



# Columbia County Needs Assessment 2006



A report by the Columbia County Human Service Coalition



# Columbia County Needs Assessment Acknowledgements

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# Executive Summary

**T**his report summarizes a three year examination of the strengths and needs of Columbia County commissioned by the Columbia County Human Service Coalition. The conclusions are based on interviews with community leaders and service providers and a survey completed by 1094 county residents.

Participation in the survey was widespread. Residents from diverse income groups, age ranges, geographic locations, and educational levels agreed to share their thoughts on the community.

A major goal of the assessment was to better understand what issues concern county residents. These issues are work, crime, substance abuse, teens, transportation, and the needs of senior citizens.

Participants say that finding desirable work is difficult and that the number of talented young people leaving the area in search of better jobs is also troubling. At the same time, most county residents report being satisfied with their current job.

Residents are very concerned about crime and substance abuse with residents in the eastern part of the county expressing the highest rates of concern. Data on crime trends in our area show that fear of crime is increasing more quickly than crime itself. The county needs to examine why residents are fearful and take proactive measures to decrease fear's negative impact on the community. Rates of domestic violence in our community follow national trends with a slight decline likely related to better services and support for victims, less cultural tolerance for abusive behavior, and more aggressive enforcement of anti-abuse laws.

Concern surrounding teens centers on a need for healthy activities to occupy their time and preventing pregnancy. Many respondents say the county lacks recreational activities and gathering places for teens. While juvenile crime in the area has not increased significantly in recent years, providing more positive outlets for teen energy is a healthy step for all our communities. The greatest concerns surrounding younger children are finding good quality affordable daycare and recreational activities for children and families. Residents want more physical and winter activities for both children and teens and are concerned that most of the existing activities are located in the more densely populated areas of the county.

Transportation options for county residents who lack a reliable personal vehicle have been extremely limited for some time and many residents believe there is a need for some form of transit system. Lacking public transit, most residents have



found ways to meet their transportation needs with personal vehicles or through interpersonal networks. The community will need to explore the feasibility of transportation options that would appeal to residents more than continued reliance on their existing methods.

Concern for senior citizens is focused primarily on the cost of nursing home care. While services for seniors are among the top five concerns expressed by respondents, just under half feel these issues are problematic. In fact, respondents 65 and older express more concern with lack of recreational activities, brain drain, substance abuse, and gathering places for teens than they do for the needs of senior citizens.

Residents living in or near poverty lack access to computers, dental care, prescription drugs, health insurance, and transportation and are particularly fearful of crime. The large number of poor who hold part or full-time jobs highlights a need for employment that provides a living wage and health benefits.

Of those living in poverty, 30% list their employment status as disabled. Disability is also associated with health problems for the disabled and other members of their household as well as transportation problems. There is a need to assess services for community members with disabilities and their caregivers.

While community members are less concerned with healthcare than jobs and crime, those who do feel access to healthcare is a problem identify it as a large problem. People who have children report that they have serious problems finding physicians. This is true even though they do report good access to health insurance. People who have had health problems recently, those with lower incomes, and households that include members with disabilities are particularly likely to feel that there are problems with healthcare access in our area.

Residents are very satisfied with local public schools, emergency response, and access to information in the county. The overwhelming majority of respondents say that the people who live here are the county's greatest strength. In addition to formal volunteerism, a great deal of informal helping behavior occurs in the county. Residents report that they frequently provide friends and neighbors with transportation, household labor, childcare, and other forms of assistance. Other strengths listed include the natural beauty of the area, low crime rate, good public education system, and large number of services available.



# Introduction

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**T**his report draws on survey responses from 1,094 citizens of Columbia County Pennsylvania out of the 64,939 residents in 2005, or about 1.5% of all the people in the county. Participants completed the survey either by telephone or on-line between August 2005 and March 2006. The report provides an overview of the survey's findings. Additional information on any topic listed here and a complete report on the research methodology **can be obtained by contacting the authors.**

## Overview of the Population

Those who responded to the survey range in age from 18-94 years old. Most were over the age of 24 and the largest age group to participate was between 45-54. Twenty percent of our respondents are 65 or older.

The racial composition of our sample is not diverse. Ninety-eight percent of our respondents classify themselves as white. One percent are African American. This reflects the relatively homogeneous population of the county. The 2000 U.S. Census also indicates 98% of county residents are white.

Thirty percent of those who responded are male and seventy percent are female. While a greater balance between male and female respondents is desirable, an over sampling of females is a common occurrence in survey research.

Most respondents have lived in the county for fifteen years or more (72%). Twelve percent have lived in the county for 4-10 years and 7% have lived here for 11-15 years. Only 9% of our respondents have lived in the county for three years or less.

Participants include people who were born in 39 different states and 18 countries outside the U.S. However, 81% were born in Pennsylvania, 3% were born in New Jersey, and 4% were born in New York.

A relatively high 76% of county residents own their homes. In fact, by around the age of 27 more people own the place where they live than rent. This is likely a function of the relatively low housing costs in our area.

Most respondents (91%) have completed high school. Of those without a high school diploma, more than half have received their GED. Forty-three percent of our respondents have completed a college degree (12% have associates degrees, 20% bachelors, and 11% graduate or professional) and 10% are currently enrolled in some sort of schooling. Respondents with higher levels of education are more likely to use a computer at work or at home, own their home, volunteer, and to express dissatisfaction with the recreational activities available in the county. Differences in volunteerism are particularly striking with 42% of college graduates reporting that they or a family member volunteer compared to 17% of high school graduates. Those with lower levels of education report more difficulty accessing prescription drugs and obtaining health insurance and increased fear of both violent and nonviolent crime. The less educated report that it is difficult to find work in Columbia County while those with higher levels of education report that it is difficult to find desirable work.

Most of our respondents report household incomes between \$30,000 and \$59,999 (36%) or \$60,000 and \$99,999 (25%). Nineteen percent have a household income of less than \$19,999, 10% earn \$20,000-\$29,999 and 10% have an income above \$100,000.

Fourteen percent of our respondents (122 people) have received General Assistance or Temporary Aid to Needy Families at some point in their lives. Four percent are currently receiving benefits. Of those who are no longer receiving benefits, 58% stopped receiving them because their income increased and 25% stopped because they were no longer eligible. More than half received assistance for one year or less and 21% received it for less than two months. Twenty-one percent received benefits for more than two years.

Our sample includes participants from throughout the county. Most respondents (60%) come from the more densely populated areas such as Bloomsburg and Berwick. However, we did have substantial participation from residents of more rural areas.



# How Respondents Ranked Needs

A substantial number of questions on the survey were devoted to listing issues and asking respondents whether they believe each issue is a problem for Columbia County. While some concerns are specific to certain groups, the following table illustrates that there are five general areas of concern shared by large percentages of the population. These areas of widespread concern center on work and employment, drugs, alcohol, and crime, children and teens, transportation, and the needs of senior citizens.

## The Top Five Areas of Concern in the County

Area of Concern	Percent who believe it is a problem
<b>Work</b>	
Finding desirable work . . . . .	78%
Finding work . . . . .	60%
Talented young people leaving the community to find work . . . . .	71%
Access to job training . . . . .	30%
Transportation to and from work . . . . .	30%
<b>Drugs, Alcohol, and Crime</b>	
Drunk Driving . . . . .	74%
Amount of drugs people use . . . . .	74%
Amount of alcohol people use . . . . .	61%
Crime . . . . .	54%
<b>Teens</b>	
Finding gathering places for teens . . . . .	66%
Teen pregnancy . . . . .	47%
<b>Transportation</b>	
Low cost public transit . . . . .	54%
Public Transit . . . . .	53%
<b>Senior Citizens</b>	
Cost of nursing home care . . . . .	51%
Meeting needs of senior citizens . . . . .	40%



# Employment

Issues related to work are a significant area of concern for Columbia County residents, although from an objective standpoint people seem to have good experiences with employment. 46% of respondents were employed full time and 12% were employed part time. 4% were unemployed and looking for work while 5% were unemployed and not looking for work. 33% were out of the work force, either because they were retired, disabled, or students. Among those working, there was considerable satisfaction with work. 92% of those working full time were somewhat satisfied or very satisfied with their employment while among part time employees 86% reported this level of satisfaction.

Despite this positive picture, respondents think that finding good work is a significant problem in Columbia County. 78% of those responding to this item believe that finding good work is a problem in Columbia County. Furthermore, 47% (n=436)\* believe that finding work is either a large problem or a very large problem. As we would expect, these feelings are especially strong among the unemployed who are looking for work (68%, 25 people) although it is noteworthy that (19%, 7 people), of these people do not think looking for work is a problem. Among those unemployed and not looking for work, (49%, 23 people) think finding a good job is a problem where (23%, 11 people) do not think it is a problem.

These sentiments are echoed among those who are working. Among those employed full time, 41% think finding work is a problem. Among part-time employees, 58% think finding good work is a problem. There is no significant difference in the sentiments about whether or not finding work is a problem between people who have school-aged children and the rest of the population. Those in lower income brackets think finding good work is a larger problem than those in higher income brackets. Among those with household incomes at or below the poverty line, 69% (n=47) believe that finding work is a large or very large problem. About 57% among those with incomes between 101% and 200% of poverty and 58% among those with incomes between 201% and 300% of poverty believe finding work is a large or a very large problem. In the highest income category (more than 300% of poverty), 44% believe finding work is a problem in Columbia County.

*\*n= refers to the number of cases or respondents for the particular survey item that is under discussion.*



**Despite good experiences with jobs, finding work, and locating desirable employment are major concerns.**

# Drug and Alcohol Problems

**W**e surveyed households about substance dependence, and interviewed community leaders about the problem. Sixty percent of our participants report that if someone in their family or that of a close friend developed a problem with drugs or alcohol they would know where to send them for help. Three percent of our sample report that drugs or alcohol has been a problem for them or others in their households. Of those who have had a problem with drugs or alcohol, over half report that the drugs or alcohol have caused them to be unable to meet family obligations, work obligations, or to experience medical problems.

The national research on drug and alcohol abuse suggests a rate of abuse of 7-9% for drugs, and 14-15% for alcohol. The comparatively low numbers we find are good news. However, there are three specific reasons we must be cautious about our interpretations. The first is that omnibus surveys on multiple subjects are unlikely to produce as much candor as would be the case with surveys that were specifically about drugs and alcohol. The second is that the low level of lifetime dependence may reflect the age structure of this sample —specifically generational artifacts. There is an historical sea change that accompanies the baby boomers (1946-1964 birth years inclusive), who are now beginning to approach retirement. Whereas traditionally substance dependence has generally declined with age in adulthood, national data suggest that the baby boom generation brings higher rates of current or lifetime dependence.

The third and most important caution is based on the results of a drug and alcohol specific survey conducted in our region by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services – SAMHSA – for the years 2002-2004. That survey (NSDUH) found that in Region 16, which includes Columbia, Montour, Snyder, and Union Counties, “past-year” dependence is considerably higher. 3.44% of their sample said alcohol dependence was a problem in the last year. 1.65% of the sample said that dependence on an illegal substance was a problem in the last year. This suggests a *much* higher lifetime likelihood of abuse or dependence than our survey picked up. The 2005 Pennsylvania Youth Survey conducted by the Pennsylvania Commission on Crime and Delinquency found that twelfth graders, statewide, reported somewhat higher (than the national average) use of unprescribed sedatives, amphetamines, tranquilizers, and narcotics. Among both adults and youth, however, excess alcohol consumption remains the primary threat to well-being.

In planning for drug and alcohol dependence and treatment intervention, one should attempt to project data both from those already demonstrating problems, as well as data that suggests problematic use levels that are harbingers of medical and/or psychosocial problems in the future. It is almost certain, based on current data, that there will, at least nationally, be an increased need for treatment geared to those age 50 or older. Our survey suggests that one route to detection and counseling for such problems may be the general medical care system. The respondents in the pre-retirement age brackets in our survey seem to get annual checkups at a fairly high rate, suggesting that



the doctor's office might be a good, under-utilized way to reach people with chemical dependency problems. Liaison arrangements between drug and alcohol intervention organizations and health care centers might prove useful.

Regional data from SAMHSA indicates that 8.12% of the sample had a household member who felt they needed alcohol treatment but did not receive it. 2.33% said they needed illicit drug treatment but did not receive it. Further study of these individuals is likely to lead to more targeted intervention plans and service improvement.

Community leaders from both law enforcement and human services agencies who were interviewed by the needs assessment research team voiced nearly unanimous concern

about the dearth of treatment options beyond 12-step programs. Most felt that the lack of such resources impeded their target population's progress in other areas of life. The problem appears to be particularly acute for Access/Medicaid recipients or the uninsured. According to the Pennsylvania Department of Health, there were 257 admissions of 184 clients from Columbia County to state-supported treatment facilities. Of those, 129 sought help for drug abuse and 50 for alcohol abuse. 71% of clients sought admission only once.

What about alcohol and drug use among youth, and what does that portend for future service needs? The same SAMHSA household survey also gathered data from respondents about binge drinking among persons age 12 to 20 in the past month. In our region, 28.94% had done so. Our region has the highest such rate in the Commonwealth. This and other data suggest that the largest substance misuse problem in the state and in this area for young people appears to be heavy or binge drinking.

The 2005 Pennsylvania Youth Survey suggests that there are actually two different trends operating among the state's high school students in terms of their drug and alcohol use. Among twelfth graders of that year, drinking rates were historically high. However, among 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> graders, alcohol use dropped to some of the lowest levels ever recorded. For twelfth graders, binge drinking (33.7%) rates were at unprecedented levels, and a subset (40%) engaged in binge drinking more than four times in a two week period. Binge drinking was more common for males than females, and more common among whites than youths from other racial/ethnic groups. It was more common among those with poor academic performance and those who report being depressed. It would not be surprising, then, to see a surge in immediate need for intervention targeted to young adults in Pennsylvania – followed by a drop as the more-likely-to-abstain-or-reduce age cohort reaches adulthood.

**In our area, surveys show that among those 12-20, 29% had engaged in binge drinking; the highest rate in the Commonwealth.**

# Crime

**W**e asked questions both about general concern and personal concern about crime. As a personal concern measure, we asked “*In the last year, have you become more or less concerned about being a victim of \_\_\_\_ than before?*” For general perceptions, we asked, “**Is crime** a problem in this county?” in a section devoted to queries about a host of concerns. Concern about crime contains detached concern, anger, and fear in various combinations. However, *concern about crime* and *actual crime problems* may or may not be linked in specific circumstances. They are best considered independently in some cases.

Almost half of those in the Eastern part of the county (44.6%) report an increase in fear of theft over the past year, which is considerably more than those in other parts of the county. Just under one-third (29.7%) of those in the Eastern part of the county say they have increased concern about violence. Those in the Central district are the least likely to experience increased fear of violence (15.7%) and a greater percentage in the Central area have *less* concern than the year before (18.1%). Concern about violence is more unevenly distributed throughout the county than concern about theft. While police reports suggest an increase in offenses in the last year or two in some categories, the trend is not dramatic. There are greater increases in concern about theft county-wide than about violence, though generally, reported property crime overall has decreased somewhat.

## Fear of Crime and Responses to Related Issues, by Region Within County

Major Areas of Concern	North	South	Central	East
	%	%	%	%
Amount of alcohol people use	63	55	61	63
Amount of drugs people use	72	63	69	90
Crime	53	45	46	75
Drunk Driving	71	77	76	72
School safety	17	14	15	23
Racial tension in schools	17	14	12	22
Gangs in schools	12	10	10	23

Increased fear may be related to population change in the area and unease about what these changes will mean for the community. Efforts to deal with these fears as a community might be necessary to prevent this fear from having a negative impact on the existing community, or turning to hostility toward new community members. Collaborative neighborhood coalitions nationwide have provided some models.

Age of the sample is also important: older respondents in crime surveys almost always report more fear than younger people, although younger people are at much more risk.

<b>Bloomsburg Town</b>						
	<b>Population</b>	<b>Violent Crimes</b>	<b>Rape</b>	<b>Aggravated Assault</b>	<b>Property Crimes</b>	<b>Burglary</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>12,651</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>12,694</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>268</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>2005</b>	<b>12,829</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>253</b>	<b>36</b>

  

<b>Berwick</b>						
	<b>Population</b>	<b>Violent Crimes</b>	<b>Rape</b>	<b>Aggravated Assault</b>	<b>Property Crimes</b>	<b>Burglary</b>
<b>2000</b>	<b>10,529</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>—</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>2004</b>	<b>10,535</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>2005</b>	<b>10,513</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>382</b>	<b>68</b>

When we look at Columbia County’s real crime trends, as indicated by reports of offenses known to police (collected quarterly by the FBI), we find the following patterns (NOTE: *Not all municipalities report to the UCR. These data represent only offenses known to police, and it should be remembered that many crimes, particularly interpersonal violence and smaller property crimes, often go unreported.*)

# Teens



**T**he juvenile justice system has main jurisdiction over minors aged 10 to 17 charged with offenses. The Juvenile Probation office reports little change in the overall rate of serious delinquency over the past decade, though in the past year juvenile probation case loads have increased. However there has been little change in the general pattern, which is that most referrals are for property offenses. There have been increases in less serious offenses, and there has also likely been an effect of “formalization” in recent years. This means that certain events involving juveniles, such as property defacement, physical altercations, a weapon found at school, and threats are increasingly likely to be reported by school and program officials and thus “officially” processed as opposed to being handled informally. (The last three would be considered ‘person’ offenses.) This trend toward “formalization” is a national trend, and thus there is some confusion about what statistics showing recent moderate increases in juvenile offending really mean; the same is true of local trends.

Attention should be directed to the gradual increase in known drug and alcohol offenses among juveniles. This trend tracks with surveys of drug and alcohol use among high school students. While alcohol and marijuana are the most commonly procured prohibited substances, heroin is the most commonly abused “hard” drug in the area. Heroin dependency is widely known to be associated with property offending.

In enumerating alleged juvenile offenses, the seven most serious offenses per disposition are counted. For instance, a youth may face multiple counts of the property offense type, and each of these is reflected in the table. The reader will notice considerable fluctuation from year to year.

### Type and Number of Alleged Offenses — Juvenile, Columbia County.

Source: <http://www.jcjc.state.pa.us>

Year	Person	Property	Drug	Other
2000	64	236	66	145
2001	46	473	54	213
2002	55	142	54	127
2003	99	227	76	172
2004	111	270	96	246
2005	143	195	129	291

### Percent of Juveniles in Columbia County, Age 10 to 17, Receiving Dispositions Related to Delinquent Acts

2000	2.9%	2003	3.4%
2001	3.3%	2004	3.9%
2002	2.3%	2005	4.4%



### **A Note about At-Risk Youth**

While the juvenile probation office has seen an increase in the number of youths under its supervision, the increase in case load has not been large. Children and Youth Services, however, has experienced an increase in the number of minors in need of placement, having been removed from the custody of their parents or guardians, in the last six months of 2006. It has also seen, during this time, a decrease in the average age of children needing a home, from 12.5 years of age to approximately 9. This purview and obligation of CYS – foster care and other home placements — is its single most costly activity. In both cases, public funding is granted to the agency based on past patterns of need and case load. While the agency normally has roughly twelve youths placed at any given time, the last half of the year saw an increase to about 15. Approximately 40% of referrals to the agency come from Berwick. It is not yet clear which common family-strain factors explain this particular current increase, yet interestingly, it does not appear that changing demographics play a large role.

# Transportation

Given that this issue seemed to be a broad concern, the research team interviewed three persons employed by area service agencies who provided us with an interesting look at the dilemma. Columbia County does provide very limited transportation, for specific purposes, for specific populations by prearrangement. A “wheels to work” program provides transportation to qualified low income workers. Transportation to medical appointments is available to those qualifying for assistance. Some subsidy of gas expenses for specific purposes (eg medical appointments) is made available to qualifying needy residents. The Area Agency on Aging contracts with a private taxi-livery firm to provide the same service. The 2005 American Community Survey (part of the U.S. Census) provides data on transit practices in the Bloomsburg – Berwick Micropolitan Statistical Area. 85.8% of working residents drove alone to work, 8.2% car-pooled, and 3.4% walked to work. Close to 80% had more than one vehicle available in their household



Similar commuting patterns were observed on the county level in the 2000 Census. Thus the great majority drove to work by themselves in their own car. Transit for those with reliable vehicles could be described as generally easy in the area. According the U.S. Census, the mean travel time to work is just over 21 minutes in Columbia County, compared to 25 minutes in the state as a whole, and 25.5 in the nation as a whole.

There is a gap thus apparent between the perception that the county’s lack of public transportation is a problem and the reality that most residents do not find such transit personally necessary. Further investigation is needed to examine whether a general *preference* for the emergence of a transit system is enough to make any such initiative effective in both the short and long run. Short of an existing option to take public transit, and external pressures such as traffic congestion or a significant spike in gasoline prices, it is difficult to tell whether voluntary use of a fixed route system would be viable. Increasing valuation of environmental initiatives may eventually have some influence on thinking about public transit, but it is not yet apparent.

Our interviews with those employed by service agencies suggested that the alternative transportation needs of larger households with only one car, poorer residents, and households with multiple employed members are actually quite acute. One service provider said that a number of clients admitted driving out of necessity on suspended or revoked licenses. Interviewees noticed that Bloomsburg University has developed well-utilized fixed route buses to shopping and nightlife spots. No “poor bus” stigma seemed to attach to it, as was a concern raised by more than one interviewee. Public transportation was cited by one interviewee as a way to reduce stress on households by freeing up time and not having to rely on family for errands. One interviewee said that clientele eligible to use such services, often for plain logistical reasons, failed to use them, and two interviewees said clients simply could not sustain the rigorous schedule of multiple pick



# Senior Citizens

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ups and drop offs at workplaces, public buildings, and day care agencies. Often utilizing such services involved lengthening the workday by several hours.

Service providers felt that the current system to provide transportation for low-income households was quite inefficient, i.e. pennywise and pound foolish. Large screening and operating costs were associated with clients on a per-capita basis, and public, fixed-route service would probably be more cost efficient. This could only develop over the long term, however, and the agencies responsible lack the capacity to do the planning such a project would require. A related concern raised was that some area political leaders might see public transportation as strictly a “poor bus” initiative rather than a universal good, in contrast to the thinking in more metropolitan areas. Thus, the most economically marginal residents would be seen as the prime clientele and this would not impel leaders to act on their behalf.

The County has not had fixed route bus service or any viable public transit system since the 1960s. Private transportation has been the default option for the overwhelming percentage of county residents. It is also interesting that only one private taxi-livery concern has emerged in the area. Collectively, our interviews suggested that even as many are supportive of better transportation alternatives in the area, external pressures would probably be necessary to create a general and voluntary migration to public transit for specific tasks (e.g., going to stores and markets, work, and school).

## Senior Citizens

**T**wenty percent of our respondents (215 people) are over the age of 65. This group differs from the rest of the county population in several important ways. In terms of access to healthcare, senior citizens actually fare better than nearly every other age group. The only area where more than 5% of respondents say they have had a problem gaining access is prescription drugs (18% say that have had a problem). This pattern indicates that most seniors in the county are being adequately served by their own private medical plans or government funded services.

Most senior citizens (78%) feel their own health is between good and excellent. Ninety-four percent of those aged 65 and older report that they have had a routine physical check-up in the past year compared to only 60% of those aged 25-34. Because older respondents are clearly having regular checkups, we can assume that their assessment of their health is based on a recent medical assessment.

None of the respondents aged 65 and older report that people in their household





have had problems getting enough food. Only two of those aged 55-64 report having had problems. This seems to indicate that the food needs of older residents are being well served by existing structures.

Forty percent of the sample judged senior citizens' needs a problem, a relatively small proportion. Of these, 30% judged the problems of seniors to be large or very large while 66% judged senior problems to be a small or very small problem.

The judgment that senior problems are small seems related to the experiences of seniors themselves. Only 33% of seniors (70 people) think senior services represent a need for Columbia County and of these 59% judge the need to be small or very small while 36% judge the need to be large or very large. Only the youngest age group (18-24) has a higher proportion of people (65%, 17 people) than seniors who do not think senior services represent a need for the county. In all of the other age groups a significant majority believe senior needs are a problem for the county, with the highest concern shown in the 45-54 age group where 66% believe senior needs are a problem. Only 7% (45 people) report that senior services are problems for anyone in their household, and of these respondents only 20% (9 people) report that the problems are large or very large.

Income, education, and length of residence in the County, might be expected to relate to the perception that senior needs are a problem, but there is no tendency for any group to have a heightened sense of need based on these variables. For income, the middle-income group (between 201% and 300% of the poverty line) shows the greatest concern with 61% (49 people) judging senior needs a problem. 29% (20 people) of these judge senior needs to be a large or very large problem. In terms of residence, 72% (790 people) have lived in the County for more than 16 years. Among these people, and those who responded to the questions, about senior needs, 42% judged senior's needs not to be a problem. The greatest sense of need is expressed in the middle category, people who have lived in the County for 8-10 years (27%, 6 people) most often think senior needs are a problem but there are few respondents in this residential category. In terms of education level, there is a slight tendency for those in the two lowest and the two highest education categories (out of seven categories) to think senior needs are a problem, but in none of these groups are senior needs judged a significant problem.

There is a weak tendency for regular participants in church to see a higher level of senior program needs compared to those who attend less frequently (although non-attenders are next highest in terms of perceiving a problem). The greatest need is seen among those who attend church once a week (71%, believe senior services are a need). Meanwhile, in the once a week category and the more than once a week attending church category, 22% and 21% respectively see senior services as either a large or very large need. This is about 5% higher than any of the other church categories and it makes one wonder if church

**Most senior citizens (78%)  
feel their own health is between  
good and excellent.**

attendance is partly related to participants' need for community support.

Further evidence of weak concern for senior needs comes when we look at nursing home costs. A slightly higher percentage of respondents (51%) think nursing home costs are a problem than think other senior services are a need (40%). The preponderance of respondents judge nursing home costs a very small or small problem (70%), with 15% reporting that nursing home costs are a large or very large problem. We find little interaction between judgments that senior services are a need and that nursing home costs are a problem. 35% of those who think senior services are a need do not think nursing home costs are a need. When we look at the two variables together, cross tabulating them, we find that only 5% believe that both senior services and nursing home costs represent large or very large problems.

## Income

In order to better understand the way income influences the lives of Columbia County residents, we created four household categories. Households are classified as being above or below the poverty line based on the number of people in the household and the household income. We developed income categories using the poverty line as our reference point. Our first category includes households at or below the poverty line (11% of our sample). The second category includes households between the poverty line and 200% of the poverty line (22%). The next includes those between 200% and 300% of the poverty line (16%) and the final category is composed of those above 300% of the poverty line (51%).

There is a clear relationship between poverty status and computer usage. Only 61% of households at or below the poverty line have a member who uses a computer compared to 96% of those 300% or more above the poverty line. Among those answering our questionnaire, only 45% of those at or below poverty use computers compared to 57% in the 200% poverty category, 69% in the 300% poverty level and 80% in the above 300% and poverty level. This is clear evidence that a digital divide exists in our region and that we should be considering the implications of such a divide.

There is also a relationship between poverty status and access to healthcare. Thirty-nine percent of those at or below the poverty line report that a member of their household has been without insurance during the last year. Among those between 101 and 200% of the poverty line, 28% have had a household member without insurance in the past year, while at 201-300% the percent the rate drops to 13%. Dental care, prescription drugs, and health insurance seem to be the most problematic services for those at or near poverty. Prescription drugs seem to be a problem for all income groups but are reported to be problematic at much higher rates for those at or below 200% of the poverty line.

## Personal Health Rating Compared to Income

	How would you rate your personal health?				
	Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor
poverty or less	9.9%	22.5%	31.0%	25.4%	11.3%
between 101% and 200% poverty	9.8%	29.4%	37.8%	17.5%	5.6%
between 201% and 300% poverty	12.1%	26.2%	43.9%	17.8%	.0%
above 300% poverty	23.6%	43.8%	24.5%	6.9%	1.2%

Given differences in access to health services, differences in respondent's ratings of their own health along income lines are no surprise. Higher income is associated with better health. Sixty-seven percent of those in the 300% or above category rate their personal health as "very good" or "excellent" while only 33% of those at or below poverty do so. It is clear that those at or below the poverty line have the most health problems, but it is interesting that those at or below 300% of the poverty line are very similar to one another in their assessments of their overall health but those above the 300% mark are significantly different from the other three groups. It is not uncommon to focus primarily on providing services to the lowest income members of a community but this divide indicates that issues surrounding health in our community are a problem for moderate income households as well as low income households.

Those at or below poverty go for longer periods of time between physicals. This is likely a result of their lack of health insurance. It is also likely a contributing factor in their lower levels of overall health as they are less likely to have conditions identified and treated in their early stages or to receive preventative care.

Those with lower levels of income travel somewhat longer distances to seek medical care. This pattern is likely a function of the need to find lower cost services or to conform to the most restrictive healthcare coverage options. It could also cause them to delay treatment or to fail to have some conditions treated.

There is a strong relationship between poverty and disability. Fifty-two percent of households at or below the poverty line have a member with a disability. Thirty-two percent of those in the 101-200% poverty group have a household member with a disability, 17% of those 201-300% above the poverty line, and 12% of those above 300% or more above the poverty line. These findings indicate a strong need for better services to help those with disabilities in the financial aspects of their lives. It is difficult to tell whether the poverty led to disability or the disability led to poverty, but in either case the outcomes seem unlikely to change without a community response.

Community members in the three lowest income groups report the greatest increase in fear of theft over the past year (roughly 41%) while only 32% of those in the highest group say their fear of theft has increased. When it comes to fear of violent crimes such as assault, rape, or homicide, the patterns are even more pronounced. Thirty-one percent



of those at or below poverty say their fear of violent crime has increased in the last year. This drops to 26% in the 101-200% group, 24% in the 201-300% group and 15% among those above 300% of the poverty line. Even independent of true increases or decreases in crime, fear has an impact on a community. Individuals who fear being victimized are more likely to restrict their activities thus missing opportunities to socialize or going outdoors for exercise. These limitations, as well as the direct negative impact of stress, mean that we should be concerned about the harmful effects of fear on the lower income members of our communities.

The relationship between poverty and employment highlights the need to assess not just the availability of jobs in our area but also the availability of jobs that pay a living wage and jobs that accommodate people with disabilities. Thirty percent of respondents who live in poverty list their employment status as disabled. Also, many of those in or near poverty hold part or even full time jobs. Of those at or below the poverty line 16% hold part-time jobs and 16% hold full-time jobs. Of those between 101 and 200% of the poverty line 32% hold part time jobs and 17% hold full time jobs.

When asked about work in Columbia County, those with the lowest incomes say that finding work is difficult at much higher rates (75%) than those with higher incomes (66%, 65%, and 58%). However, all four groups report that finding desirable work is difficult at similar rates (86%, 81%, 84%, and 81%).

Those with the lowest incomes are the most likely to say that finding transportation to and from work is a problem in this county (44%). Those with the lowest incomes are least likely to have reliable private transportation and suffer the most from the lack of public transportation. These problems with transportation are likely even more trying for the many people with disabilities who live at or near poverty.

Those at or near poverty are the most likely to experience problems accessing food. Sixteen percent of those at or below poverty and 5% of those at 101-200% poverty have experienced problems accessing food in the last year. Only 1% of those 201% and above poverty have had food access problems in the last year.



# Children

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**H**ouseholds that include children differ from other households in several important ways. The incomes of households with and without children under age five don't differ significantly but households with school age children have somewhat higher incomes than those without. About half of those who describe themselves as unemployed and not looking for work have young children in their household. This pattern is likely one of parents returning to work as their children begin school and accounts for the slightly higher incomes among those with school aged children.

Thirty-one percent of respondents live in a household with school-aged children. These households volunteer at even higher rates than those with young children (43%). There is a general increase in community activity associated with having children. Parents report volunteerism as a means of being a role model and also say that they volunteer at their children's schools, sports teams, and scouting organizations.

Issues related to children, teenagers, and their parents are a focus of concern in several key areas. The needs identified as most severe in Columbia County involve 'troublesome' behaviors and outcomes among teens including pregnancy (47% yes), lack of teen gathering places (66% yes), running away (69% yes). Concern about teen pregnancy and lack of gathering places were associated with having school-aged children. Alcohol and drug abuse and running away were also more frequently identified by people without children. Other issues listed in the questionnaire such as availability of teen role models were not significant concerns.



Most respondents to the survey (98%, for those without children and 97% for those with children) responded that alcohol and drug abuse was not a problem in the respondent's household. About half of the respondents thought that there were not enough services for children with behavior problems (46%, for those without children and 50%, for those with children). Criticism was more severe for programs to help with alcohol and drug abuse where 63% (438 people) of those without children thought help was not sufficiently available and 68% (206 people) of those with children thought services were insufficient.

Health care was identified as a significant issue for people with children. Most respondents and their households have access to health insurance—only about 10% of those with children report having difficulty getting health insurance for their families (49 people, or about 4.4% of all respondents to the survey). Despite being insured, 50% (148 people) of families with school aged children and 48% (84 people) of families with pre-Kindergarten aged children report difficulty obtaining health care. Of these, 26% (76 people) of families with school aged children and 22% (38 people) families with pre-K children say this is a large or very large problem. **This appears to be a significant problem and should be targeted as a key issue to be addressed in Columbia County.**

Twenty-two percent of respondents consider finding quality daycare to be a problem and of those 72% think this is a large or very large problem. Among respondents to the study, 34% think finding affordable daycare is a problem in Columbia County and of those who consider this to be a problem, 72% think finding affordable daycare is a large or very large problem. These two concerns tend to go together. Among those who do not think finding affordable daycare is a problem, very few identified finding quality daycare as a problem. The converse does not apply. People may not think finding quality daycare is a problem, but they still often find it hard to locate affordable daycare. Nearly 20 % of our total sample reported finding quality daycare and finding affordable daycare as a problem in Columbia County. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of individuals who thought finding quality, affordable daycare problematic reported the problems as either large or very large problems.

An intriguing aspect of these responses concerning daycare is that they are only weakly related to whether respondents have children younger than Kindergarten age or not. Forty-two percent of those with children younger than Kindergarten age think finding quality daycare is a problem while 39% of those without young children think this is a problem. People with young children are somewhat more likely to say finding quality day care is a large or very large problem (33%, compared to those without small children 27%). With respect to finding affordable daycare, 61% of those with small children think this is a problem while a larger percentage of those without small children, 66% think

**We found a significant problem of access to health services for families with children.**





**Childcare is a concern of many residents whether or not they have small children.**

affordable day care is a problem. The presence of young children in the household did not appear to determine or predict responses to these items. Instead it appears that childcare is on the minds of many residents and not merely as matter of self-interest or concerned parents. It is an expression of widespread community concern for parents of small children. Furthermore, among those who recognize access to childcare is a problem, there is widespread agreement that this is a large or very large problem (74%).

Respondents are overwhelmingly positive about public schools. Among respondents 81% (n=768) reported the quality of public education is not a problem. Furthermore, this high approval rating is maintained whether or not respondents have school aged children. Among those with children (n=243) and those without (n=508), 82% say the quality of public education is not a problem in Columbia County. We asked questions about whether school safety, gangs in school, or racial tension were problems in Columbia County and for each of those variables between 20% and 25% agreed there was a difficulty that should cause concern.

Respondents were unlikely to select several issues regarding children in the community as significant. Instead, people were more likely to identify one key issue. Thus, among those who thought school safety was a problem, most did not think school gangs were a problem (18% thought only one was a problem, and 71% thought neither was a problem). There was a core, however, of about 70 respondents who thought good schools, school safety, school gangs, and race tension in schools were problems. This did not appear to be associated with the presence of children in the home. Endorsement of these issues together was also not associated with the likelihood of removing children from public schools

and sending them to private or religious schools. Families seemed to have chosen private or religious schools for other unspecified reasons.

We did not find significant differences between respondents with children in their homes and the rest of the population in terms of variables related to poverty and economic security. Low-income families did not express significantly different concerns than higher income families. People with children did not report special problems gaining access to food. Although access to jobs was a major concern for survey respondents, those with children did not express greater concern than others.

Families with children expressed concern about specific services like health care, childcare, and drop-in centers for teens. Concerns about teen problems seem to reflect generalized worries in the community about 'deviant' behavior by young people rather than critical attitudes about services falling short.



# Health and Disabilities

Only 36% of our respondents judged access to health care a significant need. Predictably, the wealthiest people believe health care access is the least serious, with about 66.5% judging this problem compared to 52% among the poverty group. Among the elderly, 85% judge access to health care not to be a need in Columbia County. This reflects their access to Medicare funding for health care.

For people in younger age groups, access to health care is judged to be a large or very large problem for about 25% of respondents. Among those who sought medical help in the last year 28% found access to health care a large or very large problem whereas only 18% of those who did not seek help found access a large or very large problem. Among people with children, as reported earlier, 48% say finding a physician is difficult about a quarter find this to be a significant problem. Similarly, among those who judge their own health fair or poor about 31% judge access to health care to be a large or very large problem compared to about 18% for those who judge their own health to be excellent or very good.

Access to health insurance is important. Columbia County appears somewhat better off than the nation as a whole where about 17% lack health insurance. Only 12% of our respondents said they did not have health insurance. 17% said someone in their family did not have it. This difference in percents reflects the fact that whether or not people have benefits relates to whether people have recently taken or left a job.

41% of those with poverty incomes or less reported having no health insurance while 22% of those between 101% and 200% of poverty reported lacking health insurance. This latter group is expected to be the one with the highest uninsured rate since they generally work at jobs with no benefits. As we move up the income level insurance rates improve. For people with incomes more than 200% of the poverty line more than 90% report having health insurance.

Perceptions of need related to health care grow out of experiences people or their friends or their loved ones have had and awareness of HIV/AIDS is an example. Only 16% of respondents judged the disease a problem in Columbia County. Among these 32% found HIV/AIDS a small problem and 42% found it a large (less than a “very large”) problem. People in rural areas may believe HIV/AIDS is a disease of cities but this is a misperception because some central Pennsylvania counties have among the highest rates in the Commonwealth.

Lack of access to dental services is usually a more common complaint than lack of access to physician care, and thus it is noteworthy that only 10% of our respondents found dental care to be a need. Perhaps funding of a dental clinic by the Central





Susquehanna Foundation is responsible. Distressingly, however, we note that the eastern region (Berwick) reports the highest perception that there is a need for dental care (12%) where in the other regions 7-10% of respondents found it to be a need.

Although 63% of the wealthiest group perceive disability to be a problem, most of our respondents, did not think disability services were a significant need. Elderly disabled were believed to have good services and did not generally report problems with access. Health insurance and social support through families appeared to provide the necessary disability support among higher income residents.

At the same time, people who are affected tend to experience an intense sense of need. Self-reported quality of health is important. About 85% of those in poor health report disability services a problem. Among these people,

45% (33 people) report that disability services are a large or very large need. 79 people rated both health and disability a large or a very large problem, representing 56% of those who rated these problems on the high end of the severity scale. Nearly 14% (139 people) rated both health care access and disability support a need in Columbia County. Another 207 or a total of 34% of the sample judged both issues a problem but did not know how to judge the severity of one or the other (that is, the entered “don’t know” for one or the other).

People in poor health are likely to live with disabled people (42% of people in fair or poor health report a disabled person in their household) while people who are healthy are not likely to live with disabled people (90% of people in excellent, very good, or good health do not have a disabled person in their household). Overall, 81% of respondents report no disabled person in their household while the other 19% do report a disabled household member. Thirty percent of those with a disabled household member rate disability services a large or very large problem.

Disability is more often perceived a problem among those respondents with the lowest income and those reporting income at 100-200% of poverty (69% and 73% respectively). Disabilities may be the reason people have fallen into the lowest income groups. There is a strong connection between the perception that disability services are a significant need and that finding good jobs is a significant problem. Among those (180 people) who are willing to rate the significance of each of these problems, 63% believe that both are large or very large problems. These people represent about 11% of our total sample and although the proportion is relatively small in comparison to some other judgments of need, the overlap of problem suggests that there is need in this area of focus.

# Domestic Violence

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One percent of our respondents report that they or others in their household have been victims of physical abuse in the last year. Five percent report that they or other household members have been the victim of verbal abuse in the past year. Of those who have dealt with abuse in the last year, 34% are still dealing with the abuse. Since people are reluctant to talk to strangers about these experiences these numbers are more significant than they may appear.

Of those who have faced abuse, a spouse or a partner was responsible 43% of the time, a parent 7% of the time, a child 7% of the time, and some other family member 11% of the time. Thirty-two percent have sought medical services as the result of abuse. Twenty-six percent have tried to get a protection from abuse order. Forty-percent contacted the police as a result of the abuse and 38% of those who contacted the police found this contact to be helpful.

Data from the county's largest provider, The Women's Center Inc. of Bloomsburg, gives a more close-up look at the extent and character of the domestic violence problem, drawn from the data it reports to funders. The Center provides services to approximately 1500 clients per year. Of these, 75% (or just over 1100) of clients are seeking relief, shelter, counseling, or other services related to domestic abuse. 25% seek help for sexual assault, and about half of these clients are minors. 30 clients came from outside Columbia County (as they were relocating from another county to escape from an abuser) and about the same number of clients from Columbia County were referred to agencies in other parts of the state for the same reason. As a member of the Pennsylvania Coalition against Domestic Violence, this mutual aid is the expected norm. The Women's Center houses 15-20 women at any given time, as well as their dependent children.



# Location

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In order to assess the importance of geographic location in the lives of county residents, we look at the county in two different ways. We have divided the county into densely populated and rural communities with Bloomsburg and Berwick (609 respondents) representing the dense population areas and all other locations being considered rural (411 respondents).

We have also divided the county into Central, Southern, Northern and Eastern Regions. The Central region includes Bloomsburg, Espy, Lightstreet, Mainville and surrounding areas (488 respondents). The Southern region includes Aristes, Catawissa, Elysburg, Numidia, and the surrounding areas (107 respondents). The Northern region includes Benton, Millville, Orangeville, Stillwater, and surrounding areas (200 respondents). The Eastern region includes Berwick, Nescopeck and their surrounding areas (265 respondents).

The central part of the county has the highest percentage of young people which is likely due to the presence of the university. The southern and northern parts of the county have the highest proportion of respondents over age 65. This could be due to out migration of younger people to more densely populated areas in search of jobs and/or a tendency to retire in less costly rural areas.

In terms of basic lifestyle, there is some tendency for those in the eastern region of the county to not own a car or own fewer cars than those in other parts of the county. Those who live in the southern parts of the county are less likely to use a computer at home or work (69%) compared to those in the central (83%), northern (74%), or eastern (78%) regions. Those in the central (26%) and eastern (23%) regions are more likely to rent their place of residence than those in the southern or northern regions (both 18%).

Those in the southern region more frequently report that they have had problems obtaining prescription drugs or obtaining health insurance for a family member than those in the other three regions. Those in the southern region also rate their personal health as somewhat less good than those in other regions. This could be related to the greater travel times to access healthcare among those in the most southern parts of the county. Sixty percent of residents in the southern region and 46% of those in the eastern report that their primary healthcare provider is less than 20 minutes from their home compared to 81% in the eastern and 82% in the central region.

Rural residents are more likely to own their homes (81%) than residents in our more densely populated areas (73%). Rural residents also report greater problems gaining access to prescription drugs (22%) compared to residents of more densely populated communities (16%).

Rural residents rate their personal health as somewhat less good than do more urban residents. We might anticipate that this pattern is related to problems accessing healthcare. However, rural



and more urban residents report rates of difficulty accessing services such as physician care and dental care at very similar rates. There is also no statistical difference in the rate at which the two groups report that they have had difficulty finding transportation to and from healthcare appointments. Rural residents do report that they have more problems gaining access to prescription drugs than do more urban residents and rural residents travel greater distances to access their usual source of healthcare. While rural residents do not report transportation preventing them from gaining access to healthcare, perhaps they delay treatment or seek treatment less frequently than more urban residents.

It is interesting that there is no difference between urban and rural groups when it comes to perceptions of the need for publicly funded transportation. Fifty-three percent of both groups say that the need for public transportation is a problem. Both groups also report a need for low cost transportation at similar rates but rural residents are more likely to say that lack of low cost public transit is not a problem.

### **Regional Comparison within Columbia County in the Severity of Areas of Concern**

<b>Percent of residents reporting that this issue is a problem</b>				
<b>Areas of Concern</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>Central</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>East</b>
<b>Alcohol use</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>55</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Drug use</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>69</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>Crime</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>75</b>
<b>Drunk driving</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>77</b>	<b>72</b>

# Community Strengths

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County residents feel confident in the emergency preparedness and response in our area. Only 7% feel that getting information for events like floods or storms or emergency response such as fire, police, or ambulance service is a problem.

Respondents also seem to feel that they are able to obtain information and access services if they need them. Only 14% feel that finding information, services, or emergency assistance is a problem in the county and 87% say that if they needed help meeting some need they would know where to seek help.

When asked who they would turn to if they needed help, 70% of our respondents say they would turn to a family member, 23% would turn to a friend, and 4% would turn to a member of their religious group. Fifty-two percent say the person they would turn to lives less than five minutes from them, 25% are with 6-15 minutes of them. Only 8% say the person they would turn to lives more than an hour away.

One of the most valuable resources in this community are informal social networks. 82% of those we talked to, 901 people, say they or a member of their household have lent a hand to a friend or neighbor recently. Some of the most common forms of help people provided one another were transportation, non-household labor, housework, lending money or goods, childcare, caring for someone who is sick, or simply kept someone company. Many people describe this help as a regular activity such as taking an elderly neighbor to his medical appointments or doing yard work for an ailing friend. Interestingly, most of this helping (84%) was done for non-family members. Forty-four percent of this aid was for neighbors, 29% was for friends, and 6% was for strangers. While these networks represent an existing strength, we should be aware that population change and increased migration to and from the community could weaken these ties in the future. A breakdown of this network would significantly change the social service needs of the area.

County residents also participate in more formal volunteerism. Twenty-eight percent say that someone in their household performs regular volunteer work. Most people perform volunteer work through a religious group, a school that they or their children attend, or through a local agency such as the Red Cross or Caring Communities for AIDS. When asked why they participate, most say that they simply want to help the community, that it makes them feel good, or that they want to set an example for their children.

Volunteerism is most common among those between the ages 35 and 54. This corresponds with high rates of volunteerism within households that have school-aged children. Volunteerism is also more common among those with higher incomes. This is logical given that higher income jobs tend to provide more flexible work hours which would also facilitate volunteerism.

This spirit of helping and community cohesion is reflected in the responses we received to the question, “What do you see as the three greatest strengths of this community?” The overwhelming majority of respondents list the people who live here as one of the county's greatest strengths. Respondents describe the members of this community as friendly, hard-working, honest, helpful, kind, and neighborly. The other strengths most often listed include the natural beauty of our region, low crime rates, good educational opportunities, and the large number of community events and services available.



United Way



## COLUMBIA COUNTY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The Columbia County Needs Assessment is a service learning partnership between the Central Susquehanna Foundation, Bloomsburg University, Bucknell University, and the Columbia County Human Resources Network.

The Central Susquehanna Foundation supports human services in the Berwick area and in Columbia County generally. The Foundation has a special commitment to forming partnerships with local universities. It seeks to give students direct experience with organizations and citizens in the five county area it serves. It also works with faculty to support their research and to make the expertise that resides in local institutions of higher education available to the community.

Bloomsburg University embraces service learning both in voluntary student activities and in teaching and learning programs in a variety of disciplines. The University's SOLVE Office of Community Service and Employment promotes part-time jobs, public service employment, volunteerism, service learning, and tutoring/mentoring opportunities. The American Democracy Project encourages students to become more actively involved in the civic lives of their communities. The Center for Social and Health Research seeks to use service learning as a way of supporting local communities and organizations as well as to provide opportunities for professional training and research.

Bucknell University in its new Plan for Bucknell recognizes building bridges to local communities as a major priority. Vice President Charles Pollock has primary responsibility for moving this initiative forward. However, the Bucknell Service Learning Program and the classes and research activities of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology are important ways this initiative is being carried out.

The Columbia County Human Services Coalition represents professional social service providers in the County as well as the United Way. The Coalition meets regularly to provide education, to engage in strategic planning, and to undertake projects that will benefit the County. The Coalition has taken the lead in initiating and coordinating this project.