding laws throughout the Lakes Region. Twenty eight people made a comment about the level of speeding that was tolerated on country and other residential roads, and they expressed concern about safety and infrastructure and an interest in enforcement of existing rules.

Finally, twenty one responders commented generally about the issue of local governance and the capacity or ability of the local governments to solve the issues before the communities of the Lakes Region.

B. Focus Group Analysis:

The Community Benefit Partnership also conducted four focus groups of individuals representing sectors of the population that may not have been well sampled using the survey tool. These groups included teachers/school administrators, spiritual care providers and elderly citizens. These groups were selected because they were felt to have ready knowledge about the assets and needs of the population to whom they provide service or companionship.

School Employees: Three different groups of school employees identified very similar issues among their student populations. The major problems they identified follow:

- Family stability, parenting skills, and time & attention parents give to children
- Domestic violence & other home stressors that affect learning
- Teenage pregnancy
- Drug & alcohol use
- Obesity
- Lack of supervised activities outside school

When asked to identify needs of the youth population in the Lakes Region, they identified the following:

- Family counseling, particularly crisis counseling
- Youth activities including community after-school activities
- Parenting education and support
- Affordable housing for families

Spiritual Care Providers: This group, composed of ministers, priests, and spiritual counselors, identified the following problems as major concerns among those to whom they minister:

- Access to healthcare without barriers
- Care for those who persons with mental illness
- Complexity in the systems used to access social services serve as barriers to obtaining the service
- Alcohol, drug and tobacco use
- Obesity, lack of exercise
- Lack of affordable housing
- Low wages offered locally
- Lack of affordable activities for persons with low income

When asked what services were most needed by those whom they serve, the spiritual care group offered the following:

- Affordable health care insurance
- Ombudsman type service to assist people in navigating complex service systems
- Greater number of counselors for low and medium income
- After school programs to help young people stay active and positive
- Affordable housing
- Living wage

Elderly Citizens: Members of a senior citizen social organization were asked to identify the greatest problems facing themselves and their peers in the community. They identified the following:

- Lack of mental health providers and coverage
- Lack of services for persons with Alzheimer's and their caregivers
- Waiting too long to receive urgent appointments with doctors and dentists
- Access to public events for persons with disabilities
- Phone solicitation
- Affordable housing
- Assistance for persons with disabilities
- Lack of dental care
- Social isolation

When asked to identify services or needs in the community, they responded:

- Lower property taxes
- Improved local shopping
- More involvement by local citizens in local decisions/voting
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C. Other Data Sources:

The State of New Hampshire, Division of Health & Human Services, collects and reports data relative to specific health indicators by county. Using a number of these data sets, we are able to identify the magnitude of certain problems in the Lakes Region.

Maternal & Infant Health Indicators: The Bureau of Vital Records provides data derived from the birth certificates of children born to area residents. Review of these data indicates that children born in Belknap County have higher risks on certain indicators than children born in New Hampshire as a whole. Specifically, 28% - over one-fourth - of all children born in Belknap County are born to a mother on Medicaid – the state/federal health insurance program for low income families. Fourteen percent are born to mothers with less than a 12th grade education, and 23% use tobacco products during pregnancy. Of the 576 children born in the year 2001 (the most recent year for which we have published data), 8.2% of all births were preterm – far higher than the state rate. These indicators correlate with a number of factors that place children and

their families at risk for problems with growth & development, learning disability and domestic violence or neglect.

Chronic Disease: The New Hampshire Office of State Planning provides data on the burden of chronic disease in New Hampshire communities. Review of these data reveal that Belknap County and Lakes Region communities have higher rates of many chronic diseases and risks for chronic disease than the state as a whole. In particular, Lakes Region communities have higher rates of cancer, asthma, diabetes and coronary heart disease. The overall use of tobacco is higher in the Lakes Region, while the percent of persons who exercise regularly is 68% - well below the state average of 80%. Not surprisingly then, the incidence of adult obesity is higher in the Lakes Region than in the state as a whole.

Health Care Access: Access to health care providers is a greater challenge in Lakes Region communities than in the state at large. The New Hampshire Office of State Planning reports that 13.5% of non-elderly adults in Lakes Region communities are uninsured compared to 6.5% in the southern New Hampshire counties. These data are derived from 2001-2002 data. Since that time, a number of local businesses have closed, and it is likely that the rate of uninsured adults has actually risen.

The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), known locally as NH Healthy Kids, has made great strides in providing health insurance coverage for children in the Lakes Region. Over 2800 Belknap County children are covered under the Healthy Kids Gold umbrella – the program available to the lowest income families. The number of families who qualify for Healthy Kids Gold is higher in Belknap County than in the state as a whole.

Finally, the Lakes Region is experiencing a shortage of primary care professionals. The NH Bureau of Primary Health Care reports that Belknap County is a Health Manpower Shortage Area using federal criteria. With 34% of regional families at or below 200% of poverty and over 16% of the population 65 years of age or older, this shortage creates tremendous stress on the health care system and on area families.

IV. Communication of results

The results of the needs assessment will be reported in a number of venues and to many members of the community. Each agency representative will report to their own agency board and other collaborative groups that they participate in. We are fortunate in Belknap County that the people in this collaborative represent most of the health and social service agencies in the County and participate in some fashion with all the others.

As we publish and submit this report, we plan to send out press releases to the local newspapers and present our findings on the local public access television station. The report and individual agency plans will be posted on agency websites. Group members will also be discussing the survey results at various groups and meetings throughout the Lakes Region to inform and involve those agencies or people that have not been involved in this process as of yet.

V. Future Plans/Planning

The members of our group, commonly called the 'Community Benefit Group' meet regularly working on common projects. We will continue to meet as the Community Benefit Group to discuss the interplay of our agencies and how we can work together to help address community need. An example of this is how LRGHealthcare and Genesis Behavioral Health are working with Health First of Franklin to expand its health center to the Laconia community and incorporate and expand greatly needed mental health services in our community. These sorts of collaborative efforts to address community need are typical of the Lakes Region and will continue into the future.