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FREE

5th class of LPNs graduate from Hart School of Nursing

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Pictured are Isabella Graham Hart (IGH) School of Practical Nursing - St. Lawrence Region graduates, from left: Isabel Hanisch, Savannah Durant, Marius Griffin, Nicole Whitmarsh and Sydni Boring. Submitted photo

CANTON — Rochester Regional Health is proud to announce the fifth class has graduated from the Potsdam-based Isabella Graham Hart (IGH) School of Practical Nursing during an official ceremony on Nov. 20.

Isabel Hanisch, Savannah Durant, Marius Griffin, Nicole Whitmarsh, and Sydni Boring have earned their

Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) certificates.

"I am incredibly proud of our graduates and the faculty who guided them on this journey," said Vice President, Chief Nursing & Patient Care Office Christina Latta. "Their dedication, resilience, and passion for patient care reflect the very best of our profession.

This achievement is not just a milestone—it's the beginning of a career that will make a profound difference in the lives of those they serve. Congratulations to each of you on this outstanding accomplishment!"

"This graduating class represents

See NURSES H7

*Learn more
inside*

Professional Connection Page 2

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Regional Healthcare Progress Strong in 2025: Year in Review

By **HOLLY BONAME**
FDRHPO

Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization (FDRHPO) had a strong and fulfilling year of accomplishments across its many initiatives that include EMS education, IT services, population health, behavioral health, workforce development, and regional collaboration.

“As you will read, none of these accomplishments would be possible without the collaborative spirit of the North Country healthcare system,” said Erika Flint, Executive Director for FDRHPO. “We are grateful to play the role of planning and convening such meaningful work across the region.”

FDRHPO’s EMS Program Agency hosted multiple educational events, including EMS Education Day, Fort Drum EMS Day, and the 2025 Spring Fling Conference, drawing more than 170 providers from across the region. Training opportunities on the Learning Management System (LMS) continued to grow, with more than 5,300 courses completed for CME credit. In addition, the EMS Program Agency expanded Opioid Overdose Prevention efforts by distributing MATTERS Kits with Narcan to EMS providers in Clinton, Essex, and Washington counties.

At the annual New York State Vital Signs Conference, attendees examined statewide EMS research projects, including a year-long quality improvement study presented by FDRHPO EMS Clinical Coordinator Amanda Slate. Her project aimed to enhance the collection of vital signs during patient refusals and achieved an 18 percent improvement in complete vital sign acquisition through collaboration with Carthage Area Rescue Squad and Lewis County Search and Rescue.

FDRHPO’s IT Managed Services Program grew with the addition of two new healthcare clients seeking cybersecurity, network management, and specialized IT support. In response to rising demand, staff also obtained a Fire and Security Alarm license, expanding service offerings to include door access and security

camera installation.

Though a grant focused on digital equity, ConnectALL, Adirondack Health Institute (AHI) and FDRHPO launched the North Country Digital Inclusion Coalition, bringing together regional partners to address barriers to telehealth and promote sustainable, accessible digital solutions.

In partnership with the North Country Initiative (NCI), the Northern Regional Center for Independent Living (NRCIL), and FDRHPO supported the placement of five full-time Community Health Workers (CHW) in eight primary care sites across Jefferson and St. Lawrence counties. CHWs engaged 754 individuals, completed 343 social needs screenings, made 298 referrals, and addressed both clinical and

immediate needs for patients. Primary care and behavioral health partners also provided 1,368 transitional care management and 1,002 chronic care management services for Medicaid beneficiaries, supported by close to \$170,000 in reimbursement from NCI and FDRHPO. NCI additionally advanced the region’s first value-based behavioral health contract, supporting care for more than 3,200 individuals.

Workforce development efforts have also expanded significantly. Winter MASH Camp offered six sessions across five locations for 58 students, and Summer MASH Camp received a record 139 applications. Scrubs Clubs grew to seven clubs in four districts, serving 119 students, with additional expansion planned.

FDRHPO also collaborated with Jefferson-Lewis BOCES to develop the first accelerated Practical Nursing Program for Army Medics (68W) in New York State, reducing completion time to five months and beginning its inaugural class in 2026. Another major win for healthcare career workforce development was through the Caring Gene Career Pathways Training program. FDRHPO worked with 138 individuals to onboard them into the program and provided educational support to begin or advance healthcare careers.

In behavioral health, FDRHPO partnered with the New York State Office of Mental Health to bring TRUST train-the-trainer programming to the tri-county region, resulting in 20 new local trainers. The organization also worked with county partners, emergency personnel, and the Children’s Home of Jefferson County to develop a Bi-County Mobile Crisis Implementation and Outreach Plan and launched the “You Are Not Alone” campaign to promote hotline awareness. Additionally, FDRHPO coordinated regular multidisciplinary discharge planning meetings with regional hospitals and community providers to support safe transitions for individuals leaving inpatient mental health care.

FDRHPO led the 2025 CHA/CHIP process for all three counties, guiding research, community engagement, and development of aligned health improvement plans under the redesigned New York State Prevention Agenda. Preventive screening initiatives contributed to strong regional outcomes, with colorectal screening rates rising to 85 percent and mammography screening rates holding steady at 80 percent. The Pediatric Oral Health Initiative distributed over 2,300 dental hygiene kits, 2,300 fluoride varnish kits, and 5,100 educational brochures to support children’s oral health across the region.

FDRHPO staff also continued community engagement efforts through the “Casual for a Cause” initiative, supporting the Compassionate Care Foundation and the Jefferson County Suicide Prevention Coalition. Employees at FDRHPO also selected 19 children from the Tunes 92.5 Angel Tree during the holidays to fulfill their Christmas wishes.

Continuing its strong partnership with Fort Drum, FDRHPO welcomed COL Elizabeth Duque as the new Commander of Guthrie Army Health Clinic and participated in Fort Drum Albany Day, engaging state leaders to highlight the partnership between the 10th Mountain Division, New York State, and the North Country region.

Freedom Homes affiliates with St. Joseph’s Addiction Treatment and Recovery

Times staff report

CANTON — North Country Freedom Homes is now officially an affiliate of St. Joseph’s Addiction Treatment and Recovery Centers, a move approved by the New York State Attorney General’s Office that cements the program’s place within the Citizen Advocates Network.

“This affiliation strengthens our shared mission to deliver compassionate, evidence-based care that supports lasting recovery,” Marc Gitlitz, chair of the St. Joseph’s Board of Directors, said in a statement. “We are honored to welcome North Country Freedom Homes into the Citizen Advocates Network, where together we can offer more seamless transitions in care and a stronger foundation of support for those we serve.”

North Country Freedom Homes is a 24-bed, all-male supportive living program that helps residents build on progress made in earlier treatment. Many enter the supportive living program following inpatient or rehabilitation services and receive continued support while connecting with community-based providers, including clinical and medical professionals.

Founded in the 1970s through the vision of John E. Murphy, North Country Freedom Homes began as St. Lawrence County’s first transitional housing facility, located in a large Victorian home in Madrid. Over the years, the program expanded to meet growing need, opening a purpose-built facility in Canton in 1988 and consolidating all services there in 2015 after major renovations.

“From the moment we turned over the keys to the house, it was clear the program could not be in better hands than with St. Joseph’s,” Carolyn White, director of the North Country Freedom Homes board, said in a statement. “I can picture dozens of graduates who built strong, lasting recovery through the program — first in Madrid and later in Canton — and generations of staff, including my late husband, who devoted themselves to making North Country Freedom Homes successful. This affiliation honors their legacy while preserving 24 vital treatment beds for the good of the community.”

As part of its continued evolution, North Country Freedom Homes recently became an Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS)-certified Part 820 reintegration program. This designation allows the facility to offer a more flexible, individualized model of residential treatment, providing tailored support from early recovery through reintegration into the community, and ensuring residents have the tools, stability and connections they need to sustain long-term success.

“North Country Freedom Homes has a long tradition of helping individuals build the skills, resilience and hope needed to thrive in recovery,” James Button, president and CEO of Citizen Advocates, said in a statement. “Through this affiliation with St. Joseph’s, we are preserving that mission while expanding the program’s capacity to meet people wherever they are in their recovery journey. Together, we are strengthening convenient, easily accessible pathways to care so individuals in our communities can receive the right support at the right time.”

The Citizen Advocates Network includes Citizen Advocates, a 24/7, walk-in access to mental health and addiction care, and St. Joseph’s, which provides inpatient and outpatient addiction treatment and specialized programs for veterans and first responders.

Pathway to Excellence Designation Highlights Strength of St. Lawrence Region Nursing Team

The three-year journey to earn Pathway to Excellence® designation is proof that nurses throughout Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region are committed to delivering the highest standard of care to their patients.

The Pathway to Excellence program, administered by the American Nurses Credentialing Center, recognizes healthcare organiza-

tions that create a positive and supportive work environment for nurses. The St. Lawrence Region is the only system of hospitals in New York State to achieve this prestigious designation—an accomplishment made possible because every nurse across Canton-Potsdam, Gouverneur, and Massena hospitals and the Clinical Network played a role in the effort.

One of those dedicated nurses is Christie Valdez, RN, whose commitment and advocacy embody the spirit of the Pathway journey. "Becoming a Pathway to Excellence hospital is really something we, as staff nurses, should be proud of," said Valdez. "As direct care nurses, we are typically knee-deep in patient care, and we forget to take the time to recognize how hard we are



Christie Valdez

really working. I say this first because that is what a Path-

way to Excellence hospital is. A team of very hardworking direct-care staff that exhibits a high level of professionalism and accountability."

"I began my journey as a nurse right here on the Med-Surg unit 19 years ago. I became a nurse because I had a passion for helping people. I have stayed in Med-Surg because I love that I am always learning something new. I also appreciate the different population groups and diagnoses we see."

Her passion for nursing is rooted in her early experiences caring for her great-grandmother. "As a teenager growing up, we took care of my great-grandmother in our home," explained Valdez. She passed away when I was 18 years old, just before her 105th birthday. She was a very meaningful person in my life, and I am proud to carry her namesake."

For Valdez and her col-

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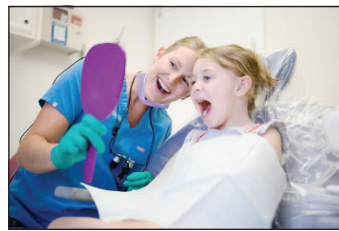


FDRHPO
Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization

Hudson Headwaters Receives Northern Border Regional Commission Catalyst Program Grant to Advance Dental Expansion

Hudson Headwaters Health Network is pleased to announce the award of a Northern Border Regional Commission (NBRC) Catalyst Program grant in support of expanding essential dental services in the North Country. This investment represents a critical step in addressing the region's dental care shortage—an issue underscored by a current waitlist of nearly 5,000 people seeking to establish care.

“The NBRC funding is an important start toward the significant resources required to close the dental-access gap in our region,” said Hudson Headwaters CEO Tucker Slingerland, M.D. “As one of the region’s only nonprofit safety-net dental providers, the Network accepts all patients regardless of insurance status or ability to pay. We see how deeply insufficient access to dental care affects families, seniors and children every



Erin Thompson, DDS, lead dental provider at Hudson Headwaters, with a pediatric patient at the Network's existing dental office in Warrensburg. Contributed.

day. We extend our gratitude to the NBRC, Governor Kathy Hochul, Senators Gillibrand and Schumer and Congresswoman Stefanik for both recognizing this immense need and helping to secure this funding.”

The NBRC funding will be used to add dental services to the Hudson Headwaters Ticonderoga Health Center on the University of Vermont Health Network – Elizabethtown Community Hospital

Ticonderoga campus.

“This generous funding will help Elizabethtown Community Hospital and Hudson Headwaters further our ongoing collaborative efforts to meet the health care needs of our region,” shared Bob Ortmyer, president of Elizabethtown Community Hospital. “The new dental suite, adjacent to Hudson Headwaters’ primary care facility, will be a welcome, and much-needed, addition to the services available on our campus.”

In addition to Ticonderoga, Hudson Headwaters is developing plans to further expand dental services by adding a new site in northern Saratoga County and upgrading capacity at the Network’s only existing dental office in Warrensburg. These plans are part of a comprehensive strategy to improve access to dental care throughout the region. As plans progress, the Network will update the public once

patients can call to make an appointment at the new locations.

Hudson Headwaters will soon launch a fundraising campaign to leverage this initial investment from the NBRC. The campaign will ensure the Network’s plans to address the region’s dental needs are successful. Donations, additional government grants and 340B savings (learn more at HHHN.org/about/340B), are all anticipated to help support the esti-

mated \$12-15 million needed.

“We are deeply grateful to the Northern Border Regional Commission and elected officials who made this funding happen,” said Erin Thompson, DDS, lead dental provider at Hudson Headwaters. “Their support provides meaningful momentum for this project and helps us move closer to meeting the overwhelming dental needs of our communities and patients.”

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Samaritan purchases former Sisters of St. Joseph's motherhouse

WATERTOWN — Samaritan Medical Center announced Dec. 18 that it has purchased the former motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph.

The property at 1425 Washington St. has been vacant since the end of 2024 when the remaining 12 sisters moved out the two-story building that had been home to the Sister of St. Joseph's order since 1976.

Samaritan said in a statement that the acquisition of the motherhouse reflects its continued commitment to meeting the evolving health care needs of the north country.

It said that while specific plans for the site are still in development, the purchase will allow Samaritan to transition some of its non-clinical staff to the new location. The move will allow for more efficient use of space within the Medical Center's main hospital campus, reserving valuable areas there for patient care, clinical operations, and future growth, according to Samaritan.

"We recognize the legacy of the Sisters of St. Jo-

seph, and it is with great respect that we ensure that this property will continue to serve a vital purpose in our community," Thomas H. Carman, president and CEO of Samaritan, said in the statement.

"By relocating non-clinical departments to the Motherhouse location, we preserve its spirit of service while freeing up critical space within the hospital and strengthen our ability to focus on delivering high-quality care where it is needed most," Carman said.

"The purchase of our beloved Motherhouse by Samaritan Medical Center allows for the continuation of the Mission of the Sisters of St. Joseph in Watertown and surrounding area. Samaritan's Mission to serve the community with care marked by compassion and quality fits well with the Sisters of St. Joseph Mission to serve "the dear neighbor" through the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy in a spirit of reconciliation and unconditional love," Sister Shirley Anne Brown, Major Superior of the Sisters of St.



The former Motherhouse of the Sisters of St. Joseph at 1425 Washington St. has been purchased by Samaritan Medical Center. Watertown Daily Times

Joseph, said in Samaritan's statement.

Samaritan said it will share further details regarding the transition timeline and departments moving to the property as plans are finalized. The location will be

called 'Samaritan Commons' as it will represent various non-clinical services.

Samaritan said the purchase not only allows it to make the best use of its limited land-locked hospital campus for patient care, but

also ensures that the former motherhouse remains a place of non-profit service and purpose.

The purchase price was not disclosed. The 54,000-square foot building sits on 17 acres of land.

Samaritan Long Term Care Communities Earn National Recognition for Excellence in Dementia Care

WATERTOWN, NY — Samaritan Medical Center is proud to announce that its long term care communities, Samaritan Keep Home and Samaritan Summit Village, have achieved Bronze-Level Credentialing in the Montessori Inspired Lifestyle® program, a distinction granted by the Center for Applied Research in Dementia.

This credentialing recognizes organizations that demonstrate a commitment to person-centered dementia care based on the prin-

ciples of the Montessori method, an approach proven to enhance the quality of life for individuals with Alzheimer's disease and other forms of dementia.

The Montessori Inspired Lifestyle® is a research-based model of care that empowers residents by focusing on their strengths and abilities, encouraging independence, and fostering meaningful engagement in daily life. The Bronze-Level Credentialing process involves extensive training, environmental en-

hancements and implementation of Montessori-based programming throughout the community.

"We are honored to receive this recognition and proud of the work our staff have done to bring this model to life," said Jolene Smouse, BSN, RN, Director of Long Term Care Education. "Incorporating Montessori principles ensures our residents receive the best quality dementia care possible while maintaining their dignity, purpose and connection to others."

A 2016 study of assisted living residences and skilled nursing facilities that received Montessori training found a significant decrease in medications needed by residents and instances of resident wandering and agitation within one year. It also noted improvements in residents' sleep quality and their ability to complete activities of daily living (ADLs) such as showering, dressing and eating.

With this achievement, Samaritan joins a select group of care providers na-

tionwide who have been formally credentialed by the Center for Applied Research in Dementia.

Samaritan Keep Home and Samaritan Summit Village will continue working toward higher-level credentialing, with the goal of reaching Silver- and Gold-Level Credentialing in 2026.

To learn more about Samaritan's long term care services, visit samaritan-health.com/ltc.

LifeNet of New York enhances critical care access

POTSDAM — LifeNet of New York, a leading air medical provider serving communities across the Northeast, announced a major upgrade to its Pilatus PC-12 fixed wing aircraft based in Potsdam, LifeNet 7-9. The aircraft now features a state-of-the-art Garmin flight deck, a redesigned medical interior, and operational enhancements, making it one of the most advanced air ambulances in the region. These investments ultimately improve the speed and efficiency of life-saving patient care across the region.

With this upgraded aircraft, LifeNet of New York continues to expand its ability to deliver rapid, high-quality critical care over longer distances, even in challenging weather or rural conditions. The enhanced avionics provide improved flight safety and precision, while the upgraded medical interior ensures a more effective clinical environment for in-flight interventions.

“Our mission is to provide critical care to the sickest patients in some of the most remote areas,” said Steve Sculley-Beaman, business

manager for LifeNet of New York. “This upgraded aircraft allows us to better deliver on that goal. We’ll be able to reach patients more quickly and more reliably.”

The interior has been transformed with a Hillaero air medical crew cabin conversion. This means more space for medical teams, better lighting, and improved ergonomics, making it easier for clinicians to care for patients during flight. There is also a wide cargo door for easy patient loading, integrated oxygen and suction ports, and a dedicated cargo area for equipment. The cabin can accommodate up to four medical crew members, plus a fifth in the co-pilot seat, and even allows a family member to accompany the patient when needed.

The upgraded PC-12 is equipped to handle the most critical and fragile patients including traumas, cardiac emergencies, strokes, pregnancy complications, pediatrics, and even neonatal transports. It carries advanced equipment, such as the Zoll AutoPulse CPR device for in-flight mechanical CPR. Flight clinicians also carry blood that can be ad-



LifeNet of New York, a leading air medical provider serving communities across the Northeast, announced a major upgrade to its Pilatus PC-12 fixed wing aircraft based in Potsdam, LifeNet 7-9. Provided photo

ministered in-flight for patients at risk of hemorrhagic shock.

An additional upgrade includes the latest Garmin avionics in the cockpit, replacing older systems with cutting-edge technology. This upgrade gives pilots a clearer view of their surroundings and has advanced autopilot features. The system can even guide the aircraft to the safest nearby airport in an emergency. These enhancements mean pilots have better tools to

fly safely and efficiently, reducing their workload and improving overall flight performance. The aircraft can fly over 1,000 miles without refueling, reach speeds over 300 mph, and operate from short or unimproved runways, making it ideal for reaching patients in rural or remote areas.

“The technology upgrade in our PC-12 has truly transformed how we fly and care for patients,” said Stuart Hirsch, lead fixed wing pilot for LifeNet of New York.

“With the new Garmin flight deck, I have a much clearer view of the terrain, weather, and air traffic, even in challenging conditions or at night. The advanced autopilot and safety systems not only make each flight smoother and more precise, but also give me the confidence to focus on getting our medical team and patients where they need to go.”

This upgrade is part of LifeNet of New York’s ongoing investment in better care for New York’s communities. By combining a proven airframe with the latest in medical and aviation technology, LifeNet of New York continues to set the standard for air medical transport, ensuring that help is always within reach, no matter the location.

LifeNet of New York remains focused on accessibility. The program is in-network with most major insurance providers, and its dedicated patient advocacy team works directly with patients and families to ensure that financial concerns never stand in the way of receiving care. No prepaid membership is ever required.

Pathway

From H4

leagues, the Pathway designation reflects much more than a title. “It means that we feel cared about by our leaders,” continued Valdez. “We feel that the place where we work is safe, and our physical health and mental health are prioritized. This is evidenced by surveys that direct-care staff have answered positively. New nurses can come here and feel that they are working for an organization that values them. They will feel like they’re not just here to provide, but to be encouraged to keep growing in their career.”

Patients benefit directly

from this level of excellence. “It means that even our patients say they are happy,” stated Valdez. “Our patients see that we provide great care. Our patient population feels safe coming to St. Lawrence Region for their medical treatment. Being Pathway to Excellence designated means our leadership listens to us. Our voices are heard.”

Valdez has played an active role in supporting the Pathway journey. “I like to think I have helped by spreading the word and educating the people around me,” said Valdez. Valdez also participates in the Medical-Surgical unit’s shared decision-making committee where she and her colleagues collaborate to bring nurse-led changes to the organization.

Achieving Pathway designation follows a precise application process—one that demands transparency, high standards, and deep engagement from nursing teams. As Valdez explained, “The application for Pathway is long and rigorous and makes it impossible to cheat or cut corners. Receiving the Pathway to Excellence designation is highly coveted worldwide.”

The St. Lawrence Region’s Pathway to Excellence designation stands as a testament to the dedication, expertise, and unity of its nursing teams—professionals who ensure that exceptional, compassionate care remains accessible across their rural North Country communities.

Nurses

From H1

the very best of what the IGH School of Practical Nursing strives to achieve,” said Senior Vice President, Associate Chief Academic Affairs Officer, and President of the College of Health Careers & IGH School of Practical Nursing Victoria Record.

“Their resilience, compassion, and commitment to excellence embody the core values of our institution. We are honored to have supported their journey and look forward to the meaningful impact they will make as they step into their roles as Licensed Practical Nurses.”

Support for youth and family behavioral health

Through a 2025 Community Impact Grant from United Way of Northern New York, 27 clinicians and counselors across Samaritan Medical Center’s hospital and clinic settings received specialized behavioral health training focused on supporting youth and families, including addressing issues such as bullying, social media influences, and adolescent engagement.

These clinicians serve individuals and families across Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence Counties, each carrying an average caseload of approximately 100 clients. As a result, the impact of this training extended well beyond the clinicians themselves, reaching thousands of North Country residents.



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