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March 2024



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LifeNet helicopter on the Samaritan helipad. Provided photo

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**NORTHERN NEW YORK'S FOREMOST HEALTH PUBLICATION**  
BRINGING THE NEWS TO YOU

# Survey of first responders finds majority suffer from stress, anxiety, PTSD symptoms

By ALEX GAULT

agault@wdt.net

A survey of New York's first responders shows that police, 911 operators, EMS staff and fire fighters are suffering from high levels of stress, burnout and mental health issues.

Released Feb. 5, the state's first comprehensive survey of first responders and their needs and issues shows that the people tasked with keeping the state safe and healthy are struggling as a result of that heavy burden.

The survey shows that 68% of first responders report experiencing stress in their line of work, and 59% reported feeling burnout — when the demands of the job become too much for the individual to fulfil and a sense of hopelessness takes hold. And 52% of the 6,000 first responders who participated in the survey reported feeling anxiety as well.

A majority, 53%, reported feeling depressed, and 38% reported symptoms of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The survey also found that 16% of first responders have considered suicide, which is four times the rate found in the general population of New York.

At the same time, 80% of those who responded to the survey said they felt that a social stigma against people experiencing a mental health crisis has kept them from seeking help for a personal crisis. A vast majority, 75%, said they didn't think there were mental health care providers available who can understand a first responders needs and problems.

Of the EMS professions polled, emergency commu-

nications personnel, who mainly operate 911 call centers and police dispatch centers, reported the highest rates of stress, mental health crises and negative personal impacts as a result of their work.

In a statement accompanying the poll results, Gov. Kathleen C. Hochul said she intends to take the lessons of this survey and turn them into action in Albany.

"I initiated the first responder mental health needs assessment to help address and further tackle the mental health crisis among our first responders, and I'm committed to continue breaking down barriers to care and get them the resources they need," she said.

Hochul is backing a first responder scholarship program, where people who have worked as first responders can get state help to become counsellors and mental health care providers at SUNY schools, and to cover training program tuition for counsellors interested in getting credentials to care for first responders.

There are existing resources available for first responders experiencing mental health crises or other complications as a result of their profession — the 988 suicide hotline is available for anyone experiencing suicidal thoughts or a mental health crisis, and the Office of Mental Health runs the CARES UP initiative that focuses on first responders.

# DEC launches new form to report Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza

ALBANY — New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Interim Commissioner Sean Mahar has announced an online platform for the public to report suspected Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) outbreaks in wild birds. The platform was designed as part of an ongoing effort to monitor HPAI in New York.

"Under Governor Hochul's leadership, DEC is working closely with our State agency and federal partners to monitor incidence of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza affecting wild birds and the threat it can pose for domestic animals," said Interim Commissioner Mahar. "I encourage New Yorkers to use this web-based tool to provide DEC with real-time information about locations of suspected outbreaks wherever and whenever they occur."

State Agriculture Commissioner Richard A. Ball said, "Early detection of HPAI is key to preventing its spread. DEC's new reporting tool will help us understand how HPAI is impacting wild birds, so we can find it quickly and take further action to keep it contained. I encourage New Yorkers to keep an eye out for sick or dead wild birds and use this tool to assist in New York State's joint response. I'm also reminding our citizens who own backyard poultry flocks to monitor their animals for illness, unexplained deaths, or sudden drops in egg production. If any of these signs are present, contact our Division of Animal Industry right away by calling (518) 457-3502 or emailing [dai@agriculture.ny.gov](mailto:dai@agriculture.ny.gov). Working together, we make sure that we are catching HPAI early and doing everything we can protect our animals, farmers, and public health."

State Health Commis-

sioner Dr. James McDonald said, "We continue to remain vigilant and monitor for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza in wild birds in New York State. This new web-based tool allows for rapid response to reports of sick birds, further protecting public health. While there are no human cases of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, we will continue to monitor these detections and work closely with our state and local partners to prevent the spread of the virus."

HPAI continues to infect birds and mammals across the United States and Canada, including New York. The first detection of HPAI in New York State was in a backyard poultry flock in Suffolk County in February 2022. Since 2022, HPAI has been detected in free-ranging wild birds and wild mammals throughout the state and in captive birds in several counties.

The new link for reporting observations can be found on DEC's Animal Diseases webpage. Once a report is received, DEC's field response is guided by the report's details, including the number of sick or dead birds, bird species, and observations from new areas where HPAI has not yet been documented. Of particular interest are reports of suspected outbreaks in all species of waterfowl, raptors, crows, shorebirds, and other waterbirds such as gulls, loons, and herons. These species are known HPAI vectors, particularly vulnerable to the disease, when testing can help DEC track HPAI prevalence on the landscape.

HPAI is widespread in wild birds and mammals, so not all reports will result in DEC retrieving the animals for testing and/or disposal. The public can help minimize risk and limit disease

spread by preventing contact between domestic animals and wild birds. In cases where DEC field staff are not responding to collect samples or carcasses from the landscape, the public should limit contact with dead wildlife and keep domestic animals away. If removal of carcasses is deemed necessary, the public is reminded to wear disposable gloves, a mask, and eye protection. Avoid direct contact with the carcass or carcass fluids by using a shovel and washing hands and clothing immediately after with soap and hot water. Carcasses should be triple bagged (garbage or contractor bags) and placed in an outdoor trash receptacle.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states that recent HPAI detections in birds pose a low risk to the public. While there is likely little risk for the public, people with close or prolonged unprotected contact with infected birds or virus-contaminated environments are at greater risk of infection.

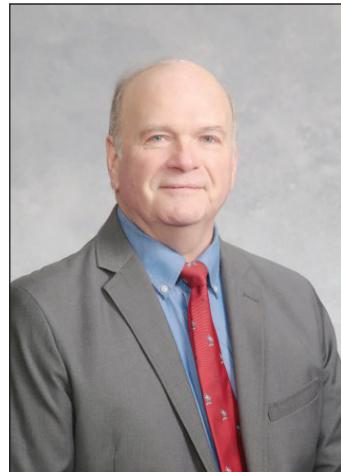
HPAI is caused by an influenza type A virus that is carried by free-flying waterfowl and other waterbirds such as ducks, geese, and shorebirds, but can also infect domestic poultry (chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, domestic ducks, geese, and guinea fowl), raptors, corvids (crows and ravens), and mammals. Recently, there have been a number of cases in dairy cattle in several states. Some infected wild birds can carry these viruses without getting sick, but domestic poultry and many species of wild birds get sick and often die from these viruses. Songbirds and other passerine birds do not appear to be highly susceptible to infection.

# SAMARITAN TO HOST DINNER TO RECOGNIZE PHYSICIANS

## DR. JACK D. RUSH TO RECEIVE LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD

Watertown, New York – Samaritan Medical Center will host its Physician Recognition Dinner on Tuesday, March 18, 2025. The event, sponsored by the Samaritan Medical Center Medical Executive Committee and the Samaritan Foundation, takes place each year around and in celebration of National Doctors' Day, honoring both active and retired physicians for their tireless dedication to the community. National Doctors' Day is observed annually on March 30.

As part of the evening, one physician will be presented with the eleventh Lifetime Achievement Award, which recognizes a Samaritan doctor for their leadership and long-term service to the health and well-being of Northern New York. Whether through private practice, hospital duties, leadership roles on the Board or Medical Staff, or volunteer efforts, Sa-



**Dr. Rush. Contributed**

maritan physicians contribute their time and expertise to making the community a better place to live.

This year's recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award is Dr. Jack D. Rush, a family medicine physician, in recognition of his 41 years of service to both Samaritan Medical Center and the surrounding St. Lawrence River

community.

Raised in Oakford, Indiana, Dr. Rush earned his medical degree from the University of Chicago's Pritzker School of Medicine in 1980, through the National Health Service Corps (NHSC) Scholarship Program. He went on to complete a residency in family medicine at the University of Iowa Hospitals and Clinics. Following his residency, Dr. Rush fulfilled his NHSC commitment by providing primary care services in Clayton, NY, a designated Health Professional Shortage Area. He worked with North Jefferson Health Systems on Strawberry Lane starting in 1983. In 1990, he and Dr. Stephen Grybowski established French Creek Family Medicine at the same location. By March 1992, Dr. Rush joined The House of the Good Samaritan, which later became part of Samaritan Family Health Center within the Samaritan Health sys-

tem. He retired recently after spending his entire Samaritan career at this location in Clayton.

Since joining Samaritan Medical Center's medical staff in 1983, Dr. Rush has provided exceptional primary care services for more than four decades. He served as Chairman of the Department of Medicine in 2010, President of the Medical Staff in 2013 and 2014, and was a long-time member of the Peer Review Committee. He is currently a

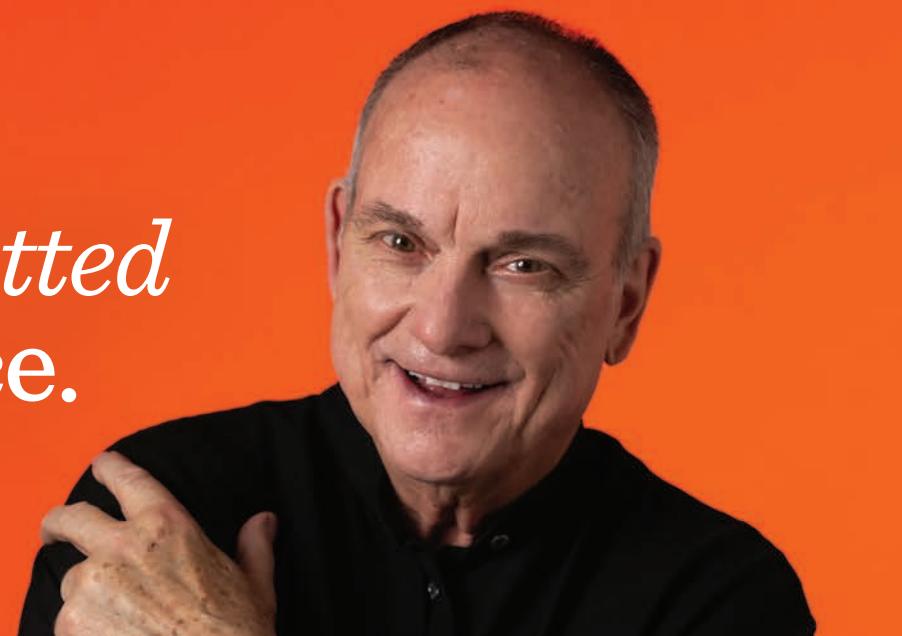
board member for Hospice of Jefferson County and serves as Vice Chair of the North Country Initiative Board.

"This event provides a special opportunity to recognize our physicians and celebrate the critical role they play in caring for our patients and our community," said Thomas H. Carman, president and CEO of Samaritan Medical Center. "Dr. Rush's remarkable career, spanning over 40 years, has touched the lives of

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# Alice Hyde board welcomes new trustees



**Nathan Monette**



**Hannah Busman**



**Dr. Ramsey Harrington**

Telegram staff report

MALONE — Alice Hyde Medical Center last week appointed three new members to the hospital's board of trustees.

The hospital in Malone added Franklin County's director of public health, a veteran emergency department physician and a local businessman to the facility's 11-member board, according to a press release from the University of Vermont Health Network.

Hannah Busman, Dr. Ramsey Harrington and Nathan Monette were named to the volunteer board last week.

Busman, the county's director of public health came to the Malone area from Schenectady, where she served in public health throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. He holds a bachelor's degree from Syracuse University and a master's degree in public health from Emory University in Georgia.

Herrington completed

his residency in emergency medicine at Oregon Health and Sciences University in Portland, Ore., and currently serves as UVM Health Network's chair of emergency medicine.

Herrington works to recruit physicians across the network and also oversaw the development of a shared emergency department staffing model that brings physicians from across the health system to practice at hospitals in both the North Country and Vermont.

A Malone native, Monette attended SUNY Plattsburgh before making his way back to Franklin County in 2017, to start working in the Monette family business, Adirondack Energy Products. He has served on the Franklin County Industrial Development Authority Board since 2022, and resides in Malone with his wife, Kendra, and their three sons.

As the hospital board welcomes the three new members, Robert Main Jr. will continue to serve as board chair, with Jason Ellis continuing as vice chair, Thom-

as Fitzpatrick as treasurer and Kevin Hart as secretary, according to the hospital.

Board members Brian Monette, Carol McKee and Paul Koehler retired from the board at the conclusion of last year after serving for 14, six and 12 years respectively, according to the hospital.

"I want to thank Brian, Carol and Paul for their many years of dedicated service to our hospital and community. Their commitment to strengthening rural health care has been exceptional and improved lives throughout the North County," Main said in the release. "I thank our new trustees for sharing their time and expertise to help advance Alice Hyde's mission and ensure we continue to find innovative solutions to the challenges facing rural health care organizations, as well as support our staff and the health and wellness of every member of the communities we serve."

# New physician joins St. Lawrence emergency team

POTSDAM — Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence team has welcomed Victor Gappmaier, MD, as its newest emergency medicine team member. He is treating patients at Canton-Potsdam, Gouverneur, and Massena hospitals.

Dr. Gappmaier earned his medical degree from the University of Illinois, College of Medicine, Chicago, IL; and completed his Emergency Medicine residency through Northwestern University, Feinberg School of Medicine, Chicago, IL.

He comes to the CPH with over a decade of extensive experience in emergency medicine.

Dr. Gappmaier has further experience as a clinical and resident university instructor, working on research projects, and writing a variety of publications.

Dr. Gappmaier was recently employed in Central New York and is looking forward to serving patients throughout the north country and working with the Rochester Regional Health team.

"I am very impressed with the St. Lawrence Region leadership. Having worked in multiple hospital systems in Upstate New York, the team here



**Dr. Victor Gappmaier**

really impressed me and swayed me to come here," Dr. Gappmaier said in a prepared statement.

"I love the rural outdoors, mountains, and forests, and am excited to experience the local hiking trails," he said.

As a member of the emergency team, Dr. Gappmaier treats patients with chest pain, numbness, sudden paralysis, seizures, poisoning, severe burns, heavy bleeding, electric shock, deep wounds, and more.

To learn more about the Emergency Medicine departments at St. Lawrence Region's Canton-Potsdam, Gouverneur, and Massena hospitals, visit <https://www.rochester-regional.org/locations/emergency>.

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# Clifton-Fine secures rural emergency designation

## FIRST IN THE STATE

### OUTPATIENT MODEL WILL SUSTAIN NEW ER WHEN IT'S DONE IN THE FALL, CEO SAYS

By JONATHON WHEELER

jwheeler@wdt.net

STAR LAKE — Clifton-Fine Hospital in southern St. Lawrence County has officially been given the designation of rural emergency hospital, the first in New York.

As required at an REH, the emergency department now under construction will not offer inpatient care, but patients may be seen for up to 48 hours, CEO Dierdera Sorrell said. If a patient needs to be admitted, the hospital can provide a referral.

"We can't admit you. But if you come and we can turn things around in 24-48 hours, then we can keep you," Sorrell said. "If you're very, very sick, you're going somewhere. But if you've got something that we can treat and turn things around and get you home the next day, we can keep you."

The hospital will continue to offer 24/7 emergency services, observation, primary care and behavioral health services, laboratory testing, radiology services, and physical and occupational therapy.

The hospital will also be starting a walk-in convenient care clinic along with the REH conversion, providing outpatient care for non-emergency needs.

Moving to REH is resulting in staffing changes, but the hospital says it is "confident that this transition will ensure the continued provision of vital health care services, employment opportunities, and economic stability for our community for years to come."

Clifton-Fine is the first rural emergency hospital in the state. Sorrell said that she hopes they have "paved the way" for other hospitals to secure REH designations.

"We kind of were the trailblazers for future REHs," she said.

Sorrell said that the rural emergency hospital program was the federal government's way of preventing closures of hospitals in remote areas.

"When you have a pretty



A rendering of the new Emergency Room at Clifton Fine Hospital.

sparse population to support your hospital, the inpatient census really isn't there and that's what drives most of hospital's revenue," she said.

Sorrel said there were periods when no patients would be admitted to the hospital, or maybe one or two people. She said the model of relying on inpatient beds for revenue wasn't working.

The hospital will now be federally subsidized with roughly \$280,000 a month, or about \$3.3 million annually.

"We gave up the inpatient unit, (where) we didn't have patients in the beds anyways. We are getting the federal stipend and we can continue to offer all

of the outpatient services that we have always had and there's no limit to the outpatient services that we can offer," Sorrell said.

Sorrell said this ensures that the hospital will be in the community for years to come.

"This makes it so we can sustain ourselves to be here," she said.

Sorrell said no other services will be lost and the designation allows them to focus on what the community needs.

"It's a great model for a little hospital," she said.

Clifton-Fine is also celebrating "topping off" its new emergency room, symbolizing the completion of the structural

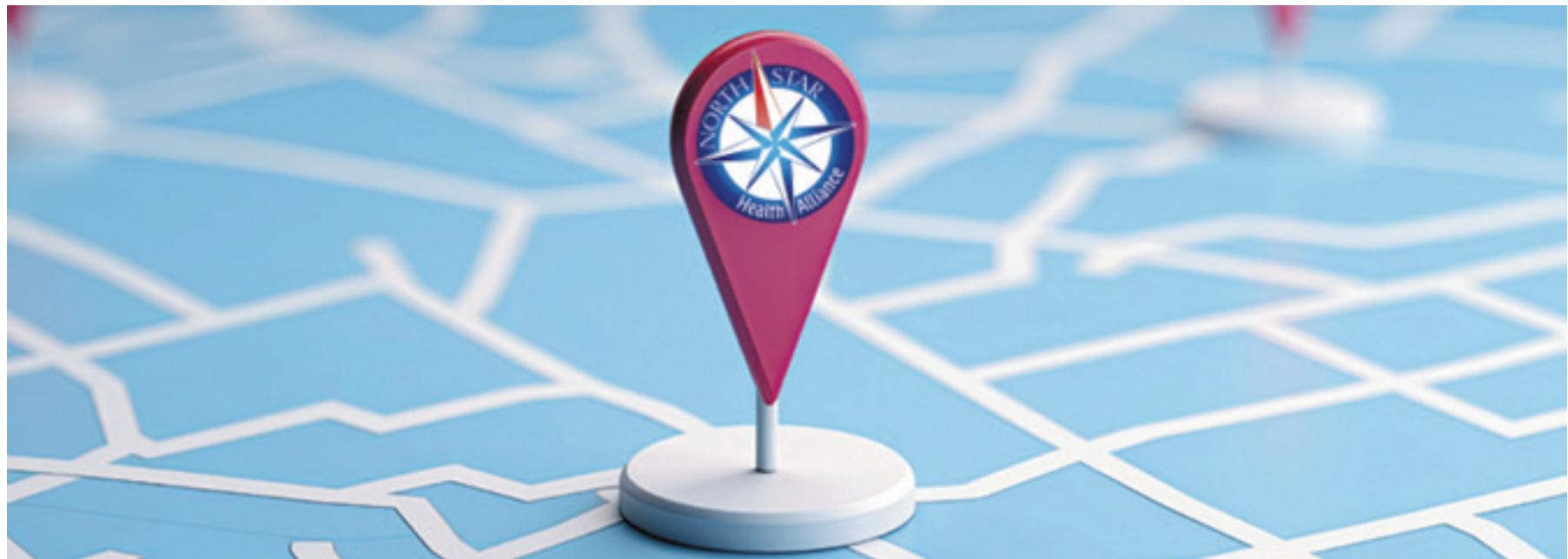
framework on the building.

Community members may sign the last remaining steel beam to be put in place. The beam is on display in the lobby of the hospital and will be installed over the canopy in the next week or two.

The project is expected to be completed this fall.

"The 'Topping Off' is not just a construction milestone, but it's also a celebration of the incredible support from our community, the dedication of our volunteers, and the hard work of our team to ensure that our Emergency Department is equipped to meet the evolving health care needs of our region," Sorrell said in a news release.

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# Planners review hospital project

**RIVER HOSPITAL PROPOSES \$11 MILLION  
RENOVATION TO UPGRADE PATIENT ROOMS,  
MODERNIZE THE FACILITY**

By CRAIG FOX

cfox@wdt.net

ALEXANDRIA BAY — River Hospital is about to embark on an \$11 million renovation capital project that will upgrade patient rooms and modernize the facility.

The Jefferson County Planning Board in late January reviewed the site plan approval for the project, sending the project back to the municipality.

Planning Board member Neil Katzman asked why the hospital was undertaking the major improvements.

County planner Andy Nevin said the goal of the project is to renovate the hospital's interior, adding that it will not increase staff or add more parking.

Hospital officials said the project includes enlarging second-floor inpatient rooms and add semi-private bathrooms to make them Americans with Disabilities compliant.

Nurses' stations, staffing quiet space/locker and medication areas, and storage rooms will be upgraded and become more efficient.

The nurse call and patient notification system also will be improved.

Some 3,000 square feet of space will be developed under an overhang at the back of the hospital on the St. Lawrence River side of the building, Nevin said. That space will be used for displaced services

caused by the renovations on the second floor.

"It looks like they want to use every available space that they have," board member Randy Lake said.

Earlier in the day, Mia Ramseier, director of marketing and community relations, said she didn't know when the project would start and when construction will be finished, declining to comment further.

Hospital officials didn't know why the planning board needed to take any action since almost all of the work will be completed to the 22-bed facility's interior.

That part of Alexandria Bay has been known for its parking woes, Nevin said. He observed that the hospital's and public parking lots were full when he recently went to do some research on the project in preparation of Tuesday's meeting.

River Hospital was awarded a \$10.7 million grant for the project from the state's Statewide Health Care Facility Transformation Program III. This program is administered by the state Department of Health and the Dormitory Authority of the State of New York.

Grant awards are intended to support projects which will help ensure the financial sustainability of safety net health care providers, and the preservation or expansion of essential health care services.

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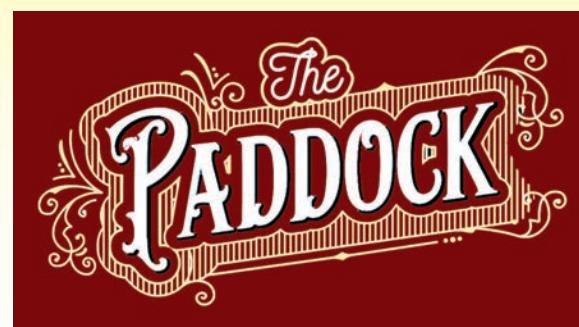
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# Samaritan Auxiliary's 23rd Annual One Night, One Diamond is in March, tickets are on sale now

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WATERTOWN, NY - Samaritan Auxiliary's One Night, One Diamond will be held on Saturday, March 29, 2025, from 5:30-10:30 p.m. at The Peak (formerly The Commons) on Fort Drum again this year. The attendees will enjoy a dazzling evening of dinner, dancing and diamonds.

Tickets are \$225 per couple or \$115 per individual, which includes dinner by The Clipper Inn, dancing to the popular band 'Atlas', and an opportunity to win the one of two 1-carat or one 2-carat exquisite lab-grown diamonds donated by Cook's Jewelers, or a get-away package to Lake Placid's Mirror Lake Inn Resort & Spa or Clayton's 1000 Islands Harbor Hotel.

The funds raised from this year's event will support the purchase of Cardiopulmonary Stress Testing Equipment for Samaritan Medical Center. This equipment gives the ability for cardiologists and pulmonologists to view precise assessments of heart health, lung function, and muscle strength during exercise. Not only will this equipment help patients with various respiratory symptoms and those who may need lung surgery, it will also allow for early detection of hidden health concerns before symptoms arise and can help create tailored fitness, rehabilitation, and performance plans for peak wellness. It will also be integral to the expansion of Samaritan's Cardiology services.

This year's Blue Diamond Sponsor is Apogee Physician. Pink Diamond Sponsors include AmeriCU Credit Union, Bob Johnson Auto Group, KeyBank and Purcell Construction. Media Sponsors are the Watertown Daily Times, 7News, Tunes 92.5 and Kara Dry Photography. Other top sponsors include Coca-Cola Company, Hancock Estabrook, King + King Architects, The Martin Group, Nickles Property Service, and Slack Chemical Company.

Among last year's Auxiliary highlights, the 2024 One Night,

One Diamond raised over \$100,000 and allowed for the purchase of the UroNav Fusion Biopsy System for the Samaritan Urology Clinic.

The Auxiliary operates the gift shops at Samaritan Medical Center and Samaritan Summit Village, as well as Sips Coffee Shop at the Medical Center, along with the Auxiliary uniform and purse sales for the staff, and membership dues which provide funding for support of programs, services, and the pledge commitment to support Samaritan Health. The Auxiliary had committed \$500,000 as its most recent pledge commitment to the Capital Campaign for the Walker Center for Cancer Care and annually provides two \$1500 scholarships to Samaritan employees to further their education. Additionally, the Auxiliary has continued the WHALE (We Have a Little Emergency) child safety seat ID program and That's Using Your Head, a helmet ID safety program, in conjunction with our Kinney Drugs Foundation partner.

For tickets or more information please visit the website [www.samaritanhealth.com/onod](http://www.samaritanhealth.com/onod) or with questions contact [onod2@shsny.com](mailto:onod2@shsny.com) or (315) 408-6475. RSVPs with the names of attendees and date of birth, for entrance onto Fort Drum, must be received by March 14, 2025.

*About Samaritan Auxiliary: The Samaritan Auxiliary was established in 1896 to serve as ambassadors and volunteers to support and enhance health-care programs at the House of the Good Samaritan. As a 501(c) (3) organization, the Samaritan Auxiliary is composed entirely of volunteers and play a vital role today in improving the quality of care in the Samaritan system through volunteer activities and financial support. Since 2006 when the event began raising funds for equipment, Samaritan Auxiliary's One Night, One Diamond proceeds have purchased nearly a million dollars in equipment for Samaritan Medical Center.*

# Samaritan gains provisional designation as Level III Trauma Center



On the left – LifeNet EMS; On the right – Dr. Daniel Bryden ad Dr. Maja Lundborg-Gray (white coats). Provided photo



A LifeNet helicopter on the Samaritan helipad. Provided photo

By JONATHON WHEELER

jwheeler@wdt.net

WATERTOWN — Fewer patients presenting at Samaritan Medical Center's Emergency Department with traumatic injuries will need to be transferred to facilities offering higher levels of trauma care after the hospital gained designation as the sole Level III trauma center in Jefferson or Lewis counties.

Samaritan recently announced that it received provisional Provisional Level III Adult Trauma Center designation from the state Department of Health in 2024.

The hospital says this designation shows the hospital is prepared and capable of offering advanced care for patients in the Emergency Department that are presenting traumatic injuries.

In 2024, Samaritan's Emergency Department served over 30,000 patients, with more than 600 receiving treatment for traumatic injuries, underscoring the need for the hospital to become a designated trauma center.

Samaritan says Level III Trauma Centers play a vital role in communities that may not have timely access to higher-level facilities, such as Level I or II trauma centers. These centers provide definitive care for patients with mild to moderate injuries, ensuring that individuals can receive critical treatment closer to home.

In addition to offering essential care, Samaritan says Level III centers are equipped with systems to promptly evaluate, manage, and transfer patients with more severe injuries to Level I and II facilities when nec-

essary. Upstate University Hospital in Syracuse is the Central New York region's only Level I Trauma Center for adults and pediatrics.

While its designation is currently provisional, Samaritan said that after it completes a two-year verification process with the American College of Surgeons, it will then be recognized as an ACS verified Level III Adult Trauma Center.

"We are honored to receive the Provisional Level III Trauma Center designation from the New York State Department of

Health," Thomas H. Carman, president and CEO at Samaritan Medical Center said in a statement. "This designation is an important step in highlighting our trauma care capabilities, and we are eager to complete the verification process with the American College of Surgeons (ACS) to solidify our position as a comprehensive trauma care provider."

Level III trauma centers provide care for patients with mild to moderate injuries. According to Samaritan, hospitals designated as a Level III Trauma Center

also are equipped with systems that will allow for them to evaluate, manage, and transfer patients to Level I and Level II centers.

"The provisional designation is an essential first step in our long-term goal of becoming an ACS Verified Level III Trauma Center," Dr. Daniel Bryden, Trauma Medical Director for Samaritan, said in the hospital's statement. "In the meantime, the hospital will continue to build upon its trauma care services, ensuring that patients receive the best care in their time of need."

## Rush

From T3

countless individuals. His unwavering commitment to the well-being of his patients and colleagues has made him an invaluable asset to the medical community and the families he has served."

Dr. Rush lives in Redwood with his wife, Laurie. They have three daughters: Kim, Caitlin, and Elizabeth.

The Physician Recognition Dinner will take place at 5:30 p.m. on Tuesday, March 18, 2025, at Samaritan Summit Village in Watertown. The event is open to the public. Tickets are \$60 per person. For more information or to RSVP, please visit [www.samaritanhealth.com/physiciandinner](http://www.samaritanhealth.com/physiciandinner), or call 315-785-

4584.

The Lifetime Achievement Award was established in 2013. Past recipients of this award include Dr. Karl Komar (2024); Dr. Maja Lundborg-Gray (2023); Dr. Jan Turcotte (2022); Dr. LaVerne VanDeWall (2019); Dr. Al Maloney (2018); Dr. John Poggi (2017); Dr. Collins F. Kellogg, Jr. (2016); Dr. David P. Rechlin (2015); Dr. David O. VanEenenaam (2014); Dr. Ronald G. Perciaccante (2013).

# LCHS WELCOMES OB/GYN ADEWALE ADEGBENRO, MD



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LOWVILLE, NY— Lewis County Health System (LCHS) is pleased to announce that obstetrician and gynecologist Adewale Adegbenro, MD, FACOG, has joined the Women's Health Center medical staff. He will provide obstetrical and gynecological care for women in all stages of life.

"Dr. Adegbenro is a welcomed addition to the medical staff and aligns with our commitment to provide a full-service OB/GYN women's health clinic for the women of Lewis County and surrounding areas," stated Lewis County Health System Chief Executive Officer Gerald R. Cayer.

Dr. Adegbenro received his medical degree from the University of Calabar, Nigeria, in 2000. He later completed his residency in the UK with the Royal College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists. He is a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada and the American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists, USA. Before joining LCHS, he was a clinical instructor at the Division of General Gynecology and Obstetrics, University of British Columbia, Canada, and on the medical staff at Fort St. John Hospital, British Columbia, Canada.

"Dr. Adegbenro's experience will serve the women in our community well and help our women's health team in meeting their gynecologic and obstetric care needs," stated LCHS Chief Medical Officer for Employed Practices Sean Harnay, M.D.

With over two decades of experience in obstetrics and gynecology, Dr. Adegbenro will provide patient-centered care for women at every stage of a woman's life – from adolescence through menopause and beyond. He



**Dr. Adegbenro**

will focus on medical and surgical obstetrical and gynecological care, well-woman exams, prenatal, delivery, post-partum care, contraception management, endometriosis, pelvic pain, menstrual disorders, infertility, menopause, urinary incontinence, overactive bladder, pelvic organ prolapse, and more.

"I look forward to working with the women's health team and providing OB/GYN care for the women of Lewis County and the North Country throughout their lifespan," stated Adewale Adegbenro, M.D.

In addition to his clinical practice, Dr. Adegbenro enjoys spending time with his family and traveling, and he is an American football fan.

The Women's Health Center, located in the Medical Arts Building on the main hospital campus in Lowville, has two additional physicians, Georges Akl and Daniel Burns, and two family nurse practitioners, Danah Ernst and Hali Reid. For more information or to make an appointment, please call 315-376-5475.

# Improving Children's Oral Health Through a Pediatric Pilot Program

By HOLLY BONAME

FDRHPO

**F**ort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization (FDRHPO) was recently awarded a 1-year grant through Fidelis Care's "Rural Health Grant Awards" to improve pediatric oral health in the region.

"Fidelis Care is pleased to present a \$10,000 rural health grant to Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization to help establish its pediatric oral care pilot program," said Fidelis Care Sales and Marketing Director Shannon Lombardo. "This initiative underscores Fidelis Care's commitment to fostering healthier futures for children across New York State, especially those in underserved communities. Our rural health grant program is centered on enhancing programs and building partnerships that address barriers to care."

FDRHPO will collaborate with Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York, a primary care practice serving patients in and around Jefferson County, to provide their patients with fluoride varnish treatments, dental care supplies (e.g., toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss), and information about dental practices in the region.

"Dr. Myla Estepa of Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York has always shown a passion for improving the health and wellness of her patients by addressing barriers to receiving the care they need. One aspect of health that is easily overlooked is dental health," said Ian Francis, FDRHPO Practice Transformation Specialist.

FDRHPO will also develop and disseminate an educational and awareness campaign to educate the general public about the importance of preventive measures (such as twice daily brushing and flossing; fluoride varnish treatments; and dental appointments at least annually) in children's oral and dental health.

"Every week we see 5 to 10 children for preoperative evaluation, in preparation for going under general anesthesia to complete dental work due to dental caries (cavities)," said Dr. Myla Estepa, owner and physician at Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York. "Pediatricians have a vital role in preventing this condition, which has now become a very expensive cost of healthcare."

Dr. Estepa's observations are backed by statistical evidence that the tri-county region faces significant dental care concerns. The rate of outpatient visits for dental caries (a.k.a., cavities) in the region is 357.5 per 10,000, which is 286% higher than the NYS average of 125 per 10,000. The region has fewer dental providers per capita compared to urban regions, leading to long wait times and difficulty establishing regular care, particularly for children.

Families may not have access to consistent dental visits due to transportation challenges, financial or insurance barriers, or a lack of awareness about preventive care. This situation leaves many children without regular dental checkups, increasing the risk of untreated tooth decay and other oral health problems.

This pilot seeks to mitigate and address these issues by providing dental care supplies and fluoride varnish treatments through the pediatric primary care setting, thereby expanding a basic level of oral care and awareness to children who are not established with a dental practice.

"Working with Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York by providing resources and logistical support to help them provide dental care and educational material to children and their caregivers can help improve awareness and support healthy behaviors in children that will help minimize long-term illnesses later in their adult lives," said Mr. Francis.



**Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization donated children's dental kits to Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York as part of the Improving Children's Oral Health Through a Pediatric Pilot Program. Pictured is the Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York staff with Joanna Loomis, deputy director of the North Country Initiative, Dr. Myla Estepa, owner and physician at Pediatric Wellness of Northern New York.**

Fluoride varnish treatment is used to prevent tooth decay and can be started as soon as a child's first tooth appears. It can be applied in dental or primary care settings, by a variety of healthcare professionals, who clean and dry the child's teeth with a small piece of gauze and then swipe the varnish onto the teeth with a brush. It generally takes less than two minutes to apply the varnish and the fluoride, housed in the varnish, enters the tooth enamel and makes the tooth hard, prevents new cavities from forming, and slows or stops decay from getting worse. It can be applied every three months, up to four times a year. Fluoride varnish is used as part of comprehensive preventive oral care, meaning it should be used alongside twice daily brushing and flossing to help prevent cavities.

"After launching the pilot program, we will share lessons learned, workflows, and resources (including 'return on investment' data regarding insurance reimbursement for varnish application) with other pediatric primary care practices in the region, to support practices in offering, or expanding their offering of, fluoride varnish treatments to their patients," explains Joanna Loomis, Deputy Director of the North Country Initiative. "FDRHPO will also collaborate with practices to explore processes and workflows to encourage patients to establish regular (at least annual) care with a dental provider."

FDRHPO also engages with a regional oral health coalition ("Keep the North Country Smiling," facilitated by Jefferson County Public Health) that includes healthcare stakeholders and regional public health departments.

"This coalition aims to ad-

dress the region's oral care challenges and has identified fluoride varnish treatment as an action item; therefore, this project will align with the coalition's efforts, ensuring alignment with broader regional strategies and fostering collaborative opportunities to expand, track, and sustain the pilot post-grant," said Mrs. Loomis.

###

*About the Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization* FDRHPO works to strengthen the system for health for the integrated Fort Drum and civilian community through analysis, identification of needs and leveraging of resources to fill gaps through innovation and collaboration. For more about FDRHPO, visit [www.fdrhpo.org](http://www.fdrhpo.org).



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