

Community Health Improvement Plan: Access to Care

Core Priorities Brief
September 2025

OVERVIEW

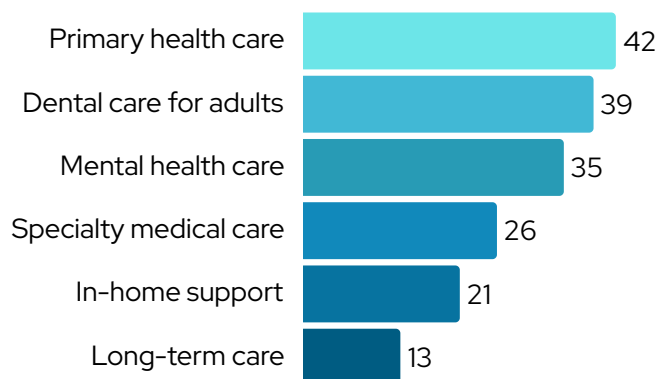
The Public Health Council of the Upper Valley, using Dartmouth Health's 2025 Community Health Needs Assessment, has identified priorities for the upcoming Community Health Improvement Plan. We hope these priorities may be incorporated into our partners' work in serving, educating, and advocating for communities across the Upper Valley.

Now more than ever, access to care in the Upper Valley is under threat. Residents of the Upper Valley struggle to meet their needs due to the shortage of providers accepting new patients, long wait times, rising costs, and difficulty navigating the healthcare system. Shortages of healthcare professionals, increasing demand from an aging population, and elimination of Medicaid expansion are all challenges faced by our care providers and communities.

Dental care for adults was identified as a particularly challenging area, second only to primary care. Additional areas of concern and focus are mental health care and specialty medical care, which pose access challenges for approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ and a $\frac{1}{4}$ of resident survey respondents respectively.

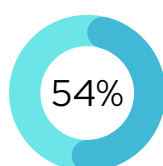
“Our region has a huge need for more mental health care practitioners, both clinical psychiatrists and psychologists. And often, patients who reach out to mental health providers have difficulty navigating the system or finding the type of care that is most advantageous to them.”
- Community Leader, Advocacy

Percentage of community residents indicating they or someone close to them has had trouble getting the following types of care:



FACTS AND FIGURES

- 57% of community resident respondents stated that the cost of health care and health insurance has gotten worse over the past few years.
- Of community residents reporting difficulties accessing primary health care, 75% selected "Not accepting new patients" as a barrier and 68% selected "Wait time too long."
- 11% of those indicating difficulties accessing adult dental care, and 20% of those indicating difficulties accessing mental health care selected "Did not know where to go" as a reason.



Percent of community residents reporting that the ability of people to get primary healthcare services has gotten worse over the last few years

“

“(Need) Significant increase in affordable housing. It impacts everyone, including the ability of health care professionals to live and work here, and the ability of people in our community to be safe and comfortable, and to have resources available for other needs such as nourishing food and health care costs.” – Community Leader, Civic sector

CURRENT STRENGTHS

- Primary care offices are now seen as more widely advertising openings for new patients.
- Rates of ED visits for non-traumatic dental conditions have fallen in recent years.
- Community-based initiatives, such as mobile clinics and outreach by community nurses, have shown positive outcomes by meeting individuals where they are.
- Expansion of telehealth was noted as a net positive change in access to health care and counseling services through increased flexibility in connecting with patients.

SOME OPPORTUNITIES

- Integrate mobile social workers, community nurses, community health workers, and local non-profits to help families and isolated individuals work through the healthcare system
- Advocate for affordable housing as necessary for recruiting more health and human services professionals to the Upper Valley.
- Encourage telehealth as an option for care, especially for rural populations—consider designating community spaces, such as in libraries, for virtual consults
- Continue to foster a sense of community through events and group activities that are welcoming and provide a social support network for isolated and marginalized individuals

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Access to healthcare is dependent on many factors affecting the lives of community members, including transportation, level of educational attainment, family support, and financial status. Availability of health and human services providers is also affected by the current housing crisis and high cost of living in the Upper Valley.

REFERENCES

Dartmouth Hitchcock Medical Center, Alice Peck Day Memorial Hospital, and Visiting Nurse and Hospice for Vermont and New Hampshire. (2025). Community Health Needs Assessment: Fiscal Year 2025. <https://www.dartmouth-hitchcock.org/about/community-health>