



Lancaster County Progress

A YEAR IN REVIEW A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

A PUBLICATION OF
LNP | LancasterOnline

MARCH 7, 2021

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This 2021 edition of *Progress* offers a snapshot of life in Lancaster County in the time of COVID-19. We look at the impact the pandemic has had on how we work and how some do business; how and where we choose to live; how we maintain our health and wellness; and how the challenges of the past year have affected local students. We also introduce you to some people who are making an impact in our community.

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In our words

Issues to watch in 2021

Last year in this space we predicted that the big story of 2020 would be the presidential election, but we only were half-right.

The election ended up sharing the nation's focus with the COVID-19 pandemic. Former President Donald Trump has been replaced in the White House by President Joe Biden, but the pandemic remains.

We expect it to dominate this year, too, at least until enough Americans have been vaccinated to establish community immunity — or herd immunity — against the novel coronavirus.

LNP | LancasterOnline Opinion staff fully expects to continue receiving letters to the editor from Lancaster County residents on vaccination, as the rollout of the first two COVID-19 vaccines has proven to be rocky.

“County leaders and hospital officials are working to finalize a plan for a mass vaccination site that would operate for nearly four months, from early March through June, administering coronavirus vaccine to as many as 5,000 people per day,” LNP | LancasterOnline's Carter Walker reported Feb. 6. This effort would be funded with federal pandemic relief money and “possibly other federal and state sources,” Walker reported.

This was good news, but the LNP | LancasterOnline Editorial Board believed the planning for such a site should have happened well before January and February.

The editorial board has argued repeatedly for the establishment of a county public health department. The absence of such an agency — to coordinate public health messaging and data, to bring together local health systems to plan the pandemic response — was glaring in 2020. We expect it to continue to be a subject of editorials and community debate in 2021.

As will, of course, COVID-19, especially as new variants of the novel coronavirus surface in the U.S.

The work of hospital employees — including nurses, doctors, respiratory therapists and custodians — has been nothing short of heroic. We will continue to amplify the sacrifices they have made on behalf of all of us. Likewise, the employees of long-term care facilities, where COVID-19 has struck particularly hard.

One pandemic-related issue that caught us by surprise was the unhelpful cultural and political war over mask-wearing.

President Biden has urged Americans to treat masks not as political weapons but as highly effective public health tools that can help us limit the spread of COVID-19.

As medical experts say we'll likely continue to need to wear masks through much of the year, LNP | LancasterOnline Opinion will continue to cover mask-wearing and other health measures. And we'll continue to make the case for science and fact over the scourges of rumor and junk science.

Economy

Lancaster County small businesses, especially restaurants, have been hard-hit by the pandemic. State mitigation measures to curb the spread of the novel coronavirus have meant full and partial business closures, stress for small business owners and layoffs for employees.

How the economy recovers as vaccinations increase — and, hopefully, a return to some semblance of normal life nears — will be a major topic of interest.

Education

The big story in education last year — and this year — is the pandemic's impact on the schooling of Lancaster County children.

Because of the novel coronavirus, county schools have had to shift from in-person learning to online instruction for varying periods of time. This proved to be especially tough on students with learning challenges and parents who had to juggle employment responsibilities with overseeing their children's online learning.

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention scientists published an article in late January in JAMA, the journal of the American Medical Association, “that showed some schools were able to reopen safely by following safety precautions,” NPR reported. But some teachers' organizations, NPR noted, “have pushed back against plans to restart in-person learning, arguing that teachers should be vaccinated first and that other safety measures must be in place.”

This debate will continue to be waged in Lancaster County, which has lost two school employees to COVID-19: Alexandra Chitwood, a Manheim Township Middle School counselor who died in November, and Candice Highfield, a social worker and a home and school visitor in the Hempfield School District, who died in January.

We will watch with keen interest how the state and federal governments allocate funding to help schools operate safely in the pandemic. Among the needs: money to improve school ventilation systems.

Politics

Democratic Lt. Gov. John Fetterman is attracting national interest as he seeks to run for the U.S. Senate seat being vacated by Republican Sen. Pat Toomey. That will be a fascinating — and key — race, no matter which candidates end up vying for the seat.

We wrote this last year, and it remains true: “For seniors who want

to age in place, a major obstacle remains: ever-rising school property taxes. The LNP | LancasterOnline Editorial Board keeps imploring the Pennsylvania General Assembly to ease the real estate tax burden on senior citizens on fixed incomes, but so far, our pleas have been to no avail.”

Unfortunately, there are no signs that the state Legislature is going to tackle the issue in a serious way anytime soon.

Lancaster County Republicans — particularly House Speaker Bryan Cutler, of Peach Bottom — hold considerable sway in Harrisburg, but we've yet to see the Legislature adopt this county's work ethic.

As the nonpartisan newsroom Spotlight PA reported, the nation's largest full-time Legislature emerged from 2020 “having failed to address some of the public's most pressing needs, and marred by some in the majority party who sought to undercut the election results, spread misinformation, and fuel hyper-partisan fights.”

Spotlight PA noted: “Only 27 of the 140 bills passed by the legislature and signed by (Gov. Tom) Wolf in 2020 directly addressed problems brought on by the pandemic.” (Spotlight PA is powered by The Philadelphia Inquirer; its partners include LNP Media Group.)

As for the aforementioned misinformation and efforts to subvert the 2020 presidential election? LNP | LancasterOnline Opinion will continue to press for the truth, voting rights and an adherence to democracy and the facts.

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ECONOMY



BUSINESSES ADAPT OFFICE SPACES TO COVID-19

REBECCA LOGAN
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Remember the office?

It's that place you used to go. Not just once a week or so when there's a task that absolutely must be tackled from there. But every weekday. Along with all of your coworkers. You know, those people with whom you once squeezed — en masse and unmasked — into stuffy little conference rooms?

For a large chunk of the workforce — with a year of telework now under their belts — the image of that before-time office is starting to look a little bit fuzzy. And that's leaving many people (from workers, to bosses, to architects, to landlords, to real estate agents) trying to figure out just what the workplace will look like post pandemic.

"There's going to be a profound, long-term impact on the office market," says Christine Sable, owner and broker at Sable Commercial Realty in Lancaster. "We just don't know yet exactly what that will be."

About 80% of Sable's business is office related. A pivot may be on her horizon, though she notes that flex space — which includes a work floor component — is still a hot commodity. As for the pure desk job world? It's going to be interesting to see what shakes out in a Lancaster County office landscape that Sable says had just started to heat up in the couple years prior to COVID-19.

"There was very little new inventory added to the market for 10 or 15 years," she says.

That changed.

"Around 2018 the office market was really starting to cook again," she says. "Vacancy rates were pretty low."

January 2020 actually looked great, she says. Then came the brakes. And there's no way the impact of teleworking won't have an effect on letting those up, Sable says.



VINNY TENNIS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Employees meet in the conference room at TONO Group in Lancaster.

"We've never before had everyone learn all at once how to use Zoom and GoToMeeting," she says. "And now people are used to it."

If more employees are given the permanent option to telework at least part time — and take their bosses up on that — companies may downsize their footprints.

"Yes, some may take more space so they aren't packed on top of each other," Sable says. "But a lot of them aren't going to. They are going to be hesitant to make any investment knowing what happened this time. They may have been looking at more space. But now they're nervous and saying they can live with what they've got."

Sable says she also doesn't envy many small or medium building owners throwing tons of money into their spaces to accommodate pandemic concerns. They're not going to be able to afford it, she says.

"You might have a company that is in the middle of their 10-year lease — maybe a national-type tenant, like say an insurance company — that might say, 'We demand that you do something to improve the air qual-

ity,'" Sable says. "They might do it. A smaller tenant isn't going to be able to (demand) that."

Sable herself rents a 1,100-square-foot office and bought a new HEPA (high-efficiency particulate absorbing) system for her space. She says she wouldn't expect her landlord to absorb that cost.

"Now if I were Google or Amazon it might be different," she says.

Workplace trends

Office owners with the cash to keep buildings well-maintained have more of an edge than ever, Brandywine Realty Trust CEO Jerry Sweeney said during that office real estate giant's last earnings call of 2020.

"What used to be points about HVAC etc. on page 15 of an RFP? They're now Page 1," Sweeney said.

Philadelphia-based Brandywine's portfolio includes more than 24 million square feet of space in and around its home city, plus buildings in Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas. The percentage of people who once worked in that space who end up returning remains to be seen. But Sweeney

said many CEOs are anxious to get their staffs back under one roof.

"There are more and more studies coming out — for both small and large companies — (saying) that continued remote work is having a significant adverse impact on productivity," Sweeney told analysts.

He also said losses that landlords see from any shift toward telework may be somewhat offset by those who are no longer looking at space-sharing designs aimed at shrinking footprints and saving money.

"I think that trend, which had been slowing anyway, is certainly going to go in the opposite direction for the foreseeable future," Sweeney said.

"We're going through a number of space-planning exercises with some of our existing tenants and Topic 1 on their mind is how they create more workspace area for each of their employees with greater circulation patterns," Sweeney told analysts. "Whether that's a durable trend or goes away ... we don't really know."

Healthy spaces

Lancaster-based Armstrong World Industries is banking on a long-term pandemic impact. In the fall, Armstrong unveiled a new 24/7 Defend portfolio.

"Healthy spaces is the dominant topic in commercial construction conversations today," Armstrong CEO Vic Grizzle said during a 2020 earnings call. "Ninety-two percent of architects and engineers surveyed said they are having conversations with their clients on how to make their spaces healthier and safer."

The new portfolio includes ceiling panels that self-seal into the ceiling grid and an in-ceiling ultraviolet air purification system produced along with another company. That's the type of technology that Armstrong

Making the Right Connections in Lancaster & Beyond



Making the right connections is key to business success, and Grudi Associates has been helping businesses do just that for nearly three decades. A leading provider of Telecom & IT services to businesses and organizations in central PA and beyond, Grudi Associates was founded in 1992 as a cellular phone and long-distance business. It has grown into a premier provider of Telecom & IT services in Central PA and beyond.

Today, Grudi Associates provides businesses with extensive services, from wireless, hosted phone systems, internet bandwidth and cyber security to outsourced management of PCs, servers, desktops, cloud connections, networks, mobility and more.

"We've come a long way since the early days," says Walt Grudi, CEO of Grudi Associates. "Our incredible team is laser-focused on solving business challenges and helping our customers succeed. Our guiding principle is to make good things happen for other people, and that's what we do every day."

At the core of Grudi Associates is its Managed Solutions, a comprehensive, outsourced set of services that help businesses get the most for their telecom & IT expenditures. It includes Mobility Managed Solutions, covering everything from invoice management to the acquisition, provisioning and support of mobile devices, and Voice, Data & Cloud Managed Solutions, addressing many needs,

from invoice management, inventory management, service procurement and implementation, to help desk, contract management, billing dispute resolutions and more.

"Many businesses lack the bandwidth or expertise to deal with Telecom & IT challenges," says Grudi. "They pay too much, have suboptimal services, lack security and have overwhelmed IT staffs. Managed Solutions addresses all those issues and lets companies focus on their core business needs. Typically, Managed Solutions saves businesses up to 35% on their Telecom & IT expenses."

Grudi stresses that his company is a results-oriented, customer-centric firm, built on growing long-term, high-value relationships. While he lists a wide

array of clients, key industries include banking and financial, healthcare, manufacturing, construction, logistics and retail.

Grudi Associates partners with Lancaster Chamber to offer Grudi Advantage, a Telecom & IT program that benefits Members and the Chamber. Members can receive excellent prices, expert Telecom & IT assistance and generous annual cash-back dividends. Lancaster Chamber also receives a financial benefit. Walt Grudi was named the 2020 Lancaster Chamber Small Businessperson of the Year. In addition, Grudi Associates is an active sponsor of Lancaster Chamber, Associated Builders and Contractors (ABC) and more.



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Office

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used to deploy primarily on projects like emergency rooms.

“This pandemic is serving as a catalyst to renovating commercial spaces to create healthy and safer spaces unlike anything we’ve seen before,” Grizzle told analysts. “And we believe it will continue to evolve for many years to come because healthy spaces are now essential.”

Making adjustments

Plenty of hand sanitizer wall units have been ordered for The Exterior Co.’s new headquarters.

The inside of that building will end up looking different than it was expected to look when the roofing company confirmed in January 2020 that it was embarking on a \$2.7 million

project to convert a historic tobacco warehouse next to Clipper Magazine Stadium.

“Instead of putting all of accounts receivable in this one little section, I’m thinking about spreading them out on different floors,” says Nicole Bair, TEC’s administrative manager. “It’s an opportunity we don’t necessarily have right now.”

The company has been working with half the staff at a time showing up at TEC’s existing Landisville office. Bair and other company leaders say they’re looking forward to having more room to spread out.

More closed-door offices are being considered and furniture lists are being adjusted with COVID-19 lessons in mind. Example: The plan for TEC’s new office originally called for five tables in the break room.

“I took it down to three tables,” Bair says. “In my mind I don’t see everyone hanging out in there now eating lunch.”

At TONO Group’s headquarters, much of the staff used to gather in an enclosed conference room, says Hunter Johnson, CEO of that architecture, design, building and development group. These days there are times when that must still be used for whiteboarding or Zoom meetings, he says. But now it’s occupied by at most a handful of employees at any one time. Everyone wears a mask. And the conference room filtration system — newly installed and always running — is at its highest setting when people are in there.

That’s the type of adjustment many employers are making in their current spaces. They’re making bigger changes in new ones. Johnson says his firm was about to start construction for a national client in Mechanicsville when the pandemic struck.

“We’d gone into it thinking, ‘How do we stuff as much as possible into this building?’” Johnson says. “Then this happened. Now that’s taboo.”

The plan for that client was changed quickly. The layout was switched to a more staggered design. Bathroom features were upgraded to touchless and hardware to antimicrobial. Automatic doors, like the kind you see in big box stores, were added. New furniture was ordered.

Cubicle divider heights for many office projects had dropped to 48 or 42 inches as a norm. They’re now headed back up to 5 feet, Johnson says.

“We were moving into crisp, modern, streamlined and now we’re starting to think about the old-fashioned cubical mentality,” Johnson says.

While that can make aesthetics tricky, he’s more concerned about the potential impact on well-being.

“When you see some of those physical barriers coming back, the restricting of natural daylight and natural views? That’s something we’re going to be struggling with,” he says. “And I wonder about the long-term consequences.”



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COUNTY HOTELS MEET MARKETING CHALLENGE

Attracting guests with cleanliness, technology

DIANE M. BITTING
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

This past year has been a tough one for the hotel industry in Lancaster County and beyond because of the coronavirus pandemic.

But local hotel operators have been adapting to serve those who are traveling, emphasizing cleanliness measures, new technology and unique offerings to entice people to stay at their properties.

And they're hoping that, with the vaccine rollout, the latter part of 2021 will allow people to indulge their desire to hit the road and experience new places or revisit favorite destinations.

Because hotels are considered a life-sustaining industry, they weren't required to shut down during the earlier state lockdown, explains Sunny Desai, who oversees operations at four county hotels: Comfort Suites Amish Country, Comfort Inn Lancaster at Rockvale, Historic Clarion Inn Strasburg and the Holiday Inn Express Suites in Mount Joy.

While occupancy then was low, hotels still served such guests as truck drivers delivering groceries and traveling health care workers, he says.

As more people have begun traveling, cleanliness has been a top concern of guests interested in booking rooms.

"Cleanliness is definitely the No. 1 item that's out there and we are promoting that as well," Desai says.

"We have been getting a lot of phone calls directly to the hotel, just kind of asking, what type of steps we are taking," he adds.

Among those steps are special training for staff, the use of CDC-approved

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Joseph and Madison Hetterly of Brooklyn, New York, work remotely from the Historic Smithton Inn in Ephrata while on a "workcation" with their dog, Bowie.

VINNY TENNIS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Ephrata inn's 'workcations' draw new visitors

DIANE M. BITTING
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Joseph and Madison Hetterly, a 20-something married couple from Brooklyn, New York, have both been working virtually from home during the coronavirus pandemic. He works in theater management and she in film production.

For a change of scenery, "we decided to try to find a place to get some fresh air and to have a place to do some work in a place that's a little more aesthetically beautiful and get some nature," Joseph says.

They did a Google search for bed-and-breakfasts within a drivable radius from their home, looking for something to also accommodate

their recently adopted dog, Bowie. One of the results was the Historic Smithton Inn on Main Street in Ephrata.

The couple chose the Smithton for a two-night respite during a week-long getaway bookended by stays at Airbnbs in Bucks County.

"It had a perfect balance of sort of cozy and quaint but also sort of modern and clean amenities," Joseph says.

And it had great Wi-Fi so they could do Zoom calls and other online work — that is, when they weren't enjoying the "absolutely delicious" food and taking Bowie to Buchanan Park's dog park in Lancaster city.

The Hetterlys were just the type

of guests that Smithton innkeeper Rebecca Gallagher had in mind last year when she obtained a federal pandemic assistance loan and had the 257-year-old building with 18-inch-thick stone walls hardwired for high-speed internet. All seven guest rooms now have smart TVs connected to the internet along with Wi-Fi boosters.

Now there's no buffering, and "everybody in our house can watch Netflix at the same time," says Gallagher, who co-owns the Smithton Inn with her husband, Dave.

Since the new Wi-Fi first fired up last August, "it totally paid off," Gallagher says. "People definitely ap-

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Hotels

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cleaners, a sanitation schedule, including public and high-touch areas, and plexiglass barriers. Employees are required to wear masks as are guests in public areas. Hand sanitizer can be found throughout the hotels and is given to guests.

Desai describes the feedback as “very positive,” with online good reviews. “A lot of our guests are very amazed at how flawless it is when they come into the hotel,” he says.

The hotels are also no longer offering hot breakfast buffets. Instead, guests get prepackaged breakfast items, such as pastries and yogurt, he says. While hotel fitness centers had been closed, now they are opened, with frequent cleanings.

Desai hopes to see an uptick in occupancy this spring, with Sight & Sound Theatres reopening and some local sports tournaments still scheduled.

Turning to tech

Stephen Sikking, managing partner of the Eden Resort Inn and general partner of the Fulton Steamboat Inn, says both properties are relying more on remote check-in technology to help guests feel and stay safe.

While that technology has existed for a while, it is now being used more, according to Sikking. “Now it’s going to be and is already a very important component to your hotel stay,” he says.

Guests can check in using their phones without going to the hotel desk, and a code is provided to open the hotel room door. If they still want keys, those can be delivered. Housekeeping can also be scheduled with no contact.

Interaction with guests now often involves texting, Sikking

notes. Also, takeout is popular at the restaurants at both hotels, with many guests requesting boxed breakfasts.

“Everything can be done really virtually, almost, without being in person ever,” Sikking says. “You pretty much can be on your own here but still get the benefit of all the amenities that the hotel has to offer.”

Those amenities include indoor pools at both properties, plus the Eden has a large outdoor pool. During busier times on weekends, the number of people at the pools are limited, with guests signing up for scheduled times, Sikking says.

Of course, strict cleanliness measures are followed. But even then, Sikking notes, there have been a couple guests who have brought their own linens.

Sikking believes that if the vaccine can start getting the virus under control and people feel safer traveling, that “drive travel” will come back first, and “that bodes well for Lancaster.”

Promoting uniqueness

At the Cartoon Network Hotel, Ryan O’Donnell, director of hotel, makes this observation: “What we’ve seen over the last three to four months is, when some of those travel restrictions are on the minimal side, there’s definitely a demand for families who want to get out of the house who are looking for hotels or for destinations that have amenities.”

O’Donnell says the hotel, located next to Dutch Wonderland, had just opened last January and then was closed from March through mid-July. Upon reopening, the hotel instituted its COVID-19 safety protocols, including additional cleaning procedures and social distancing guidelines, he says. The hotel also does temperature checks on everyone en-

tering the building; face coverings are required.

The hotel is the first and only Cartoon Network Hotel in the world, O’Donnell points out. Therefore, it has a “nice little niche” as an entertainment destination.

With out-of-state travel restrictions and quarantine recommendations, the hotel has focused its promotional efforts more on “major feeder markets” within the state, such as the Philadelphia and Pittsburgh areas, he says.

Among the property’s unique offerings is the Toon Room, featuring such interactive games as the Powerpuff Yourself stations and Summer Camp Island virtual tag wall. Other entertainments are the Omnicade arcade and virtual reality pods. And there’s an indoor pool and hot tub. These areas all have occupancy limits and hand-sanitizing stations, he says.

These amenities were closed during the state’s renewed restrictions over the December holidays, and the hotel’s eateries offered only takeout, but these reopened in January. According to O’Donnell, the hotel’s occupancy rate remains at around 50%; there are 159 rooms.

After reopening last summer, the hotel’s outdoor attractions were in use, O’Donnell says, including an outdoor pool, splash pad, fire pits and movie screen.

O’Donnell says the hotel is starting to see more demand now, due in part to exposure on social media. One young woman’s discovery of the hotel, as she drove through the county, became a viral TikTok video that got more than 11 million views, he shares.

O’Donnell’s hope is that, by June or July, there will be fewer restrictions, and “we can get back closer to what a normal year would look like.”

Ephrata

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preciate it.”

The increased connectivity set the inn up to offer “workcations,” where people can bring their work and still relax in a different setting.

Besides couples like the Hetterlys, families have also embraced the trend, with dad doing Zoom meetings and mom doing virtual schooling with the kids, a kind of “schoolcation.”

The Smithton Inn even got a mention in a New York Times list of places to go for “workcations,” she notes.

This marketing effort has been one way for the inn to survive a pandemic that has greatly reduced travel. During the initial shutdown last spring, the Smithton Inn hosted only hospital workers. Then starting in June, it began welcoming other visitors.

To make her guests aware of what the inn has done to keep them healthy, Gallagher posted a video of herself on the website and Facebook explaining the additional cleaning measures and distancing protocols.

Gallagher also has taken on marketing tasks that she used to pay others for, such as learning about search engine optimization, so that Smithton Inn can have a prominent ranking on sites like Google and Facebook.

Gallagher now writes her own blogs, promoting everything from suggested hikes and outdoor adventures to socially distanced entertainment to five winter ideas in Lancaster County for bed-and-breakfast guests.

The Smithton Inn also features the Weathered Vineyards wine bar, added in 2016, which has provided a liquid lifeline, especially during the early months of the pandemic, helping to offset revenue loss. While the bar couldn’t offer its Mediterranean bistro menu at that time, there was (and still is) curbside pickup for beverages.

“While the B-and-B was practically shut down, people were drinking a lot of wine,” Gallagher says.

Gallagher reports that January was shaping up to be at least the second-best they’ve had since buying the inn in 2009, and she predicts last month will be their best February yet.

“What’s happening is, guests are booking at the last minute,” she says. “I think they are absolutely desperate to get away from their own four walls.”



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3 prospecting activities to improve performance in our new environment

Just when we have things figured out, change and disruption get thrown our way. 2020 threw us all a curve. Moving forward, we must be intentional about finding the best ways to adapt to our new environment.

Here's the good news: while things are different, things are still the same. People still have needs, and your products and services meet those needs even now. The only real difference is how we go about finding and satisfying selling opportunities. While some try to recreate the wheel, others understand the same tactics that created success in the past can also help in the future.



Here are 3 **KEY INITIATIVES** to help in your selling efforts.

1 - REVISE YOUR IDEAL CLIENT PROFILE

Clearly identify what your ideal client looks like. It's hard to identify 'the right' opportunities when we don't have a clear vision of what they look like. Who do you best serve? Have they changed? What do they look like now? What are their defining characteristics? Be as specific as possible. Not only will this help your salespeople target their efforts, but it's also a great tool when asking for referrals.

2 - CREATE A PROSPECTING MIX

Once we've revised our ideal client profile, we need to create a mix of activities to get 'in front' of as many prospects as possible. Should we be cold calling? Are we leveraging LinkedIn? Can we create a direct email campaign? How about social selling? Work to identify the activities that are most effective—what we did yesterday may not work today.

3 - ESTABLISH A PLAN

After finding the opportunities, establish a cohesive plan for what to say and do once we get their attention. Are we following a system? Do we have a cadence for number of touches? Are we asking the right questions? Do we have a pre-call plan and a post-call debrief for our selling conversations?

It's not necessarily about doing different things, rather it's about doing things differently. Although most networking events, in-person calls, lunch meetings, and events are on pause, we can achieve the same results through slightly different means.

If you need help focusing your selling activities, let's chat, and begin the journey of improving the health of your business and creating a plan to adapt to our new environment.

FARMERS MEET GROWING DEMAND FOR ETHICAL GOODS

SEAN SAURO
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At Kreider Farms, an early January announcement was made with pride.

The farm's commitment to humane treatment of its dairy cattle earned certification from a nationwide animal welfare organization — a first-of-its-kind certification for any farm in the eastern United States.

Spokesperson Khalee Kreider explained that altruistic reasons alone don't explain why the Manheim-area operation sought out the certification from American Humane.

"It's the marketability," she says frankly. "We know that consumers, nowadays, are really invested in where their food comes from."

Now, dairy products from Kreider Farms can be labeled "American Humane Certified." And Kreider says she's hopeful that label will give the farm an advantage over competition.

It's a tactic that's recently risen in popularity, food and agriculture experts say. Farmers and retailers find themselves increasingly beholden to a growing consumer base that demands products created in line with ethical criteria — humane, organic, environmentally sustainable and other conscientious labels.

Pursuing certification can prove costly on local farms, sometimes forcing owners to adopt new practices, perform time-consuming paperwork and purchase new equipment, experts say. But it's a trend that's likely here to stay, according to Lexi Hutto, associate professor of marketing at Millersville University.

"I think it's part of a bigger trend of sustainability and environmental stewardship, and it's really taken off, I would say, in the last 10 years," she says.

Driving the trend, Hutto says, are consumers 40 years old and younger — a group more heavily influenced by regular, widespread internet use.



SUZETTE WENGER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lemon Street Market sells organic, natural and humane certified goods.

Online, they read articles linking business practices to climate change; share blog posts about conscientious companies that should be patronized; and browse social media sites like Instagram, where popular fitness photos and videos are explicitly linked to healthy eating.

That last example especially stood out to Hutto.

"A lot of them aren't that superficial, but, I think, (are) way more interested in being healthy," she says. "The younger people don't want to inherit a world that's not productive, that's unhealthy, where the resources have been depleted."

Don Ranck, Lancaster County Farm Bureau's president, says farming has changed significantly in the last 50 years, as farmers embrace new practices with human, crop, livestock and environmental health in mind. Farmers welcome these sorts of changes without having to be recognized by third-party certifiers, he says, because they know that producing quality products is in their best interest.

Still, some farmers will seek out

certifications like the one awarded to Kreider Farms, Ranck says.

"They want to take advantage of the product they produce," he says, explaining those certified products can often, but not always, sell for higher prices. "I think it will continue as long as economics are good. If people have money to spend, they'll tend to spend on higher-priced things."

That popularity is on display at Lemon Street Market in Lancaster city, where produce and dairy manager David Dietz says the store offers organic and chemical-free products with few exceptions.

"We're a little more scrupulous in what types of products we carry than most stores would be," Dietz says, touting items like pasture-raised eggs, grass-fed meats and humane dairy products.

While Lemon Street's prices might be higher than a typical grocery store, Dietz dismisses the notion that it's wholly unaffordable to budget shoppers.

"A lot of times you can find some pretty good bargains on products that are sustainably grown and so

on," he says.

But in general, producing conscientious goods, especially organics, exacts a higher cost on farmers, who typically have to devote both money and time to meet stipulations. And that explains the higher prices for most of these products, Ranck says.

To earn its humane certification, Kreider Farms agreed to allow their operation to be scrutinized to ensure it follows welfare standards outlined in a 121-page document. Though many of those stipulations were already commonplace, Kreider says much time is spent keeping a paper trail.

It's the same elsewhere, according to Emily Moose, spokeswoman for A Greener World, an Oregon-based organization that offers a number of certifications — which can be included on product labels — in an effort to promote food production transparency.

In order to receive those certifications, Moose says, farmers must first agree to meet "rigorous" standards and to uphold them, taking time to keep meticulous records, which are audited yearly. Among those standards, certifiers place stipulations on animals' breeding, health management, shelter and pasture access in addition to a long list of other criteria.

"What's the point of having a food label if what's underneath is the same as everything else," Moose says, explaining what sets the products her organization certifies apart from others.

She also makes sure to note her organization has worked with thousands of interested farmers, including in central Pennsylvania. The idea, she says, is to give consumers who buy certified products direct insight into the processes that put food on their tables.

"We're not trying to tell anybody how to eat or how to farm, but I think people are really hungry for more information about their food," she says.

HOME



COVID-19 AFFECTING HOW AND WHERE WE LIVE

REBECCA LOGAN
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

When it comes to where and how people are currently choosing to live, many may relate to this sentiment from soon-to-be Lancaster County resident Joyce Collaso.

“Life’s gotten a little crazy,” she says. “We’re looking for somewhere to breathe.”

For some folks — who spent more time than ever in their homes over the past year — that might mean finally finishing a basement. For others, it means commissioning a backyard project. For Collaso, it means selling her home on Long Island, New York, and moving to one that she and her husband are having built south of Quarryville.

A national Lending Tree survey from September found that 46% of respondents were thinking about relocating in the next year. That includes 27% considering a new place within their current area, 12% considering another city in their state and 8% considering a new state entirely.

Collaso says she was surprised to walk into the kitchen last year and hear her 62-year-old accountant husband on the phone discussing his pension. He’d decided to retire. “I said, ‘Really? And what are we going to do?’” she says. “And he said, ‘Well, we’ve always loved Lancaster.’”

Collaso says the time is right to sell their house — the one in which she grew up — and relocate to a favorite vacation destination. In this era of COVID-19, Long Island sellers have the advantage as many people move out of Manhattan.

One of the Collasos’ daughters worked in the city as a nurse during New York’s toughest COVID-19 wave last year. For months her parents didn’t see her but would instead drive into the city and leave groceries at her door. That daughter isn’t coming along on the move. She loves city



BLAINE SHAHAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Steele Ridge neighborhood in Little Britain Township has filled up quickly in recent years. The rural backdrop appealed to buyers like Joyce Collaso, who is looking forward to a slower pace and more space than she and her husband find on Long Island.

life and would miss it too much, Collaso says.

Her 30-year-old sister, however, will be relocating with her parents to the Southern End neighborhood that Collaso says felt less suburban than other Lancaster County zip codes they considered. That 30-year-old, who works in retail, is more of a country girl at heart, says her mother. The upper floor of the new house will be hers.

“It will be her own little oasis up there,” Collaso says.

“And I always tell her, ‘You’ll be taking care of us one day.’”

The couple have specific requests being included in their space. That includes a craft room and an office area for any post-retirement accounting work that Collaso’s husband decides to pick up.

“And one of the big things I had to have after all this was a sunroom with my view,” she says.

Demand is high

The Collasos are typical of today’s

buyers in many ways, says Jared Erb, senior designer and partner at Custom Home Group. In addition to the Collasos’ neighborhood, that Quarryville company is building elsewhere in the Solanco, Penn Manor, Lampeter-Strasburg and Conestoga Valley school districts, plus York County and Maryland.

“The whole pandemic definitely seems to be changing how people are investing in their house, meaning they’re putting a lot more into it,” Erb says. “With new construction, historically people wouldn’t necessarily finish their basement right away or would wait to do the screened-in porch. But we’re seeing people do it all now just because people are spending a lot more time at home.”

Erb has also worked with several families consolidating multiple generations under one roof.

Demand is high, he says.

“We’re a relatively small builder. We normally build 30 to 50 houses a year,” Erb says. “We could double that right now if I could figure out

how to handle that.”

With ongoing low interest rates, Lancaster County’s supply of both new and existing homes was already struggling to keep up with demand before the pandemic.

“Inventory is as low as it’s ever been,” says Tom Blefko, president of the Lancaster County Association of Realtors. “It’s not unusual for properties, after maybe two or three days on the market, to have two dozen offers — many offers above list price. It’s just been something that I’ve not seen in a long time.”

Even houses in the \$500,000-and-up category are moving faster than usual — hovering around three to four months of inventory, Blefko says. That’s much lower than is typical for a price level at which buyers can afford to be picky, he says.

Demand isn’t limited to particular zip codes, he says.

“I don’t want to get into saying this particular school district or that district is selling more than others,” Blefko says. “I’ve got to tell you.

Live

Continued from 14

Based on the numbers I saw this past year? All of Lancaster County is a hot marketplace.”

Nationally, inventory is also low, with existing home sales in December reaching their highest level since 2006, according to the National Association of Realtors.

One demographic playing into all this are renters who are increasingly inclined to want to own their own homes, according to studies like America At Home, conducted

in April and October. Half the renters surveyed in October for that said they wanted to own their own home — up from 46% in April. Broken down by age group, that was 44% of millennial renters, 58% of Gen X renters and 46% of boomer renters who now want to buy.

Of course, plans for apartment complexes in Lancaster County are still moving forward. In January, for example, the Manheim Township commissioners approved a Baltimore developer’s land plan for a \$35 million conversion of the vacant Stehli Silk Mill into 165 apartments with a targeted spring 2023 completion.

The senior factor

Blecko says baby boomers who own homes but who are downsizing are major players in the market. And they often have an edge with an ability to make cash offers, he says. Slightly over 18% of all residential sales in Lancaster County in 2020 required no financing, he says.

COVID-19’s impact on where seniors opt to live is expected to be significant.

Nursing home closures have risen steadily for several years, per the American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living. According to a November AHCA/NCAL survey, 90% of nursing homes are currently operating at a loss and two-thirds of nursing home providers say they will not be able to sustain operations for another year at the current cost.

“You’re seeing a change. And I

think it’s a change most of us approve of. And that’s aging in place,” says Pleasant View Communities CEO Jonathan Hollinger.

People are spending less time in skilled nursing settings, he says, adding that was already happening before the pandemic.

However the senior landscape ends up shaking out after COVID-19, “vibrant living” will continue to be in high demand for boomers and likely Gen Xers right behind them, Hollinger says.

Sales were cruising right along on the Lofts at Lititz Springs, a Pleasant View 60-plus project that’s part of the multi-use redevelopment of the Wilbur Chocolate factory complex, Hollinger says. Then came the pandemic. Had it not, construction would probably be underway there by now, he says.

Hollinger says Lofts sales started

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HOME SALES IN LANCASTER COUNTY IN 2020

Nationally, properties typically remained on the market for 21 days in December — down from 41 days in December 2019. The median existing-home price across the U.S. for all housing types in December was \$309,800.

	HOUSES SOLD	AVERAGE SALE PRICE	AVERAGE DAYS ON THE MARKET
JANUARY	420	\$ 218,766	21
FEBRUARY	351	\$ 227,078	26
MARCH	450	\$ 243,982	22
APRIL	327	\$ 254,667	15
MAY	282	\$ 247,561	14
JUNE	375	\$ 269,641	11
JULY	685	\$ 261,525	7
AUGUST	644	\$ 260,423	7
SEPTEMBER	618	\$ 274,317	6
OCTOBER	601	\$ 261,019	7
NOVEMBER	540	\$ 266,570	7
DECEMBER	592	\$ 266,464	7

SOURCES: NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS AND TOM BLECKO, BOARD OF DIRECTORS PRESIDENT AT THE LANCASTER COUNTY ASSOCIATION OF REALTORS

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Live

Continued from 15

regaining traction in December thanks in part to teaming with a real estate company on a marketing push.

“It’s targeted toward those that might desire a quieter setting but an urban feel,” he says.

Meantime, Willow Valley Communities in December announced plans to develop a 20-story apartment building in downtown Lancaster for ages 55 and up. At an estimated cost of \$90 million, it would be the tallest building in Lancaster County.

Urban vs. rural

COVID-19’s impact on city-living sentiment for all ages remains to be seen. There were several reports last year from real estate sites noting increased traffic on rural listings. But data is evolving. For example, a Harris poll conducted in April found that 39% of urban dwellers said they were considering leaving for a less crowded place. But a Yahoo Finance-Harris poll conducted in August found 74% of city dwellers saying the pandemic was unlikely to cause them to move out of their metros.

Leon Stoltzfus, a New Holland Realtor and auctioneer, says he doesn’t typically run into many non-local buyers because auctions are less likely to attract them than traditional listings.

Many of his auctions are attended by Amish families — a significant buyer segment that adds yet another layer of competition to Lancaster County’s tight inventory.

A steady stream of buggies rolled into a multi-parcel auction that Stoltzfus ran in September in Little Britain Township.

Amish buyers were the winning bidders on most of the parcels auctioned that day, Stoltzfus says, but adds that one of the lots did go to someone from Wilmington, Delaware.

“And, with what I hear from other

agents, I would say that there are a lot more out-of-town buyers in the market,” he says.

Time will tell

Blefko says that despite anecdotal evidence, he hasn’t seen any hard data to indicate whether the number of homebuyers coming from other areas has risen over the past year.

He says it’s important to consider a lag in actual response to the pandemic and how homebuyers are going to react.

“People are in a ‘wait and see’ mode to understand what the world will look like on the other side of the pandemic,” he says. “Real estate is not a highly liquid asset and you just can’t decide to sell your house today and move into one next week. It takes time. I think we will have a better idea how people will have reacted to the pandemic in 2021.”

Factors to watch include house size.

The average size of a new home built in the United States in 2019 was actually smaller than it had been in 2015, according to a U.S. Census Bureau report released in December. Average square footage rose from 2,457 square feet in 2010 to 2,724 in 2015 but then shrank to 2,518 in 2019, according to the census report.

Ben Rutt, vice president of sales and marketing at Keystone Custom Homes in Lancaster, isn’t seeing that shrinking trend but instead says Keystone homebuyers are asking for more space than ever.

Rutt says lot size doesn’t seem to be much of a factor — as long as there are easily accessible spaces for walking nearby. More important, he says, is whether the lot can accommodate a larger house footprint.

“For some people their home is now school. For a lot of people it’s church. And home is now the office,” he says. “We’re requiring a lot more of a home now than we ever have in the past.”

HOMEBUYERS SEEK OFFICES, OUTDOOR SPACES

REBECCA LOGAN
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Home shoppers who clicked on a New Holland Avenue real estate listing last month may have noticed a simple sign on a sleek little desk.

“Home Sweet Home (Office),” it said.

It wasn’t there by accident.

Realtor Donna Giovingo says her seller displayed that sign as a visual cue after researching homebuyer desires in the era of COVID-19. Her resulting pre-sale renovation included upgrading the kitchen, rebuilding an upstairs deck and installing a gazebo outside the back door of the 140-year-old city home.

“We talked about how people need a space now to be outside but still be socially distanced,” Giovingo says.

About 27% of about 2,000 people surveyed by Lending Tree in the fall named a yard as one of the amenities and home features that they now desire thanks to the pandemic. A home office also made that list.

“It’s huge. Before, you would always hear some people say they’d like a home office,” Giovingo says. “Now they need it.”

Today clients are often hoping for a home office for two — be it for a double-telecommuting couple or parent and virtual learning child, Giovingo says.

“Maybe it’s using the smallest bedroom,” she says. “But a lot of times it’s about finding that small space somewhere else in the house where you can carve out your own personal, little nook.”

That’s also the case in the 101NQ luxury condos that Henrietta Heisler has been designing for clients in downtown Lancaster.

Even with an empty-nester-heavy crowd headed there, a defined workspace is key — be it as simple as a desk near a window or a room that can be



HOWARD SUPNIK

Pools and other upgrades to outdoor spaces are currently popular, says landscape architect Howard Supnik.

closed off entirely for a modeling hobby, she says.

While Heisler continues to see a variety of styles and tastes come into play, she does describe “clean lines” as a current, uniting theme across them. Decluttering is in.

Millennials have long been painted as an anti-clutter generation. Heisler says baby boomers — perhaps in part due to having now spent so much time inside with what they’ve amassed — are increasingly getting onboard with clearing out.

Still another common design denominator after spending so much time in the home?

“How can I make this space multi-task for me?” Heisler says.

“You really have to define what your needs are,” she says. “Do you need a place where, when you’re working, you can have extra quiet time? Or maybe if there are younger children you need a place where you

can watch what they’re doing while you work. These are the questions you need to be clear about.”

Heisler says she’s seeing clients turn toward their attics and unfinished basements to help answer those questions.

As home values rise and interest rates stay low, many people are looking to tap into that to complete home renovations. But not everyone is seeking — or getting approved for — home equity lending options.

Lancaster-based Fulton Bank actually saw a decrease in home equity lending last year. That went from about \$1.3 billion in 2019 to \$1.2 billion last year for Fulton’s five-state service area, says Steve Trapnell, vice president and senior communications consultant.

With others in the industry experiencing the same, he says part of the rationale is that people have been sav-

MUST-HAVES

What home features and amenities are on consumers’ wish lists due to the pandemic? Lending Tree says the percentage of people surveyed said they want the following:

- **27%:** A yard so I can go outside without being around other people
- **18%:** A bigger kitchen since I’m dining out less
- **16%:** Office space since I’m working from home and/or my children are learning remotely
- **14%:** A pool to provide entertainment and beat the heat
- **13%:** A home gym since those in my area are closed
- **10%:** More square footage since everyone is home more
- **7%:** Dedicated distance learning space

Source: A national Lending Tree survey of more than 2,000 people in fall 2020w.



COURTESY OF DONNA GIOVINGO

The seller of this New Holland Avenue home staged a home office to appeal to potential buyers who work remotely.

Buyers

Continued from 18

ing discretionary income that might otherwise have gone for things like travel or dining out.

“Although home equity lending declined from 2019 to 2020, there were still plenty of people using home equity lines of credit — whether for home improvement projects or other needs,” Trapnell says. “Each person’s situation is unique: While some people may be able to use discretionary income for projects, others may find that a home equity line of credit is a good solution.”

The National Association of Home Builders in late January released its Remodeling Market Index for the fourth quarter of 2020. The association says the national score of 79 on that index signals remodelers’ strong confidence in their markets for all sizes of projects. The Northeast scored 81 on that index — higher than the South and Midwest but lower than the West.

“The remodeling market was consistently strong throughout 2020 as homeowners had more time on their hands to improve their homes and add space and efficiency,” said NAHB Chair Tom Ashley Jr. in a prepared statement. “However, activity slowed a bit at the end of the year as a result of the rising COVID-19 cases and an

increase in economic insecurity.”

Howard Supnik, a Lititz-based landscape architect, is expecting to stay busy in 2021 as he did last year.

“Other landscape architects, builders, contractors — we’ve all been swamped,” he says. “To me it’s similar to what happened after 9/11.”

He says people were cocooning then, too.

The kitchen is at the heart of where people socialize, he says. And people are now — albeit often in small numbers — often socializing outside. That, he says, is why he designed several outdoor kitchens last year.

Pools are also hot. Supnik recently consulted on a pool-centered design for a couple who want to give their grandchildren somewhere to play. He says, however, that pools are tricky right now because pool installers have some lengthy, demand-driven backlogs.

Being home to supervise projects. Having money to spend that might otherwise have been invested in travel. Needing somewhere for the kids to burn energy. All of it is playing into demand for outdoor projects, Supnik says.

“It’s really about wanting to relax and reduce anxiety — whether that’s something featuring the soothing sound of water or a garden,” he says. “For a lot of people it just seems like a good time to add anything that can bring them joy.”



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COMMUNITY



SUZETTE WENGER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

COUNTIANS TAKE TO THE OUTDOORS DURING PANDEMIC

SEAN SAURO
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Cynthia Krom is a fan of the outdoors. Her favorite pastimes are hiking and biking, kayaking and skiing.

It's been the same for years, says Krom, Lancaster Hiking Club's president. But she hadn't yet seen a year like 2020.

"Many trails were closed due to overuse," Krom says, later explaining that wasn't the only obstacle. All summer, she says, it was "nearly impossible to buy kayaks, good bicycles, bike racks, tents and other outdoor equipment."

Those things were true as outdoor spaces became a last respite from in-home isolation in the days after the COVID-19 pandemic took hold, forcing lockdowns that prohibited indoor gatherings in hopes of slowing the virus' spread.

"I cannot imagine going through COVID without my outdoor escapes," Krom says. "I know a lot of my friends feel the same way."

It's a growing interest that has sent thousands of first-timers out into local parks, wild areas and waterways. And while it will come and go as a fad for some, Krom says she suspects many others are outside to stay. That's OK, she says, as long as infrastructure exists to support the larger numbers, and that hasn't always been the case.

An example is the parking area along River Road at the Lancaster Conservancy's Tucquan Glen Nature Preserve in Martic Township.

"Illegal and dangerous parking and traffic issues occurred with the increase in visitors," conservancy President Phil Wenger says.

"By one account, over 100 cars arrived during just a four-hour period at our small 15-space parking area at the bottom of a steep and twisting section of River Road," he continues. "At another time, when faced with



CHRIS KNIGHT | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Bicyclists ride along the Northwest River Trail in East Donegal Township last spring.

a full lot, cars illegally parked in the active traffic lanes of the roadway rather than finding another place to hike. It became a safety issue for visitors, our staff and the neighbors of this popular preserve."

The parking area is now closed and will remain that way for the foreseeable future, Wenger says.

Wenger guesses that the total number of visitors to conservancy properties in 2020 was likely double the number in an average year, with April through June being the busiest period. Visitors are not counted, so he couldn't give exact numbers.

Negative impacts

The conservancy has protected more than 6,000 acres across 47 nature preserves in Lancaster and York counties, offering more than 40 miles of trails. And while most 2020 visitors were respectful, there were a few problems beyond the parking, says Brandon Tennis, the conservancy's

senior vice president of stewardship.

"Heavy use does negatively impact preserved landscapes," he said in an email, citing a noticeable increase in litter, especially sanitary items and dog waste.

"A few of the more egregious violations included trespass beyond preserve boundaries, disturbance of vegetation, unsolicited trail building, ATV use and mudding, campfires, shelter building and camping/squatting," he said.

Some of the same behavior was reported within Pennsylvania's 121 state parks, which also saw increased attendance, according to Department of Conservation and Natural Resources spokesman Terry Brady.

"There were major over-capacity issues at many of our state parks early in the pandemic," he says. "With crowds came increased litter and some resource abuse but that improved somewhat as the summer progressed."

Brady points to October atten-

dance figures, which broke records at 3.9 million visits — a 31% increase over the same period in 2019.

State park spike

At Lancaster County's only state park, that October spike was even greater, according to department data. Susquehannock State Park saw a 293% increase in October visits, from 4,228 in 2019 to 16,595 in 2020.

And that's only a one-month snapshot. For the entire year, department officials estimated in December that the statewide system was on track to see about 9 million more visits in 2020 than in the previous fiscal year. In an average year, the statewide system sees about 40 million visitors — both residents and out-of-state visitors.

"Our Bureaus of State Parks and Forestry saw, met and overcame challenges never before seen by DCNR employees," Brady says. "They knew the value of outdoors

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Outdoors

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recreation to all who so badly needed a respite from the pandemic and its restrictions.”

That need has been acute, according to John Mullineaux, who handles community outreach for Lancaster Bike Club, an organization that saw a big increase in interest since the pandemic’s onset.

“I’ve been engaged in this sport for a long time now, and it goes through regular cycles of up-and-down and up-and-down,” he says of interest. “It’s in an up phase right now.”

Meeting challenges

But during the spread of a deadly, contagious virus, that bolstered interest has presented some obstacles, specifically forcing club leadership

to rethink the way they schedule rides, Mullineaux says.

In the early days of the pandemic, they were altogether canceled, but that changed as the weeks and months progressed and information about the virus became clearer, he says.

While trying to follow all COVID-19 guidelines handed down by public health officials, club leadership chose to resume their outdoor activities, Mullineaux says. Still, they limited group sizes or staggered starting times.

Mostly, they also chose to avoid crowded rail trails.

“All of the trails have just been packed to the gills,” he says.

And the club’s biggest yearly event, a large-scale fundraiser called the Covered Bridge Classic, seemed like an unnecessary risk, Mullineaux says, noting it typically attracts upward of 1,000 cyclists.

“We did not have that ride this year,” he says.

Krom, with the hiking club, says her group also had to adjust — suspending some events, avoiding interstate travel and, at times, limiting trips only to members.

That same abundance of caution compelled leadership at the Lancaster County Bird Club to enact similar restrictions, including their decision to bar newcomers — who traditionally have been welcomed — from an annual holiday bird count.

Ahead of that count, club Vice President Ted Nichols II called it disappointing, though he understands that it was necessary.

“A big part of the Lancaster County Bird Club is holding events to show people what birding is about,” he says. “We had to put it on hold.”

Still, like the others, he’s happy to see that his favorite hobby is growing in popularity.

“I’ve seen a lot of people start to take a look around them at what’s in the natural world,” Nichols says,

looking forward to meeting newcomers after the virus is no longer a threat.

“They are going to find us after all of these restrictions,” he says. “And we’ll be there when this is done and we’ll be that resource to the community that we have always been.”

The conservancy’s Wenger says much the same.

“Outdoor recreation was already on the rise across the state and the county with increased visitation to small previously unknown local preserves. ... We anticipate a continued increase in use due to COVID and climate change. Our climate is changing, winter is warmer and preserves are being more heavily visited year-round,” he says.

To meet that demand, there is one clear solution, Tennis says.

“Our community needs more public lands to accommodate our growing populations and their need to get outside and access nature,” he said.

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PETER ANDERSON

Custodian • Water Street Mission | Poet and Writer

MICKAYLA MILLER
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Peter Anderson is a man of many talents and hobbies. When he isn't working at the Water Street Mission, he could possibly be found tutoring students or writing poetry.

Anderson, 58, writes to keep human connection alive, often specially writing and gifting his friends with his artistic creations.

What inspired you to work at Water Street Mission?

I've had a long-standing desire to work in a place where I could contribute to the lives of others in a meaningful way. This desire gained focus in recent years as I went through

some personal struggles of my own and experienced how much of a difference it made for me to know that I had people who were willing to support me.

My work here is an expression of gratitude for that, and a practical expression of my personal faith. Human connection is important to all of us, and this is true no matter where we are on our journey. I have often told people that I came here to give, but instead, I find myself receiving more than I could have imagined.

Writing is one of the ways you find that human connection. How do you express yourself through poetry and short stories?



CHRIS KNIGHT | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Artist Peter Anderson, at Square One Coffee in Lancaster.

I started writing limericks in the 1980s. I think I chose limericks because they were short, well-defined, and were a good vehicle for my unconventional sense of humor. About five years ago, one of my children gave me a book of limericks as a Christmas gift, and I gave myself the challenge of writing at least one a day. I like to bring laughter to those around me.

As for stories, there are some people in recent years who have had a profound impact on me, just by being kind and by being themselves. The short stories or poems that I write

for them are gifts that come from my heart to show appreciation to them for who they are.

COVID-19 has changed nearly everything this past year. How has it impacted your job or your writing?

Like most people, I've needed to adjust to changing circumstances. In my role at Water Street, the changes have centered around our desire to keep guests and staff safe. We've increased the frequency of cleaning and disinfecting around the cam-

ANDERSON, page 26

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DR. SHAREE LIVINGSTON

Chair • OB-GYN department of UPMC Lititz

NICOLE BRAMBILA
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Sharee Livingston was interested in women's health from an early age. By age 9 she was working as a candy striper at Community General Osteopathic Hospital in Harrisburg, now UPMC Pinnacle Community Osteopathic.

She received her medical degree at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and completed her residency at Penn State Hershey Medical Center.

In 2006, she began practicing as an OB-GYN at UPMC Lititz.



Dr. Sharee Livingston

You grew up in Harrisburg and studied in Philadelphia. As a physician of color, why was it important for you to return to the region?

I was born and raised in the William Howard Day Projects of Harrisburg. My maternal grandmother had eight children (four boys and four girls). We were brought up in a very close, tight-knit environment and our poverty was shared so it never felt like we did not have. We supported each other tremendously. I never felt like I did not have what was necessary. It is that commitment to family and community that drew me back to Central Pennsylvania. I understood firsthand the need for Black health care providers in the area, so when I graduated from the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine, I returned to Hershey to do a rigorous obstetrics and gynecology residency. Subsequently, I decided to practice medicine locally.

What inspired you to spearhead UPMC's doula initiative?

What inspired Patients R Waiting and me to create the Diversifying Doulas Initiative was the desire to address and decrease Black maternal morbidity and mortality. Black women are four times more likely to

die during pregnancy, compared to their white counterparts. During my 15-year career, I saw this mortality upfront. When the COVID pandemic hit, it was evidenced that health disparities among communities of color were worsened. We did not want this disparity to worsen and we knew we had to do something. UPMC Pinnacle Foundation, LCCF, Lancaster Osteopathic Health Foundation and Gateway were offering grants to address COVID needs and we jumped all over it.

What encourages you most about the future of Lancaster County?

The future of Lancaster is bright. Lancaster has many young folks who are committed to seeing democracy evolve. As witnessed by the amount of money raised by ExtraGive 2020 and 522 nonprofit organizations, our community is answering the call to help those in need. Our Patients R Waiting organization participated in the ExtraGive 2020 for the first time as a nonprofit organization and we earned the title of raising the largest amount of money by a first-time organization. People want to help eliminate health disparities.



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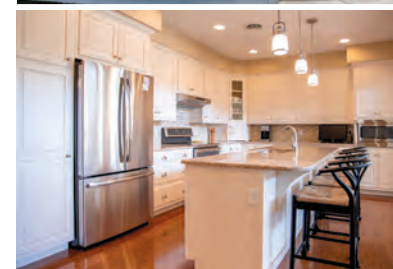
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TRACY ROSARIO

Owner • Fix (IT) Chix

MICKAYLA MILLER

MJMILLER@LNPNEWS.COM

Tracy Rosario works in the business of problem-solving. Years after immigrating from Trinidad, she took her love of tinkering and problem-solving and quickly taught herself how to do phone repairs.

When she moved to Lancaster County, she wanted to open a business combining her love of the trade and her talent. In 2014, Rosario, now 44, opened Fix (IT) Chix, a computer and phone repair business in Lancaster city, near the Amtrak station.

You grew up in Trinidad. What inspired you to move to the U.S.?

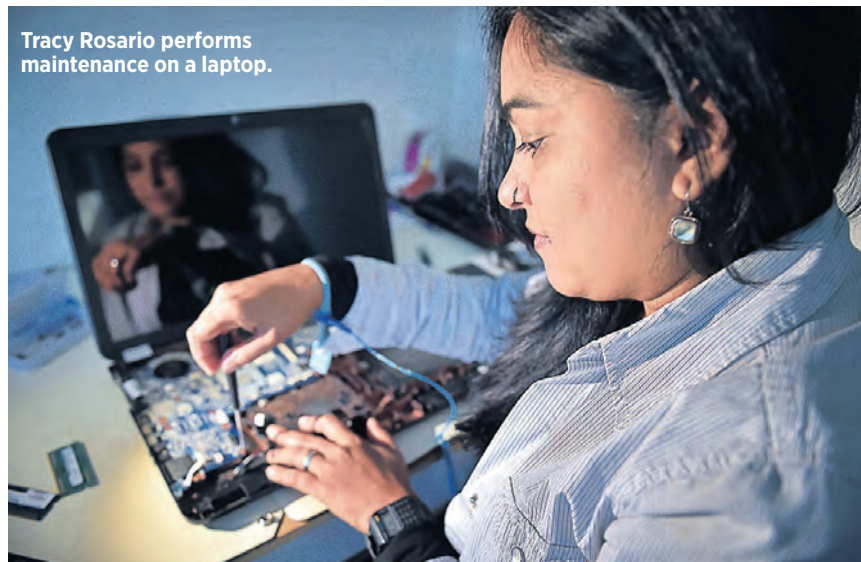
I moved to the U.S. just after I turned 20 years old. I always knew I wanted to live in the U.S. ... It was the land of opportunity. I wanted more for myself and my family. We were very poor and my mother instilled hard work and dedication in all of us at a very young age. She taught us that education would be our way out.

After several years of being in the U.S., you emerged in the tech industry. How did you get there?

I always loved making things and creating things with my hands. I also had a fascination with everything electronic. I dreamed of building a robot when I was a child, but of course I didn't have the means to do so. I tried any science experiment that involved household supplies. My parents let me do (that) and it was the best thing they could have done. When I moved to Lancaster, I needed a job and I saw an opening for phone repairs. I didn't have experience, but ... I learned to do the repairs very quickly.

You went from phone repairs to owning your own business. What was the process?

If you talk to any of my friends,



Tracy Rosario performs maintenance on a laptop.

DAN MARSCHKA | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

they would tell you that I have always been an idea person, and some (of those ideas) were really silly. I was ready, definitely not intimidated to start this business. I have a life partner who supported me and that was all I needed to go for it. Every day is a little different, which is a good thing. I get a lot of satisfaction from solving a problem with a device, fixing something that is broken and saving it from winding up in the trash.

How has COVID-19 changed your life and your business?

It initially affected the shop because we closed down for two weeks, but I wanted to keep my people paid and be there for customers. I worked out a solution to offer pickup and drop-off appointments to customers through the website on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The days surrounding that would be days we would come in and actually get the work done. Our service was very needed during this unprecedented time, when everyone was working from home and needed their devices to work. So, all in all, I'd have to say that we were OK.

During that time, I repaired a computer for a doctor, a phone for a nurse

and helped a customer in the mental health field save some data that was very important. Those (situations) stick out in my mind and made me see how needed we were. I just follow the guidelines and so far we have been able to stay clear of COVID-19 in the shop and at home thankfully.

What encourages you most about the future of Lancaster County?

I think the growth of the county and the awareness of the people here in Lancaster is very encouraging. I think Lancaster is very diverse. The people who live here and the energy to improve the city and offer more to the surrounding communities is a very positive thing.

What concerns you most about the future of Lancaster County?

I can't say that I have any concerns. I see Lancaster as a place where people can thrive and grow in many aspects of their lives. The key is to work hard and be driven for what we want. The city is changing every year, but change is inevitable. We must embrace it and continue to do whatever we can to improve the county in whatever small ways we can.

Anderson

Continued from 24

pus, and have found ways to continue providing our services while following social distancing and mask guidelines.

As for my writing, I have found that much of my inspiration comes from my day-to-day interaction with people. Having less contact has meant that I wrote less during 2020. With the beginning of the new year, however, I've been finding new ways to connect safely, and have done more writing as a result.

What encourages you most about the future of Lancaster County?

I would say that I'm very encouraged to see the way people cooperate to address some of the needs that are being experienced by their neighbors. Perhaps the biggest thing that encourages me is the army of donors who contribute food, supplies and cash (to the Water Street Mission). It strengthens my faith in God.

What concerns you the most about the future of Lancaster County?

There are a lot of people struggling with homelessness and poverty in Lancaster County. Sometimes these issues keep people down when they are not yet ready to receive help or when addiction and other life-controlling issues are keeping them from getting the help they need. There is no easy fix for these problems but my hope is that through showing love, treating people with dignity and compassion, we can draw people in.

JAMES VAUGHAN

Executive Director • Pennsylvania State Education Association

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James Vaughan is the executive director of the Pennsylvania State Education Association and has worked for the organization for 16 years. Vaughan, 45, and his wife, Jen, graduated from Millersville University and remained in the area to raise a family.

How has COVID-19 changed the state of education in Pennsylvania, from your perspective?

COVID-19's impact is difficult to summarize. Starting last March and continuing today, the pandemic has upended the lives of school employees, students, parents and entire communities. It has demonstrated the critical role that public schools play



James Vaughan

in our communities. In the last year, we have all recognized the dedication of school employees who have prioritized students over themselves, from

ensuring students had access to food, to — at a moment's notice — finding ways to adapt curriculum to meet the demands of distance learning.

I think this pandemic has showed us all that teaching is an art and a science. And it is hard work. It has also shown the disparity among public schools and the need for more equity in the system. Some school districts were able to hit the ground running without missing a beat, while others struggled without the resources they needed.

Are you optimistic about the future?

I have a realistic optimism about our future. I hope we take time for reflection, as individuals and as a community, about what to remember and learn from this moment. Specific to education, I believe there is a new recognition that public schools are cornerstones of our communities. I am optimistic that Pennsylvanians will come together and do all we can to en-

sure our children and educators have the tools and resources they need.

What encourages you most about the future of Lancaster County?

We have met extraordinary people through schools and community groups, people who are now our friends. I am encouraged by the many smart, energetic, hard-working and kind people who live here, as well as the professionals, entrepreneurs and service organizations who keep looking for ways to make this wonderful county even better.

What concerns you most about the future of Lancaster County?

As with every community in the country, this year has highlighted inequities and exposed rifts caused by differing opinions. However, I have confidence in the generous, friendly people who live in Lancaster County. We can work together to celebrate diversity and heal divisions.



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ARGIRES MAROTTI NEUROSURGICAL ASSOCIATES OF LANCASTER



Dr. Louis Marotti, a neurosurgeon with Argires Marotti Neurosurgical Associates of Lancaster says that back and neck pain is so common that an estimated 80% of the population will experience pain significant enough to require medical attention at some point in their lifetime. "By far and away the most common problem we see is back and neck pain," he says. And the most common cause of that back pain is spondylosis, a form of osteoarthritis affecting the spine. Spondylosis is a degenerative condition that can affect the discs that separate the vertebrae and the facet joints that connect the bones of the spine.

"These degenerative changes can cause back or neck pain symptoms," Marotti says. Degenerative changes are a natural part of aging, so essentially everyone is at risk. "Some

people get it a lot worse than others and a lot earlier in life than others," says Marotti, who has treated patients in their teens with the beginnings of the degenerative process in their spines. There is often a hereditary factor as well. "Bad backs run in families," he says.

While there are no medications or treatments that will slow the degenerative process, there are steps you can take to improve the overall health of your back and neck and reduce the possibility of flare-ups. The key, Dr. Marotti says, is staying in the best physical condition possible by maintaining your ideal body weight and having a regular workout or training regimen. However, he advises against high-impact cardio exercises like jogging that can put added stress on your back. Instead, opt for walking on

smooth, level ground, and use a stationary bike or elliptical. At the office, use optimal ergonomics - including proper equipment spacing, chair height and desk posture - to avoid stress on your neck and back during the course of the workday.

Finally, avoid activities known to put a strain on the back, such as repetitive bending, twisting and lifting, he says. "It just comes down to awareness," Dr. Marotti says. To make an appointment with Dr. Marotti, or for more information on Argires Marotti Neurological Associates of Lancaster, visit their website at www.argiresmarotti.com or call (717) 358-0800.

ARGIRES MAROTTI
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HEALTH



CHRIS KNIGHT | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

LANCASTER HAS GROWING 'WEB OF WELLNESS'

KARYL CARMIGNANI
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Since ancient times, health and wellness have been lofty and necessary goals. People have sought remedies from a range of sources including nature — plants, animals, outdoor exploration — and modern medicine.

Advancements in the latter cannot be overstated, but many seek answers to their ailments in a more holistic, organic realm, turning to herbal tinctures, aromatherapy, acupuncture, massage, nutrition, CBD products, yoga and other proactive body-balancing choices.

"We are healing each other through a web of wellness," says Christi Albert, owner of Ellister's Elixirs, a North Queen Street shop providing organic, plant-based skin care and wellness products. She is referring to a thriving women's wellness collective currently blossoming in Lancaster.

Albert notes that, especially since the pandemic, "(Social media) has helped support other makers and small healers through sharing each other's content, skills and offerings."

The result, she says, is broader access to healthy learning opportunities for the public.

"As women, it is important to have support from other women to feel uplifted and feel good about themselves and caring for each other," Albert says.

A focus on healing

Dr. Erin Gattuso, a naturopathic practitioner in Manheim, is committed to helping women find alternative approaches to chronic health conditions, from fertility issues to menopause symptoms.

"Root healing is largely emotional, and the goal is to break past the conscious into the subconscious thoughts and belief patterns," she



Christi Albert mixes skullcap herb and vodka at Ellister's Elixirs to make a tincture used for stress relief and sleep.

says.

Breath and body work can also help people "connect to a deeper layer of their emotional self," she says.

Gattuso works with men as well, often using cranial sacral therapy (CST), a gentle hands-on technique used to relieve compression around the skull, spine and surrounding joints to help heal deep-seated trauma. While CST's efficacy may be dubious to some, many patients insist

that it contributes to their health and sense of well-being, according to Medical News Today.

Gattuso says she is proud to be a part of the women's collective for healing in Lancaster, and mentions other talented, committed folks in the growing field.

"Christi Albert is great at cultivating different experts and bringing them together," she says.

One of Gattuso's pet peeve's is that

everybody wants to work with herbs, but many of them are not dedicated to the art and science of it.

"In alternative medicine, you have to dive full in because every client's body is different," she says.

A collective effort

Susquehanna Apothecary provides raw herbs, tinctures, and even ergonomic and locally made Rebel Garden Tools. The business is owned by Benjamin Weiss and managed by Ella Usdin. They also offer classes, which Gattuso says she is excited to take this spring.

Among this growing wellness collective, Gattuso also cites Lancaster Farmacy, which grows certified organic medicinal herbs, flowers and produce. Owned and operated by Elisabeth "Eli" Weaver and Casey Spacht, Lancaster Farmacy, according to its website, describes its mission as empowering others "to reclaim their health through the ancient knowledge of natural traditions of whole foods and herbs."

Gattuso calls Weaver "a force" and says she has the utmost respect for "rad women like her who choose farming."

The woman-owned herb and coffee house Blade & Spade Coffee Apothecary, on West Walnut Street in Lancaster, serves seasonal made-from-scratch food and drinks infused with "mylk," a plant-based spin on dairy milk. Owner Alyssa Miller's vendors include the previously mentioned businesses, ensuring Lancaster's wellness professionals help and support one another so they can, in turn, support the community.

Relieving anxiety

The most common ailment for which people seek relief is chronic

Wellness

Continued from 30

anxiety, the women say. “But not just since the pandemic,” Albert says. She attributes the uptick to the ubiquity of technology.

“It is hard to turn things off — as technology has increased, so has anxiety,” she says.

Worry and unease as a root ailment can lead to hormonal, skin, gut and pain difficulties. “Anxiety fuels other ailments,” Albert says.

But, she adds, there has been a “COVID shift,” with parents balancing work and homeschooling their children and looking for ways to take the edge off in holistic, healthy ways.

Gattuso agrees, noting the pandemic has taken a toll.

“Anxiety has been through the roof and harder to manage,” she

says.

Anxiety can manifest in other areas, like bowels, gut and sleep, which impacts the immune system, Gattuso says. But a holistic approach can cure the symptoms as well as the cause, creating long-term wellness, she adds.

Another effective remedy can be a sense of community, Gattuso says. For instance, before the pandemic, her clinic provided parent-connect groups where moms with (or dealing with) food issues or allergies could come together with other like-minded people.

“It’s very comforting,” she says. “Feeling seen and supported is the foundation of safety, which facilitates healing and wellness.”

Albert, too, is looking ahead to a pandemic-free time when she can provide a free community meditation hour at the studio adjacent to her shop, giving people “a safe

place to feel calm and recharged.”

“Community is the main factor of health that is missing in most people’s lives because in the U.S. we promote individualism,” Gattuso says.

That lack of community connection has been exacerbated by COVID-19, she says.

What else is good for health and wellness? Singing and dancing, Gattuso says.

“Women were meant to sing together!” she says. Whether it’s call-and-response or belting out your own melody, “singing is such a relief — it resets you.”

Body movement — walking, dancing, exercising — is also crucial to wellness. “When I work with a lot of women (with anxiety), dancing is often that level of release that they need,” Gattuso says. “Dance can enhance your health and well-being.”

8 DIMENSIONS OF WELLNESS

There is synergy between mental and physical health — problems in one area can impact the other. It is important to make healthy choices for both your mental and physical well-being. The Eight Dimensions of Wellness are:

- **Emotional:** coping effectively with life’s challenges and nurturing satisfying relationships.
- **Environmental:** occupying stimulating and pleasing environments that support well-being.
- **Financial:** satisfaction with making ends meet and future financial goals.
- **Intellectual:** finding ways to expand knowledge, skills and creative endeavors.
- **Occupational:** personal satisfaction from one’s work (paid, volunteer or vocation).
- **Physical:** eating healthy foods, getting enough sleep and committing to physical activity.
- **Social:** developing a sense of connection and fostering a support system.
- **Spiritual:** expanding your sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Source: Boston University College of Health & Rehabilitation Sciences

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CAROLE DECK

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Health care is rapidly changing from the traditional in-person delivery model to a virtual one, where patients visit with their medical professionals remotely using video and audio technology.

Thanks to COVID-19, the virtual platform has grown rapidly over the past year. Using a camera, microphone and the internet connection on their cellphone, tablet or computer, patients can visit with their doctors without leaving home, work or college.

All four local health systems have embraced virtual health care. Here's how:

UPMC Pinnacle

In January, UPMC Pinnacle introduced Virtual Primary Care-UPMC, offering almost total virtual primary care (95+%). The virtual full-service family medicine practice provides a complete spectrum of secure and HIPAA-compliant care for patients 18 and older.

Like most health systems, UPMC Pinnacle quickly increased telehealth options last spring when the pandemic became a serious threat. While UPMC doctors returned to seeing patients in their offices last summer when the virus somewhat subsided, they found some patients preferred the virtual visits. This led to the birth of the new virtual primary care practice.

"We're very excited about this new practice and what it represents for the future of medicine and for the care and convenience of our community members and patients," says Dr. Carleen Warner, a UPMC family practice physician at Columbia Regional Health Center, St. Anne's Retirement Community and regional medical director for Lancaster and Lebanon counties. She is one of eight



VINNY TENNIS | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Dr. Heather Morphy, a UPMC primary care physician, demonstrates a virtual visit with a staff member at the Oyster Point office.

providers who split their time between their traditional practices and the new virtual primary care model.

The virtual model, Warner says, is an opportunity to truly put patients' needs and convenience at the center of care.

Virtual visits mirror traditional ones in the office. You make an online appointment through MyPinnacleHealth patient portal or call 717-207-4800. Your visit includes review of any issues, medications and vital signs. Patients can monitor their own temperatures, blood pressure and weight and report to the virtual primary care provider. A physical exam can be done remotely with simple instructions from the provider.

"There are very few patients who couldn't receive high-quality health care remotely," Warner says.

She acknowledges there are issues that cannot be assessed safely or managed virtually, such as chest pain or wounds needing stitches. These would require a visit to one of the eight Virtual Primary Care-UPMC satellite offices most convenient for the patient. Locations are available in Lancaster, Lititz, York, Harrisburg, Middletown, Mechanicsburg and Spring Grove.

"Many of our patients like virtual care visits compared to a brick-and-mortar one taking more time out of their work day to travel to an office," says Dr. Heather Morphy, a Virtual Primary Care provider and UPMC primary care physician at Oyster Point, Lancaster.

Some older patients, she says, are uncomfortable with virtual visits with a few worried about being forced to do them.

THE SENIOR FACTOR

While studies by Ziegler, a Chicago-based investment banking firm, show older adults are adopting and gaining comfort with modern technologies, there's still some hesitancy.

The 2019 Link-age Connect survey revealed seniors aren't as interested as younger people in continually updating their devices or getting the latest one.

Lisa McCracken, director of senior living research and development at Ziegler, agrees that people can be confused by all the labels.

"Telehealth and telemedicine are used interchangeably with virtual care as the umbrella," she says.

"VPC isn't for everyone and we'll continue to offer traditional office visits in the future," Morphy says.

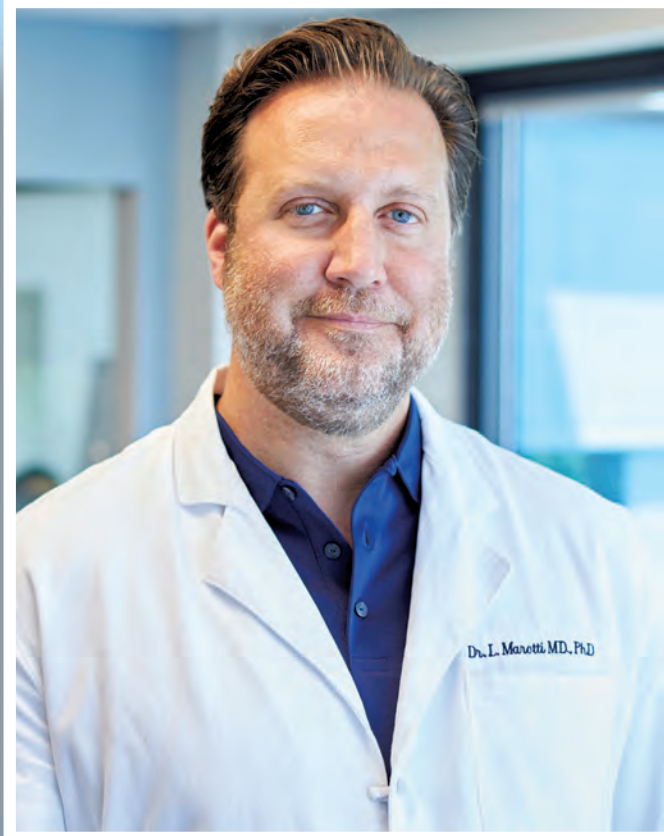
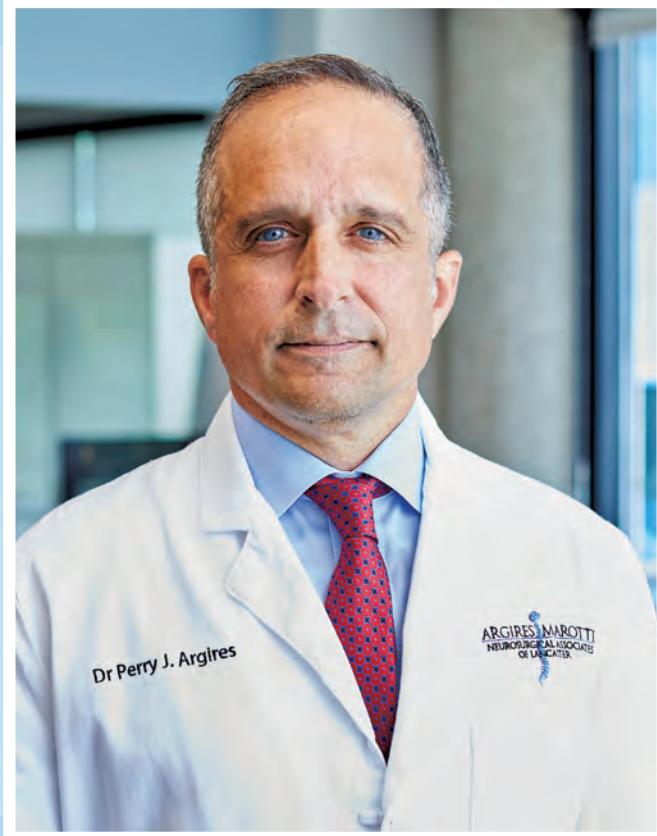
She agrees with Warner that virtual primary care will remain when the pandemic ends. Many patients see the convenience of how virtual visits reduce time off work and the need for child care, she says.

Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health

Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health's network of nearly 350 primary-care providers currently cares for over 25% of patients via telehealth.

"Our primary care network is utilizing virtual medicine as another means to connect with patients. It's no different than seeing them in person or by phone," says Dr. Vito

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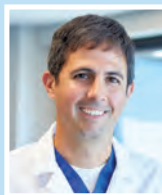
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Virtual

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DiCamillo, clinical director, corporate partnerships, and urgent care medical director, Penn Medicine Lancaster General Health.

DiCamillo says patients want multiple channels to connect with providers and Penn Medicine is focused on meeting patients on their terms. Patients can interact with providers using any video-enabled device or by phone.

Penn Medicine OnDemand serves as the fully virtual, urgent-care service to address primary care and acute needs. The service is available every day, any hour, for anyone 14 and older located anywhere in Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey or Delaware.

WellSpan

WellSpan Health Online Primary Care was rolled out as a pilot program to its 20,000 employees in September 2019.

“We chose to use the term online versus virtual to better define the care and make it easier for patients to understand the service provided,” says WellSpan spokesperson Ryan Coyle. Urgent care is also included in the online care option. Plans are to expand the online service to the public this spring.

Recognizing services were shifting to online even before COVID-19 gave WellSpan the advantage to implement telehealth phone and video visits across all practices to patients during the early days of the pandemic, Coyle says. Video visits can be scheduled directly through the MyWellSpan secure online patient portal.

Currently there are two physicians

dedicated to the Online Primary Care practice.

“It’s a unique offering designed to meet patient’s health care needs and goals through partnership with skilled physicians and easy-to-use technology,” Coyle says.

Penn State Health

Penn State Health offers unlimited 24/7 live video visits through Penn State Health OnDemand. It includes urgent care. Chris LaCoe, vice president of virtual care for Penn State, explains the OnDemand app platform was introduced in 2018 to employees enrolled in their health insurance. Its success led to opening it up to the public six months later, before the pandemic.

“Adoption of the app was huge by patients following the COVID-19 lock-down of most health systems in March last year with 120,000 downloads and 70,000 visits,” LaCoe says.

He explains health care systems embraced virtual care as being more convenient for provider and patient plus it reduces cost. But there were questions early on about who would pay for it. Medicare wasn’t on board originally, LaCoe says, but the pandemic led to their acceptance of virtual visits.

A unique benefit of virtual care for Penn State Health, LaCoe says, is being one of the first health systems in the U.S. to offer a user-friendly telemedicine solution for care of

patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as Lou Gehrig’s disease.

“Virtual care addresses the debilitating difficulty for ALS patients to receive care. It’s unique in being able to provide a team of specialists to electronically see a patient in the same visit,” LaCoe says.

Along with all the advantages of virtual care, consideration is needed to recognize the disparity in digital access for some people due to lack of broadband, particularly in rural areas, he says. Technological issues like dead spots, tower overload and dropped connectivity can also be problematic.

LaCoe stresses part of the digital health revolution is due to the majority of people who can easily connect with their health care provider using the app on their phone, which is always with them. And while tech-savvy younger people take to transportable health care, it may not be a good fit for everyone.

As with all the health care systems in Lancaster County, Penn State Health is not replacing in-person office care with remote care. Specific health issues will always require traditional visits.

“There’s always a life cycle maturity to a new health care model. Virtual care is here to stay, but there will be questions about reimbursement when the pandemic ends,” LaCoe says.

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EDUCATION



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SCHOOLS DEAL WITH ‘MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS’

GAYLE JOHNSON
FOR LNP | LANCASTERONLINE

Six-year-old Imogen Slesser sat in her classroom one day early last year and watched police run down the hallway, followed by EMTs rolling a stretcher. In a nearby classroom, another student was banging his head against the wall in art class, screaming at the teacher and spitting blood on her.

Imogen, her parents say, had trouble processing the upsetting event, which happened in January 2020 at an elementary school in the School District of Lancaster.

Diagnosed with anxiety and PTSD, the little girl started crying every school night and morning. She complained of a stomachache and hoped she had a fever so she could stay home.

Imogen had just begun counseling when COVID-19 shut down schools. The result, father Steve Slesser says, proved devastating. Telephone and then virtual therapy focused on prompting Imogen to go back into the classroom and face her fears — which she couldn't do.

“It's hard to connect to a 6-year-old through remote counseling,” recalls mother Rebecca Slesser, who gave up her new career in real estate to stay home with Imogen and her older brother, Jude. “It was a bit of a struggle because this happened at school, and we needed her to practice being in school. And we couldn't.”

The pandemic has fractured the emotional health of students in Lancaster County and across the country as schools struggle to reach out to families experiencing failing grades, stress, depression, anxiety and other mental health conditions.

‘Mental health crisis’

“There is a mental health crisis” among schoolchildren, one of “na-



Imogen Slesser, 7, center, works with her parents, Rebecca and Steve, in their Lancaster Township home. Imogen recently returned to in-person learning in the School District of Lancaster.

BLAINE SHAHAN | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

tional proportions,” Damaris Rau, School District of Lancaster superintendent, told board members in December. That's why she relentlessly argued for all students to return to in-person classes Jan. 25 in a district that's primarily relied on at-home and virtual learning since March.

“I just knew I had to get my kids back in school,” Rau says recently, citing parents who called to report younger children acting out, losing language skills and forgetting their toilet training. “Even our highest-performing kids were not performing.”

Nearby, Penn Manor School District identified 21.57% of ninth graders as struggling after they recently completed a mental health screening. That number jumped from 12.42% in fall 2019, although the percentage has been higher in previous years, says Mike Lechlitter, Penn

Manor superintendent. “It's an indication that this is a more stressful time for students,” Lechlitter says.

“Kids are overwhelmed,” says Melissa Ostrowski, the district's counseling department coordinator. “It's hard to know who's supposed to be here when. Students know how school works, and we keep changing that. Families have to pivot.”

For instance, some students attending Penn Manor High School receive in-person instruction on Mondays and Tuesdays. Other students attend Thursdays and Fridays. All students learn virtually on Wednesdays, but some families have opted for full-time online learning.

The district works with Samaritan Counseling Center in Lancaster to screen ninth graders. This year, Penn Manor added seventh grade students. Every student who takes the survey receives a phone call.

“Our first recommendation is to open the door to an honest conversation,” says Kim Moore, who directs Teen Hope, Samaritan's mental-health screening department. Teen Hope administers and collects mental health questionnaires in 19 schools covering 16 districts in the county. The 18-question survey asks about depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Any student who indicates suicidal thoughts receives immediate attention, as do students who achieve a certain numerical score when ranking their feelings as a 1, 2 or 3, with 3 signaling a bigger problem, Moore explains.

Teen Hope has seen “a bit of a jump” this year in students needing help, Moore says. Screeners collected information from 845 students this academic year, flagging 22.7%. Moore says some districts canceled



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Schools

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this year because of the pandemic. The department conducted 3,315 screenings in the 2019-20 school year and identified 19.29% as struggling.

The pandemic did no favors for Kya London, a McCaskey High School senior who still learns at home because she takes three virtual classes for dual credit at Harrisburg Area Community College.

“It’s definitely been a challenge,” says Kya, who began counseling in her sophomore year for extreme anxiety.

After the pandemic closed schools, Kya found it difficult to connect with her McCaskey social worker as they worked through missed phone calls and text messages. Added stress came when Kya and her mother lost

their jobs last March. The 17-year-old worked as a party host at Chuck E. Cheese, while Sandra London worked as an aide at a preschool. Kya had committed to a trip to Panama this summer and needed to finish paying the \$3,000 fee. She now works at a Giant store, while her mom returned to the job she lost.

“It’s been difficult,” Kya says. “My grades went down at first.”

The senior now counts on a support group of three friends who frequently check in via a group chat on iMessage.

Although most students are back in school, they still may be struggling. Educators, mental health experts and Pennsylvania Department of Education officials, however, remain optimistic.

“PDE understands the learning challenges created by the impacts of COVID-19. We continue to focus efforts and supports to our schools to

create pathways to accelerate learning to address any learning gaps in the coming year,” Kendall Alexander, the department’s press secretary, said in an email.

Catching up

The School District of Lancaster plans to offer extra tutoring, Saturday school and a focused summer school designed to compensate for the learning lost during the pandemic. Students who are failing three or more classes now attend in-person classes three days a week instead of the usual two days at McCaskey.

“We will catch up,” promises Liz White, Kya London’s social worker, and a student and family resource specialist at McCaskey.

Penn Manor’s Ostrowski believes “the perfect storm of the pandemic” will create resilient students. “The optimist in me says these students are going to have intangible skills — a new bar for what students can handle.”

Penn Manor also plans to offer tutoring and summer school. The district may also assign a mentor to a student so there’s another adult in the building to offer help. Students

can also receive help with time management, coping and organizational skills.

The Conestoga Valley School District also looks to the future to erase any learning loss. Phyllis Heverly Flesher, the district’s chief finance and operations manager, recently advised school board members to earmark money for the next two years for students who need extra help catching up.

“We have to be as realistic as possible,” Flesher says, explaining that staff sought information from other school districts about remediation costs. “We’re going to see (COVID-19 and learning loss) effects in ‘22-23,” she cautioned.

For Imogen Slesser, starting school again Jan. 25 proved distressing. Her father, who owns his own contracting and renovation business, arrived late to work her first day back because his sobbing daughter wouldn’t let go. The first grader now regularly meets with her school counselor and says each day has gotten a little better.

“Teachers were instrumental” in helping Imogen feel comfortable, Steve Slesser says. “We are super grateful for that school.”

Counselor Liz White, from SDL, says students already have shown an improvement in grades and mental health in the few weeks of in-person classes.

“It’s going remarkably well,” she says.



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