

## **IX. Health and Human Services**

### **A. Overview**

Recognizing that health and human services are integral to the purpose of having a community plan, that is, to have a better community, the Belchertown Community Plan Steering Committee chose to include a section on these issues. This section of the community plan has been developed to summarize and address the current health needs of town residents. Some of the major public health and medical care issues faced by residents are outlined in this section, as are community demographics, health needs, existing health and human services in town, and projected needs for the future including facilities, services, and personnel. Recommendations for additional study and steps to address needs are provided at the end of the section.

Statistical data about the health of Belchertown residents were gathered from numerous sources, including the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Quabbin Health District (of which Belchertown is a member), the Belchertown Public Schools, the Belchertown Senior Center and Council on Aging, MASS CHIP- a statewide online computer database of vital statistics, and interviews with key community leaders and local providers of health and human services.

Belchertown has a fair distribution of residents across age groups; there are significantly large populations of elderly, school-age youth, and young adults in town, each with their unique health concerns. As of the 2000 US census, Belchertown had 13,017 residents. Of these residents, the following age breakdown was reported:

- the town median age was 36.3 years
- 72% of residents were over the age of 18
- 6.8% were under the age of 5
- 10.3% were over the age of 62
- 14.4% were between the ages of 10 and 19

The 2006 census estimate for Belchertown's total population was 14,103. Further analyses are not available.

Access to health care in the region, the costs of health care, and the type and range of services available directly in town are major issues. The large area of the town challenges residents who do not drive or have access to a car. The area's network of health care providers is fragmented; many residents go to neighboring towns for health care. The community's challenge is to address the health needs of residents in a coordinated, cost-efficient, and accessible manner in accordance with local, state, and federal regulations.

### **B. Goals and Policies**

#### **Goal:**

The overall goals of the health and human services system are to protect and improve the health and well-being of all Belchertown residents by supporting and coordinating a comprehensive range of high-quality services that are accessible to all.

**Policies:**

- The town should provide adequate resources (funding and personnel) to the current town departments charged with delivering public health services and assuring compliance with local, state and federal regulations on health issues, including the School Department, Board of Health, Recreation Department, Public Works, Water District, Police Department, Fire Department and Emergency Medical Services.
- The town should work with appropriate town and local agencies to identify and monitor the changing health needs of residents and to plan for meeting those needs.
- The town should identify areas of need for particular populations including the elderly, school-age youth, teens, young adults, and families with pre-school children.
- The town should identify and coordinate social, recreational and health education services to enhance health and well-being for all residents.

**C. Inventory****Health Indicators**

In order to assess the health status of a community, public health professionals look at a number of types of individual and community-wide data including:

- death rates
- birth rates
- major causes of death
- major reasons for hospitalization
- rates of reportable diseases
- prevalence of risk factors for health problems such as tobacco use, alcohol and drug use, poor nutrition, exposure to potential health hazards in the workplace and community
- access to health care services for acute and chronic health conditions

The environmental quality of a community must also be evaluated for potential health hazards and risks such as poor quality drinking water, contaminated soils, poor air quality with extensive chemical and particulate matter pollution, and overcrowded and potentially uninhabitable housing stock. The percentage of community members with adequate health insurance, poverty rates, and the availability of medical care services are also used to evaluate the overall health of a community. Comparing an individual community to surrounding communities and the region as a whole can provide additional information about that community's health. When a community has rates of a particular disease or condition that are higher or lower than a regional average, further exploration of the contributing factors is warranted.

The following highlights some of the major health issues facing Belchertown. Data were obtained from the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the state laboratory, and the Quabbin Health District.

### **Death Rates and Major Causes of Death**

In 2007, Belchertown had 94 recorded deaths. The major causes of death include in order of magnitude are:

1. Heart disease
2. Cancer
3. Diabetes
4. Chronic Lower Respiratory Disease (CLRD)

For each of the above specific causes of death, Belchertown death rates were higher than the state average.

### **Birth Rates and Access to Pre-natal Care**

In 2000, Belchertown recorded 171 births. Over 80% of mothers had access to adequate pre-natal care. Less than 10% of smoked during their pregnancy, and over 85% had private health insurance to cover the costs of pre-natal and post-partum care.

### **Major Causes of Hospitalization**

From 1997-2000, when Belchertown residents have needed to be admitted overnight at the hospital, over one-third of them went to Baystate Medical Center in Springfield. Two other community hospitals, Cooley-Dickinson and Mary Lane Hospital had about 18% of the Belchertown hospital discharges. More women (59.7%) than men (40.3%) from Belchertown needed overnight stays in local hospitals during that same period.

The major health issues necessitating hospitalization included: circulatory system disease (16.1%), childbirth (15.8%), and respiratory system diseases (7.8%). These figures mirror that of statewide data in terms of the reason for hospitalization.

When Belchertown residents have needed to be examined or observed at a hospital but not be admitted overnight, over one-third of town residents went to Mary Lane Hospital in Ware. These outpatient observation stays in local hospitals are documented by the state Health Department differently from in-patient admissions or discharges from hospitals and may reflect that fact that Mary Lane is geographically closer and more convenient for town residents.

### **Special Populations**

#### **Youth**

Health risks among youth and teens can provide insight into the quality of life in a town. Health promotion and prevention of risky behaviors among youth are a high public health priority. Prevention efforts can save lives, reduce long-term health care needs, reduce health-care costs, establish positive health habits at an early age, and greatly improve the overall quality of life for youth. The following are some of the health issues currently facing Belchertown youth:

#### Alcohol and Drug Use

35% of Belchertown youth drank alcohol in the last thirty days.  
61% attended a party where other kids their age had been drinking.

9% drove after drinking once or more in the past twelve months.  
23% have used marijuana ten or more times in their lifetime.  
25% of 11<sup>th</sup> graders reported smoking cigarettes once or more in the last thirty days.

#### Unintentional and Intentional Injuries

8% of Belchertown youth reported carrying a weapon in the last twelve months.  
30% hit someone once or more in last twelve months.  
15% attempted suicide one or more times.

#### Sexual Behaviors

19% of Belchertown youth reported having had sexual intercourse three or more times.  
68% report using protection every time they have intercourse.

#### **Elderly**

Given its physical beauty, close community ties, and ample social and recreational opportunities, Belchertown is an attractive residential community for aging adults with grown children, retirees, and seniors. As the “baby boomer” generation continues to age, most communities in western Massachusetts face significant decisions about the quantity and quality of town services, housing and support needs, and public safety resources for the elderly. The following are some of the major public health issues and concerns for the older population:

- Access to quality health care in town including pharmacy, general and specialty physicians, vision care, free screenings for common conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, etc.
- Expansion of insurance coverage, i.e., Medicare, for prescription medications.
- Social/recreational opportunities within reasonable travel distance.
- Adequate police, fire and emergency personnel to respond to health care emergencies.
- Affordable housing and accessible services for the disabled.
- Nutritional support via meals on wheels, senior center, food shopping near residential areas.
- Mental health care.
- Assisted living and other supportive housing options for elders.

#### **Young Families**

As the community has grown, the number of families with young children has increased as well. There are special health needs and concerns for this population. They include:

- Availability of affordable, licensed child care services.
- Access to affordable social/recreational opportunities for adults and children.
- Availability of medical providers specializing in children’s health care.
- Emergency services for childhood illnesses, unintentional injuries and accidents; 24-hour access to pharmacies, physicians.
- Safety of recreational areas including parks, playgrounds and child care facilities.
- Early intervention services for at-risk or special needs children.
- Peer support services and mental health care providers for child abuse prevention.
- Stress management and support services for young parents.

## **Other Health Issues**

Based on interviews with key community leaders and town health and safety employees, the following were identified as additional significant health issues or needs within the community:

- **Domestic violence**; most calls handled by town police include domestic violence.
- **Environmental protection of water supplies, groundwater and wetland areas**; the staff and members of the Board of Health in Belchertown spend over 75% of their time on compliance with Title V regulations to ensure adequate on-site sewage disposal systems (septic) and to protect the safety of the groundwater.
- **Increased vehicular traffic** with safety concerns for drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians, especially children.
- **Mental health issues for youth**; school department personnel feel the town needs more resources for guidance and counseling of youth.
- **Assistance for parents**; topics such as safety, violence prevention, drug use prevention, puberty, and teen dating violence are issues about which parents could benefit from additional assistance, information and support.
- **Healthy activities for youth** that are not exclusively sports-based.
- **Support for youth experiencing domestic violence in the home**
- **Emergency response services such as ambulance, emergency medical technicians and transport to local hospitals**; with increased populations and the subsequent increase in medical emergencies, these services are needed at increasing levels.

## **Community Resources**

### **Quabbin Health District**

The Quabbin Health District is a regional health department serving Belchertown, Ware, and Pelham. It was established by town meeting vote in 1980 and is the joint effort of the local boards of health to provide their towns with public health professionals and services. The primary duties of the district center on enforcing provisions of the State Sanitary Code and Environmental Code under the jurisdiction of the Board of Health. It also provides technical assistance and educational services to residents and other municipal departments. The Quabbin Health District serves approximately 25,000 residents in an area of about 120 square miles. The following are some of the major services provided by staff of the district:

- Percolation tests and soil evaluations.
- Septic system application review for new construction and repairs.
- Septic system installation inspections.
- Well application review for new construction and repairs.
- Food service inspections.
- Temporary food service permits (annual Belchertown Fair).
- Housing inspections.

The district supports professional staff. Because the staff serves three communities, Belchertown has the equivalent of a part-time Health Director, Health Inspector, and Senior Clerk. The Belchertown Board of Health office in town hall is open three days per week for a total of 15 hours.

### **Belchertown Board of Health**

State statutes and regulations largely determine the Board of Health's responsibilities. The board is also empowered to establish local regulations necessary to protect the health and well-being of the community. The board's primary duties relate to the protection of public health, control of disease, preservation of a wholesome and safe food supply, promotion of sanitary living conditions, and the protection of the environment from damage and pollution. The board consists of five members who are elected for three-year (overlapping) terms and meets monthly.

### **Emergency Services Personnel (Police, Fire, EMS)**

#### **Ambulance/Emergency Medical Services**

Belchertown has access to high-quality emergency ambulance services through the Emergency Medical Services Association. It is dispatched via 911 calls and through the police department. It is staffed by full-time and part-time EMTs at all times. Given the increases in population and the varied needs of young families, the elderly and adults, the emergency services respond to a wide variety of calls with complex medical needs.

#### **Police**

The Belchertown Police Department has adopted a community policing partnership with the community. In addition to traditional police services, such as investigative and reactive patrols, the department works with residents to collectively solve problems via neighborhood planning and strategy meetings. The department issues all firearm licenses. Applications are available at the police station and are considered after a complete records check. The department completes photo processing and fingerprinting by appointment. The EMS is a call service dispatched by the Belchertown Police Department communications center. The Police Department is equipped with the latest E-911 emergency telephone technology. In summer of 2008, the police hired their first dog for a canine unit.

#### **Fire**

The Belchertown Fire Department is a call volunteer department which consists of 1 full time fire chief, 1 full time fire inspector and 38 volunteer firefighters plus 10 auxiliary firefighters. The fire station is at 10 North Main Street. A new engine was bought in 2008.

### **Recreation Department**

The Recreation Department offers recreational activities for children and adults. Programs include: youth baseball, softball, soccer and basketball, baton twirling, yoga, and tai chi. Summer programs include: tennis lessons, golf lessons, summer days, baseball clinic, basketball clinic, soccer clinic, softball clinic, nature hikes, and art programs.

The Recreation Department schedules swimming lessons, aquanastics, senior exercise, toddler program for adults and children, Stingrays swim team, scuba lessons, lap swim, family and open swim at the pool located at Chestnut Hill Community School on Route 202. The Recreation Department supervises and staffs the Town Beach from July 1st

through August. Yearly passes for the beach are sold at the Recreation Department office.

### **Senior Center/Council on Aging**

The Council on Aging is a community-based resource for elder citizens of Belchertown, serving the needs of an average 175 elders each day. The Senior Center, located just off Route 202 at the William Gerald Whitlock Municipal Complex, is home to a variety of programs and services. These programs and services include:

- Accessible transportation services both in and out of town, Monday through Friday. Group shopping, transportation to medical appointments, and other activities as possible. Transportation is available for disabled and elder citizens.
- More than 20 different classes, clubs and activities occur each week at the Senior Center -- from Tai Chi to knitting, oil painting to quilting, walking club to bridge club, cribbage and crafts, computer classes, and many more.
- Information and referral services, travel services, health promotion, tax preparation assistance, entitlement program applications, and assistance with insurance-related benefits are available. Other benefits include equipment loans, a monthly newsletter, and volunteer opportunities exist.
- Located at the Senior Center, the nutritional program provides nearly 55,000 meals a year. Congregate meals are served in the dining room Monday through Friday, and home delivered meals are prepared and delivered seven days a week. Cold evening meals are available for those in need as well.

### **Teen Center**

The Belchertown Teen Center opened in September, 1999. The center is used by over fifty teens in 7th through 12th grades. The center is available to all teens in Belchertown. It provides a safe, drug-free environment in which teens can play pool, ping pong, basketball, volleyball, foosball, and air hockey, or watch a movie, work in the gardens, work on the new computers, or get help with their school work.

The Teen Center provides activities for teens who might not otherwise have an opportunity to express themselves creatively. Activities are directed toward learning problem-solving and improving social skills. One goal is to help develop personal and social skills that will give teens an advantage throughout their lives.

The teen center's hours are Wednesday and Thursday from 2:15 ~ 5:00 p.m. and Friday from 2:15 pm with closing hours alternating between the middle school and high school. Each Tuesday, in conjunction with the After School Program, the center offers a variety of activities. Snacks and beverages are available with some days having special themes. During warmer months, cookouts take place on Friday evenings for a small fee.

### **Public Schools**

The School Department plays a major role in the health of its students. The Belchertown Schools have a comprehensive health education program in place with a full-time Health Coordinator and numerous programs at the various grade levels. The health education

curriculum, activities and services are designed to address student health issues, educate students and parents about health risks, and deliver health promotion and prevention programs to enhance student well-being and development. The following are some of the programs offered within the schools:

#### High School

- Sports
- Health-related clubs such as SAVE: Students Against Violence through Education; SADD: Students Against Destructive Decisions; Humanities Club; Student Council; Diversity Club (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender issues)
- Support Groups based on need
- Courses including 1 semester of wellness required in 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grades; 1 term of Physical Education in junior or senior year; 1 term of Critical Health Issues

#### Middle School

- Hepatitis B clinics
- Intramural Sports
- Diversity Club
- PATH: Peers Against the Hate
- Courses: 1 quarter of health required each year; 2 quarters of PE required each year; some home economics available

#### Elementary

- Educational support groups
- Peer mediation (under development as of this writing)
- 1 weekly PE class
- No current requirements for health education courses/classes
- Second Step (violence prevention)
- Personal safety lessons

#### **Health Care Providers**

Although Belchertown does not currently have a community hospital from which residents can obtain in-patient or surgical care, there are hospital-affiliated health care providers within town boundaries to meet medical needs. Hospitals are in nearby communities, including Wing Memorial Hospital in Palmer, Mary Lane Hospital in Ware, Holyoke Hospital in Holyoke, Cooley-Dickinson Hospital in Northampton, and several hospitals in Springfield. Based on data from MDPH, town residents use these three hospitals regularly. Residents also have the option to travel farther to obtain specialty or hospital-based care in Springfield, Greenfield, and Worcester.

For out-patient medical care, there are group physician practices located within town.

They include:

#### Belchertown Wellness Center

An affiliate of Baystate Medical Center in Springfield, the Belchertown Wellness Center is a group of physicians specializing in family practice and pediatrics. A licensed

acupuncturist and a massage therapist share space at this location. The center is located at 95 Sargent Street. The staff includes general practice physicians and specialty consultants in obstetrics, gynecology, urology, surgery, and family counseling.

#### Wing Medical Center

An affiliate of Wing Memorial Hospital, part of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, the Wing Medical Center provides area residents with primary health care, pediatric care, and specialty medical services such as podiatry. The medical center accepts most health insurance plans. It is located at 20 Daniel Shays Highway.

#### Dr. Yih-Ming Hsiao

In addition to the group physician practices described, Belchertown has an individual practice in family medicine and pediatrics lead by Dr. Yih-Ming Hsiao. Dr. Hsiao also serves as an ongoing advisor to the Board of Health.

#### Chiropractors

There are several chiropractors' offices in town. Two are near the Amherst line, the others are around the town center.

#### Dentists

There are two dental practices available in town, all geographically close to the center of town or major business areas.

#### Vision Care

There are two optometrists and vision care providers located in town near shopping areas.

#### Psychotherapists

There is one psychotherapy practice in town.

#### Massage Therapists

There are three licensed massage therapists in town.

#### Additional Health Services

Sponsored by various agencies and local providers, the following services are also regularly available to town residents:

- Smoking cessation classes and support; classes are held periodically.
- Domestic violence support group for women; held twice per month.
- Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings at local churches.

#### **Family Center**

In 1998, a group of parents and other community members began discussing needs of the young children of Belchertown. This resulted in the family center. The family center quickly involved 75 families. The family center is open once per week offering educational and fun events. In the summer of 2001, the center moved into the Franklin School on Franklin Street in Bondsville. The center is run by parents and volunteers. It welcomes any family in Belchertown and the surrounding towns to join.

## D. Implementation Actions

Based on analysis of data, interviews with key community leaders, and assessment of the health and human service priorities of the town, the following chart outlines the action steps proposed as part of a community-wide plan for the future of Belchertown.

I.D.	Action	When Initiate	*Leadership [and others who should be involved]
HHS-1	Evaluate readiness and capacity to respond to biohazard emergencies, disease outbreaks and other serious threats to public health and safety		*Board of Health, [BoS, Police, Fire, EMS, health care providers]
HHS-2	Assess availability of acute/urgent health care services within the town; assess current level of emergency services available		*Board of Health, [COA, health care providers, EMS, police, fire, schools]
HHS-3	Increase funding resources for Board of Health and Quabbin Health District to meet increasing demands for retail food inspections, Title V compliance and enforcement of existing state and local regulations in tobacco control, water quality, and environmental health		*Board of Health [BoS]
HHS-4	Establish a permanent, full-time position of a Community Health Educator to work under the Board of Health in collaboration with schools, COA, teen center, and other town departments to coordinate town-wide health promotion activities and planning		*Board of Health [BoS]
HHS-5	Assess current transportation resources for residents to access health care and develop plan to improve access		*Board of Health [COA, PVTA, health care providers, schools]
HHS-6	Evaluate current availability of child care, recreational and health services for pre-school children and identify gaps in services		* Board of Health [local day care providers, pre-schools, nursery schools, parent and family organizations]
HHS-7	Expand resources for effective, science-based alcohol, tobacco and drug abuse prevention programs for school-age children and young adults; establish permanent position of Drug Abuse Prevention Coordinator within schools		*School Department [Board of Health, state DPH and DOE]
HHS-8	Expand health education services in schools; increase staffing levels for High School level health instruction and provide trained health education staff for all grade levels		*School Department [Parents groups, state DPH and DOE]
HHS-9	Evaluate service needs for domestic violence prevention and intervention		*Board of Health [Police Department, local advocacy groups, clergy]
HHS-10	Assess mental health services availability and utilization for teens, families and seniors; develop plan to better coordinate and deliver services		*Board of Health [School Dept., local mental health providers, clergy, Police Depart.]
HHS-11	Evaluate service needs for seniors to identify gaps in health care access and underutilization of existing services		*Board of Health [COA, health care providers]