

Connecticut Office of Rural Health

2021 Annual Report

Year in Review

This report highlights the funded initiatives and major activities of the CT Office of Rural Health (CT-ORH).

For more detailed information, please contact the CT-ORH.



2021 Community Star, Susan Starkey, MPH, MS, RD

On **National Rural Health Day**, November 18, 2021, the National Organization of State Offices of Rural Health (NOSORH) announced that Susan Starkey, Director of Health at the Northeast District Department of Health (NDDH), located in Brooklyn, CT, was chosen as Connecticut's *Community Star*. She was also recognized for this honor by the New England Rural Health Association at their annual conference in Newry, Maine.

Ms. Starkey was nominated for her role in improving rural population health through innovation, education, collaboration and communication. She is actively involved in public health policy at the state level and has contributed to the Department of Public Health 2019-2023 Strategic Plan, the CT Oral Health Improvement Plan, and the 2025 State Health Improvement Plan. She is a member of the National Association of County and City Health Officials' (NACCHO) Public Health Informatics Workgroup and teaches Health Informatics at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU) in the Business Information Systems program.



In her role at NDDH, Ms. Starkey supports innovation, consistently seeking new ways to improve population health in the “Quiet Corner.” NDDH is dedicated to preventing illness, promoting wellness and protecting public health, and serves the 12 communities of Brooklyn, Canterbury, Eastford, Hampton, Killingly, Plainfield, Pomfret, Putnam, Sterling, Thompson, Union and Woodstock.

As Connecticut’s representative of this national program, Ms. Starkey’s story is included in a NOSORH publication and available to read on its web portal: [The Power of Rural](#). The CT-ORH congratulates Ms. Starkey on this well-deserved award.

ACTIVITIES

Learning from COVID Study

The CT-ORH collaborated with the **Foundation for Community Health** and the **Northwest Coalition of Agencies Related to Elder Services (NW CARES)**, to support an analysis of the early response to COVID-19 in northwestern Connecticut, focusing on strengths and opportunities for improvement on a local and regional level. The resulting study, [Learning from COVID](#), and an [Executive Summary](#) were completed in 2021.

The **Torrington Area Health District (TAHD)** provides services to nineteen towns in the northwest corner and serves as the Region Five Fiduciary and Cities Readiness Lead for the Public Health Emergency Preparedness grant. TAHD aligned the recommendations from the *Learning from COVID* study with the public health emergency preparedness capabilities. The Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security (DEMHS) and Emergency Support Function #8 Public Health and Medical Services (ESF#8) Committee incorporated a number of these recommendations into the most recent Public Health Emergency Response Plan revision, including building community relationships and coordinating educational and training opportunities with organizations representing vulnerable and at-risk populations.

Transportation

The CT-ORH supported a new initiative from **Geer Village Senior Community**, located in Canaan, CT, which provides a broad range of services to the aging community and is the local Dial-A-Ride provider. In 2021, it began the development of an on-demand transportation program, *GoGeer*, the first of its kind in northwestern CT, to assist vulnerable individuals with accessing critical transportation for unscheduled ride requests for medical and basic needs.



VAMS Scheduling Assistance

Additionally, the office provided support to the **Northeast District Department of Health (NDDH)** in its work providing guidance to area employers, health care providers and social service agencies on the COVID-19 vaccine registration process during the initial stages of the vaccine rollout. To ensure there would be people ready, willing, and able to be vaccinated once the vaccine rollout began, NDDH provided training to approximately 250 individuals on vaccinating based on priority group, the national IT system, the ethical underpinnings of the

vaccinations strategy, and how to implement and use the Vaccine Administration Management System (VAMS) in a work setting.

NDDH also collaborated with Eastern Connecticut State University students on an innovative, simple-to-use website to share vaccine scheduling information widely and assist with vaccine registration, and encouraged students to help their parents and grandparents with scheduling their vaccines.

Workforce

Connecticut's three rural community colleges -- **Northwestern CT Community College** in Winsted, **Quinebaug Valley Community College** in Danielson, and **Three Rivers Community College in Norwich** – all provide critical health care workforce training to their communities. In 2021, the CT-ORH helped to support the marketing of these colleges' health care career training programs to prospective students, with the goal of promoting enrollment and increasing health care workforce in the surrounding areas. The three colleges leveraged social media campaigns, printed mailers, stadium billboard advertising and radio to promote their respective programs.



In addition, the CT-ORH continued its support of the **3RNet** health care provider recruitment tool and subscription, in collaboration with the **Community Health Center Association of Connecticut (CHCACT)**, the association for 16 Federally Qualified Health Centers (FQHC) across the state. CHCACT administers 3RNet to help recruit and retain health care professionals who are dedicated to serving rural and underserved communities.

Data

Throughout 2021 and 2022, the CT-ORH will be in the process of updating the Connecticut Rural Health Needs Assessment. **DataHaven**, the New Haven-based non-profit, will assist with the update of the assessment throughout 2021 and 2022, utilizing 2020 ACS data, the latest-available town level demographic data.

DataHaven also conducted the [2021 Community Well-Being Survey](#) on quality of life and COVID-19 recovery indicators, utilizing in-depth telephone interviews, and producing a wealth of town level data. In collaboration with partners Charlotte Hungerford Hospital and the Northwest Connecticut Community Foundation, the CT-ORH supported an effort to increase the sampling size specific to Litchfield County, resulting in more robust survey results and information about adults living in the area.

Special Thanks

A special thanks and congratulations to **John Brannelly, Jr.**, who completed an internship at CT-ORH as an MPH candidate at Southern CT State University, and has since graduated with his master's degree.

The CT-ORH also owes many thanks to its Advisory Board members, who provide the office with guidance and direction:

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