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Hospice and Watertown City School District providing grief support for students

By Jonathon Wheeler

jwheeler@wdt.net

WATERTOWN — The Watertown City School District and Hospice of Jefferson County are teaming up to provide grief support for children within the school district.

Kathy Arendt, director of foundation operations and development at Hospice, said she was redoing printed materials while working on a bereavement brochure and saw a family with several children visiting their father. She then thought about the bereavement program at Hospice, which only serves adults.

“In this day and age, it’s tough being a teenager,” she said. “And add on grief of any kind, they flounder. I just thought there might be a better way to do it here at Hospice.”

Arendt then went to Jannetta Brown, bereavement counselor and youth educa-



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tor at Hospice to see if there was some sort of program they could offer.

“That’s when the entire conversation started,” Ar-

endt said.

Arendt said the program isn’t meant only for students who have lost someone in their lives, but can also be

for a child who is experiencing loss in any way, whether that be getting injured in

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*Learn more
inside*

By Jonathon Wheeler

jwheeler@wdt.net

WATERTOWN — A recent Samaritan Medical Center inpatient mental health patient is singing the hospital’s praises in a testimonial pub-

lished by the hospital.

The testimonial written by the hospital states in 2023, Leah Rink suffered a psychotic break right before Christmas, saying to the hospital that she was “com-

pletely out of it” and was admitted to the emergency department, where she was later taken to the inpatient behavioral health unit.

“They brought me up to Inpatient Behavioral Health

and I woke up like, ‘Where am I?’ and at first it was really scary, but then I got to know the staff and the other people in the unit and it became like a small community,” she

See SAMARITAN H2

*In her own words: Samaritan patient
recounts her experience with behavior health*

Samaritan Partners with Jefferson County Public Health Service for 2025-2030 Community Health Assessment and Community Health Improvement Plan

Watertown, NY— Samaritan Medical Center is proud to contribute to Jefferson County's 2025 Community Health Assessment (CHA), Community Health Improvement Plan (CHIP), and Community Services Plan (CSP). This effort reflects a shared, countywide commitment to improving health and advancing equity. These plans were developed through a strong partnership among Jefferson County Public Health Service, Carthage Area Hospital, River Hospital, and Samaritan Medical Center, with leadership and planning support from the Fort Drum Regional Health Plan-

ning Organization. Community partners and local stakeholders played an important role in shaping priorities and will continue to be involved as the plans are implemented.

The Community Health Assessment identifies key health needs, gaps, and available resources using data and direct community input. The CHIP and CSP build on those findings by outlining practical, evidence-based strategies to improve health outcomes and access to care. Together, these plans align with New York State's 2025–2030 Prevention Agenda, which emphasizes prevention, health equity, and

the social and economic factors that influence well-being.

For 2025–2030, Jefferson County will focus on priority areas including poverty, suicide prevention, tobacco and e-cigarette use, infant and maternal health, chronic disease prevention, oral healthcare, and health- and wellness-promoting schools. By working within a shared framework while addressing local needs, partners are taking coordinated action to strengthen community conditions and improve health and quality of life for all residents.

Samaritan honors staff member with ELM Award

Watertown, NY— Samaritan Medical Center expanded its employee recognition program in fall 2025 with the introduction of the ELM Award for Exceptional Leaders and Managers, honoring outstanding leadership across the organization. The final recipient for 2025—and the program's second overall honoree—is Andrea Roden, Samaritan Experience Manager.

Roden previously served as Samaritan's Patient Relations Manager and now leads as Samaritan Experience Manager, where she oversees patient relations, the volunteer program, and screening/visitation caregivers. In every role, she has elevated the standard of service, championing a culture where every patient, resident, visitor, and caregiver feels heard, valued, and supported.



ELM awardee Andrea Roden, Samaritan Experience Manager.

Beyond her leadership responsibilities, Roden serves as an Innovation Ambassador and actively contributes to several internal committees, helping shape initiatives that strengthen the or-

See AWARD H4

Samaritan

From H1

said in the testimonial.

Staff made her comfortable and safe, while Rink accepted help and “did well with therapy and medication” resulting in her being released after two weeks, the testimonial states.

After being discharged, Rink stated she stopped taking her medicine and suffered another round of psychosis. She stated she was back in the inpatient mental health unit for a month in February.

Her second stay was “transformative” the testimonial states.

“I listened to my family to go get help and it's the greatest thing I've done to this day,” she said in the testimonial. “I got one-on-one time with the psychiatrists and nurses and therapists. I



Leah Rink donated new books, games puzzles, art supplies, and other activities to the inpatient mental health unit at Samaritan Medical Center. Photo provided by Samaritan Medical Center

feel like the care there is very centered on the patient's needs.”

After being discharged,

the testimonial states she feels like a new person as she continued getting help with therapy appointments and

now helps facilitate mental wellness in others, serving as an onboarding specialist with Thrive Wellness and

Recovery.

“I am currently the best I have ever been, honestly,” she said. “I'm the old Leah, but a better version of her.”

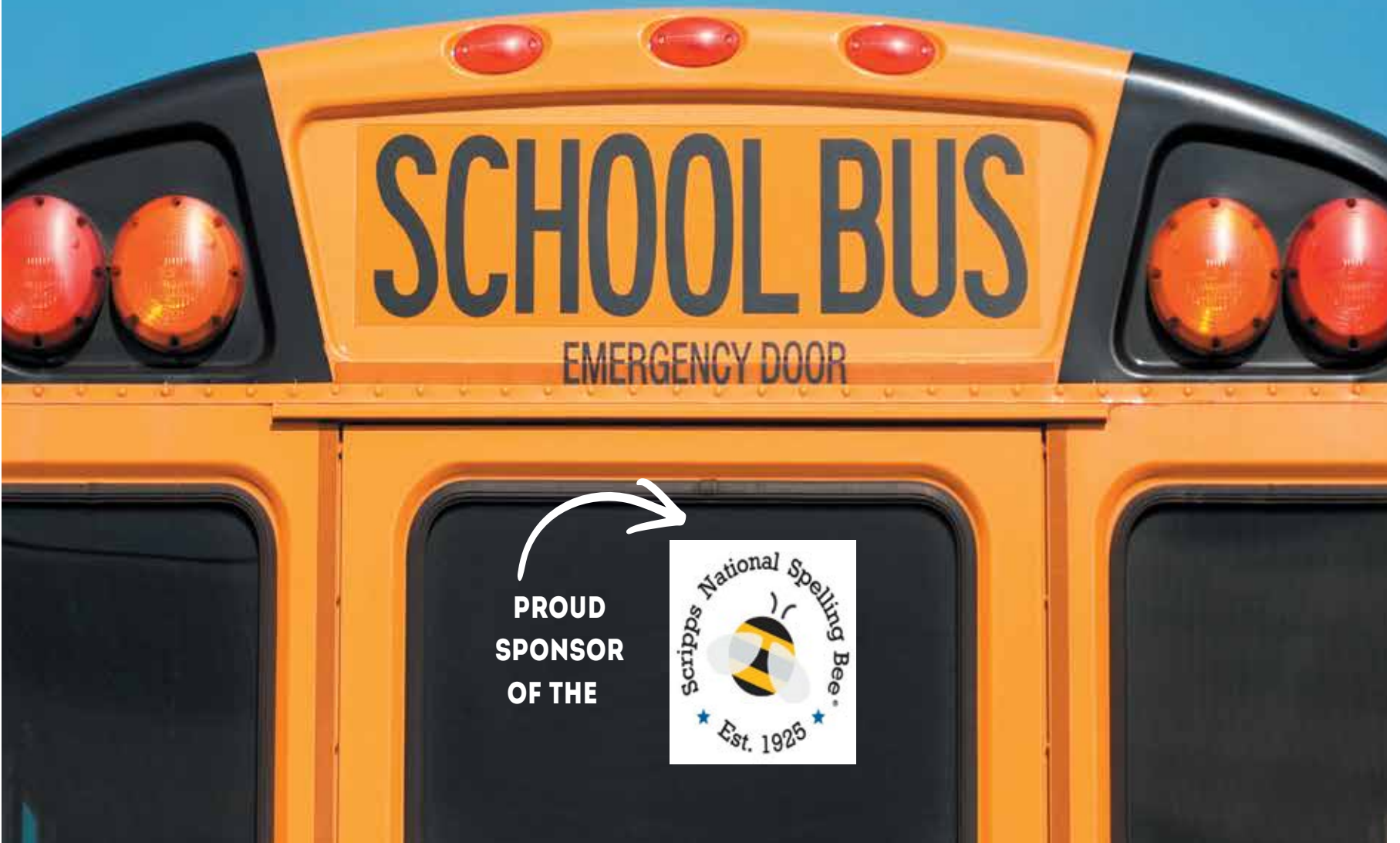
Rink put together a donation drive for new books, games, puzzles, art supplies and other activities to gift to the patients in the inpatient mental health unit. She donated over 250 items.

She wanted people struggling with their mental health to know that the moments when they are struggling does not define the person.

“This moment doesn't define you. Being hospitalized doesn't mean you're weak, it means you're surviving. And even if it doesn't feel like it right now, there are people rooting for you and it's best to hold on to hope. Hold on to hope for yourself,” she said.



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Rochester Regional Health raises awareness about heart attacks

POTSDAM — During American Heart Month, Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region is reminding the community that heart attacks and cardiac arrest are not the same—and understanding the difference, including the warning signs, can save lives.

A heart attack happens when blood flow to the heart is blocked, most often by a buildup of plaque in the arteries. The heart may continue to beat, but without timely treatment, the lack of blood flow can cause irreversible damage to the heart muscle.

In some cases, a heart attack can also lead to dangerous electrical disturbances in the heart, triggering life-threatening arrhythmias and even cardiac arrest. This is why early recognition of symptoms and immediate medical attention are essential.

Common symptoms of a heart attack may include chest pain or pressure, shortness of breath, discomfort in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw, or stomach, as well as nausea, lightheadedness, or cold sweats. Symptoms can vary, and may be more subtle in women.

Cardiac arrest, on the other hand, is a sudden electrical malfunction that causes the heart to stop beating altogether. When cardiac arrest occurs, a person collapses without warning, becomes unresponsive, and stops breathing normally. Without immediate CPR and defibrillation, death can occur within minutes.

According to the American Heart Association, heart disease remains the leading cause of death in the United States, and sudden cardiac arrest claims the

lives of hundreds of thousands of people each year—often without warning. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that nearly half of U.S. adults have at least one major risk factor for heart disease, including high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, smoking, or physical inactivity.

“People often assume heart attack and cardiac arrest are the same, but they are very different medical emergencies,” said Ricardo Benenstein, MD, FASE, FACC, Regional Medical Director of Cardiology for Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region. “A heart attack is a circulation problem caused by a blocked artery, while cardiac arrest is an electrical failure that causes the heart to stop altogether. Both require immediate attention—but cardiac arrest becomes fatal within minutes without cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) and an automated external defibrillator (AED).”

Dr. Benenstein emphasized that acting quickly can make all the difference.

“A heart attack should never be ignored or delayed, because the longer the heart is deprived of blood flow, the greater the damage—and in some cases it can suddenly lead to deadly rhythm disturbances and cardiac arrest,” he said. “If someone experiences chest pressure, shortness of breath, or discomfort in the arm, jaw, or back, call 911 right away.”

He also highlighted the critical role that bystanders play in cardiac arrest survival.

“Cardiac arrest often happens outside a hospital, and the person's survival depends on the people near-

by,” Dr. Benenstein added. “Learning CPR and Basic Life Support is one of the most powerful ways members of the community can be prepared to save a life. You don't need to be perfect—you just need to act.”

Members of the public interested in CPR and Basic Life Support (BLS) training can learn more through the American Heart Association at:

<https://cpr.heart.org/en/cpr-courses-and-kits/healthcare-professional/basic-life-support-bls-training>

Heart Health Tips

As part of its American Heart Month message, Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region encourages community members to take simple steps to protect their heart health:

— **Know your numbers:** Get your blood pressure, cholesterol, and blood sugar checked regularly

— **Stay active:** Aim for at least 30 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week

— **Eat heart-healthy:** Choose fruits, vegetables, whole grains, lean proteins, and reduce sodium and processed foods

— **Quit smoking:** Smoking greatly increases the risk of heart disease and cardiac arrest

— **Learn CPR:** Knowing CPR and how to access an AED can help save a life at home, work, school, or in the community

For more information about heart services, visit: rochesterregional.org/services/heart/heart-health.

Award

From H2

ganization and enhance the care experience.

She was nominated for this award by multiple caregivers who consistently highlighted her unwavering dedication to her profession, her team, and the individuals and families Samaritan serves. Their nominations reflect a leader whose compassion, integrity, and commitment truly embody the spirit of Samaritan.

Roden was presented with the award on February 10 and was celebrated by her co-workers.

The ELM Award honors exceptional Samaritan leaders and managers who exemplify the organization's HEART values—honesty, empathy, accountability, respectfulness, and trustworthiness. Unlike the DAISY, BEE, or OWL Awards, which

recognize those in direct patient or resident care roles, the ELM Award celebrates leaders who support care indirectly through their leadership.

These individuals foster safe, supportive environments for staff, uphold quality standards, manage resources responsibly, and cultivate teamwork, resilience, and recognition. They create settings where compassion thrives, enabling staff to treat patients, residents, and families with dignity and respect. Nominated by staff or peers, ELM Award recipients have served Samaritan for at least one year and, like the strong and adaptable elm tree, demonstrate resilience, growth, collaboration, and a commitment to continuous learning. The ELM is a quarterly award.

Clarkson University launches new scholarship

POTSDAM — Clarkson University has launched a new scholarship initiative to support students enrolled in its Master of Science in Occupational Therapy and Doctor of Physical Therapy programs within the Lewis School of Health and Life Sciences.

The new institutional scholarships, outlined on Clarkson's Occupational Therapy and Doctor of Physical Therapy program webpages, are designed to support students pursuing rigorous academic and clinical training. By investing directly in scholarships, Clarkson aims to help students focus on professional preparation and long-term career success in health care.

The scholarships are designed with affordability in mind and complement exist-

ing federal loan options for students pursuing advanced clinical and academic training.

Among the scholarship opportunities is support for students from the North Country, helping local residents, as well as students who choose to study in the region, pursue careers in occupational therapy and physical therapy.

Additional awards are available for first-generation college students, students with notable community or service involvement, and those active in athletics. Clarkson also offers the New York Care Forward Scholarship for students from outside New York state who plan to contribute to health care needs in underserved communities.

“Our scholarships reflect

Clarkson's commitment to supporting the next generation of occupational therapists and to making an exceptional occupational therapy education accessible, especially for those who call the North Country home and those who have chosen to make it their home while studying here,” said Alisha Ohl, associate professor and director of the Occupational Therapy program.

Samantha Marocco, chair of the Department of Doctor of Physical Therapy, emphasized the broader impact of the initiative.

“Clarkson University is dedicated to fostering the next generation of physical therapists and ensuring that an exceptional physical therapy education is financially acces-

See CLARKSON H5

SUNY Canton receives \$358K to expand nursing education

CANTON — SUNY Canton is eyeing new ways to fill healthcare positions in the region by expanding nursing capacity through two innovative partnerships.

In December 2025, the college received nearly \$358,000 from the State University of New York's 2025 High Needs Nursing - Supporting Innovation & Partnerships funding. It will be used to establish a Northern New York Nursing Consortium and to offer the Practical Nursing Program in the Syracuse area. The partnerships will work with the college's new plans to create a new SUNY Canton Nursing Simulation Center, according to Health, Science and Criminal Justice Dean Michele Snyder, Ph.D.

"The new grant is part of our continuing efforts to expand the number of students in the region's nursing programs," Snyder said. "We're improving coordination among area colleges and creating clear, stackable academic pathways to much-needed careers in rural and urban regions of the State."

One of the initiatives outlined in the new grant establishes the Northern New York Nursing Consortium, a collaboration led by SUNY

Canton that includes Clinton Community College, Jefferson Community College, and North Country Community College. The consortium aims to maximize existing capacity by aligning admission criteria, redirecting qualified students to programs with available seats, strengthening articulation agreements from Practical Nursing programs to two-year Registered Nursing associate degrees, and culminating with four-year Bachelor of Science in Nursing degrees. SUNY Canton offers all three of these programs.

"We plan to pilot faculty sharing through virtual instruction, which will allow students to access specialized instruction regardless of where they are studying," Snyder said.

The second initiative establishes a partnership between SUNY Canton and the Syracuse Educational Opportunity Center to deliver SUNY Canton's Practical Nursing program near the East Adams Neighborhood. Demand for this program currently exceeds capacity in the area. The program would offer virtual instruction, with labs, simulation, and clinical experiences provided locally. The program is expected to enroll 20



SUNY Canton students work with a computer-controlled patient in a simulation lab. Last month, the college received nearly \$358,000 from the State University of New York's 2025 High Needs Nursing - Supporting Innovation & Partnerships funding. SUNY Canton photo

students in 2026 and expand to 40 students the following year, pending approval from SUNY and the New York State Education Department.

The SUNY investment came as part of a funding opportunity designed to strengthen New York's nursing workforce. It is the latest in a series of competitive grants SUNY Canton has secured

to enhance its in-demand Nursing course offerings. Previously, the college received \$8 million to establish its Regional Nursing Simulation Center in Wicks Hall. The significant, transformative investment was announced by New York State Gov. Kathy Hochul in May 2025. It will allow the college to more than double access to the college's

programs. "The new simulation center will augment our hands-on learning opportunities and further strengthen SUNY Canton's commitment to offering affordable, accessible and applied experiences within the School of Science, Health and Criminal Justice," said SUNY Canton President Zvi Szafran.

Clarkson

From H4

sible," Marocco said. "These scholarships represent Clarkson's belief in rewarding initiative, experience, resilience and community engagement."

Qualified incoming students may earn between \$20,000 and \$25,500 in total scholarship support. The program also includes awards for

students who accept admission early, demonstrate strong academic achievement, or bring professional or health care experience. Additional scholarships support students from colleges and universities with which the Lewis School maintains articulation agreements.

More information is available on Clarkson's Occupational Therapy (clarkson.edu/occupational-therapy-grad) and Physical Therapy (clarkson.edu/academics/majors-minors/dpt) websites.

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Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization Expands Free Mental Health and Substance Use Training Across the North Country

Holly Boname

FDRHPO

Fort Drum Regional Health Planning Organization (FDRHPO) continues to strengthen mental health and substance use infrastructure by building community capacity to identify, understand, and respond to signs and symptoms of substance use or mental health challenges. FDRHPO has a growing portfolio of free training and community-based initiatives designed to support individuals, organizations, and systems across the North Country.

Grounded in the principle that the mind is part of the body, FDRHPO's mental, emotional, and behavioral health initiatives focus on integrated care and whole-person wellness. The organization is dedicated to encouraging collaboration across the care continuum, working with healthcare providers, schools, businesses,

and community organizations to improve outcomes through education, prevention, and early intervention.

Through its Mental Health and Substance Use programs, FDRHPO offers a wide range of training to community members, businesses, schools, healthcare providers, and community organizations. These include Adult Mental Health First Aid, Youth Mental Health First Aid, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) suicide prevention training, and Train-the-Trainer opportunities that empower local leaders to expand training capacity within their own communities.

The importance of this work is evident. Nearly one in five U.S. adults faces a mental illness each year, and suicide continues to be one of the leading causes of death nationwide. In 2023, the U.S. reported over 49,000 suicide deaths — the highest number ever recorded. Furthermore,

about one in five adolescents have experienced a major depressive episode, underscoring the need for early intervention and prevention.

Our most recent Community Health Survey, along with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation's County Health Rankings, shows that adults across Jefferson, Lewis, and St. Lawrence counties experience poorer mental health than New York State overall. Residents report more frequently on poor mental health days and higher levels of emotional distress, and suicide rates in the region exceed state averages. At the same time, all three counties face a shortage of mental health providers, making timely access to care difficult for many individuals and families. This underscores the importance of strengthening the mental health and substance use infrastructure, including increasing access to mental

health awareness training, so more community members can recognize warning signs early and help connect people to the support they need.

"These numbers reflect real people, families, and communities," said Tim Fayette, Behavioral Health Coordinator at FDRHPO. "By equipping local organizations with the tools to recognize warning signs and respond effectively, we can build a stronger, more resilient North Country."

Along with training initiatives, FDRHPO supports several additional behavioral health efforts, including implementing suicide prevention and harm reduction strategies, facilitating communication and improvements in hospital discharge planning through multi-disciplinary care teams, improvement in workflows and quality metrics as it relates to

follow-up and engagement in care, support in expanding regional crisis services, and other initiatives that further strengthen FDRHPO's commitment to improving mental health and reducing substance use-related harm across the region.

FDRHPO's collaborative approach emphasizes practical skill-building and community empowerment. Training programs are designed not only for clinicians but also for educators, employers, first responders, and everyday community members who want to make a difference.

To learn more about available mental health and substance use trainings, visit:

www.fdrhpo.org/mhat-1
or www.fdrhpo.org/behavioral-health-substance-use

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- Population Health
- Mental, Emotional & Behavioral Health
- Health Information Technology
- Health Workforce
- Emergency Medical Services
- Value Based Care

Donna McGregor Named to Becker's Healthcare 2025 'Critical Access Hospital Presidents and CEOs to Know' List

P O T S - DAM, NY—Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region is proud to announce that President **Donna McGregor** has been recognized by *Becker's Healthcare* as one of the **2025 Critical Access Hospital Presidents and CEOs to Know**. The national honor highlights leaders who are making a meaningful impact on rural health care through innovation, quality improvement, and commitment to their communities.



**Donna
McGregor**

Becker's Healthcare released the list in January, noting that the leaders selected are "driving growth, strengthening partnerships, and improving the health and wellbeing of their communities." The organization emphasized that critical access hospital CEOs play a vital role in expanding access so patients in rural and underserved areas can receive high-quality care close to home, without the burden of long travel distances or excessive costs. Honorees were chosen for being innovative, strategic thinkers who continually elevate safety, quality, outcomes, and service offerings while navigating the unique workforce and financial challenges facing rural health systems.

"Critical access hospitals operate within some of the most complex workforce and financial environments in healthcare," said Jennifer Eslinger, President and Chief Operating Officer of Rochester Regional Health. "Donna navigates those challenges with clarity and de-

See **MCGREGOR H9**

Hospice

From H1

a sport, being pushed out of a friend group, dealing with divorced parents, and more.

Brown works with the school and the guidance counselors. She said the counselors usually have a student in mind who would be good for the program, but they can also fill out a questionnaire.

Guidance counselors will put the students in groups. Each session details the fundamentals of grief and is accompanied by an art concept, such as remembrance candles, memory boxes or pictures. One-on-one services are also available for students not comfortable sharing their grief right away.

"The students are able to talk about their grief," Brown said. "They're able to express themselves in healthy ways."

The program started this school year.

"The group setting is important because it allows students to know that they are not alone. They are not different, and there is no shame in their circumstances," Brown said.

Tina Lane, the Watertown City School District's assistant superintendent for personnel and student services, said that the program is important as it will equip teenagers with tools they can take with them for the rest of their lives.

"Wave Riders of Hope is especially important at Watertown High School because the program is integrated into the school day, during a time when grief can quietly and profoundly affect their academic performance, mental health, and sense of belonging at school," she said in an email. "By offering this six-week, in-school program in partnership with Hospice of Jefferson County, this helps to ensure that students have access to compassionate, professional support with-

out barriers such as transportation or cost. The program provides a safe and trusted space where students can process their experiences alongside peers, learn that their feelings are valid, and develop skills to manage stress and emotions in constructive ways."

She says that it can also strengthen the broader school community by including families and staff. It creates a "circle of care around students," she said in the email.

The students are also learning mental health skills, how to be kind to themselves, and that grief, and all the feelings that come with grief, are normal.

"Sometimes I've heard students say they feel crazy, they feel overwhelmed. So to learn that that's all natural and a part of grief is pretty profound for them," Brown said. "They have a space to ask questions and it's beautiful when they recognize that they're not alone in their grief."

Brown said they teach the children that grief is different for everyone.

Arendt said the schools

thought it was important to have some sort of help and guidance for students as districts themselves have dealt with loss.

Currently, the program is available for six graders and up in the Watertown City School District, but Brown said they would be interested in incorporating the elementary schools.

Lane said that the district "would absolutely welcome the opportunity to explore extending Wave Riders of Hope to the elementary level in a developmentally appropriate way."

"Providing early, age-appropriate grief support can help students build healthy coping skills, emotional awareness, and resilience from the start. We see great value in partnering with Hospice of Jefferson County to consider how this type of compassionate, structured support could be adapted for younger learners, ensuring that all students, regardless of age, know they are supported and not alone as they navigate loss," she said in the email.

Families also receive a folder with information and

resources while being invited to join Hospice's adult support groups. The adults also have access to one-on-one services complimentary of Hospice.

"It's a unified front for the students by educating and supporting the staff and the school as well as their family," Brown said.

The program is making its way to other school districts, as it will be at BOCES come the fall and Thousand Islands Central School District in April before being at the Sozo Teen Center in Watertown.

The program is being piloted at Watertown City School District.

The program is funded by grants from the Northern New York Community Foundation, the Jane E. Deline Foundation, Youth Philanthropy Council of the Northern New York Community Foundation, and The CAR-FRESHNER Corporation Charitable Fund of the Northern New York Community Foundation. It is also funded by private funders and donors. Those interested can donate on Hospice's website.

Starting the conversation sooner can make a difference.

Hospice referrals don't have to come from just one place. Anyone who recognizes a need can help begin the process. Reaching out earlier allows more time for guidance, comfort, and meaningful moments for both patients and families.

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Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region Wins Health Equity Award



Left to Right: GH ACOO/Director of Behavioral Health South Heather Rich; Certified Recovery Peer Advocate Aquarra Weegar; Certified Recovery Peer Advocate Tara Prentice; and Behavioral Health Operations Manager Elizabeth Stiles. Rochester Regional Health photo

POSTDAM, NY—Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region is proud to announce that it has been selected as a recipient of the 2025 Health Equity Innovation Award from Excellus BlueCross BlueShield. This annual funding opportunity supports nonprofit organizations working to eliminate health disparities and improve health outcomes across the region.

The \$29,100 award will help fund the St. Lawrence Region's Behavioral Health team's Peer-led "Living in Balance" pilot project—an initiative designed to leverage Certified Peer Recovery Advocates working directly with participants to support their journey from a life impacted by substance use to one of sustainable recovery. Using the evidence-based Living in Balance curriculum, the program will provide a structured framework to develop essential life skills, coping strategies, and recovery-oriented knowledge. The program was chosen for its innovative approach, strong community engagement, and alignment

with the goal of advancing health equity.

The Health Equity Innovation Awards reflect Excellus BlueCross BlueShield's commitment to improving community health by investing in programs that promote equity, expand access to care, and support underserved populations.

"We are honored to receive this award and grateful for the opportunity to make a meaningful difference in the lives of those we serve," said Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence Region President Donna McGregor. "By investing in certified peer recovery advocates and the Living in Balance curriculum, we are empowering individuals with experience to help guide others toward sustained recovery and improved quality of life."

For more information about the Living in Balance initiative, please contact Behavioral Health Services at (315) 955-3293.

Potsdam Volleyball Team Supports Cancer Patients



Left to Right: Coach Sidney Outman; Jasmine McKnight; Nora Shelly; Becca McKnight; Center for Cancer Care Oncology Nurse Manager Bridget Gilbert; Charlotte Fiske; Lucy Baker; Shayne Kennedy; Mazzy Comins. Rochester Regional Health photo

POTSDAM—Members of the Potsdam High School Section X Volleyball Team, along with their coach Sidney Outman, recently donated student-created personal

care packages to Rochester Regional Health's Center for Cancer Care at Canton-Potsdam Hospital. The athletes, who fundraise by selling breast cancer awareness

T-shirts, assembled the packages with items such as lip balm, deodorant, and lotion to support patients undergoing cancer treatment.

McGregor

From H7

termination, always centering patient safety, operational excellence, and team well-being. Her leadership has strengthened care delivery across the St. Lawrence Region and reinforced our commitment to rural communities. We are proud to see her recognized nationally for this important work."

"It is an incredible honor to be included on this list," said McGregor. "This recognition reflects the dedication of our physicians, nurses, and team members who show up every day to care for our community with compassion and excellence. Rural hospitals play a vital role in the health of our region, and I am proud to work alongside a team that is so deeply committed to that mission."

Under McGregor's leadership, the St. Lawrence Region has advanced numerous initiatives to enhance patient care, expand access to services, and strengthen partnerships across the North Country. Recent accomplishments include **Gouverneur Hospital** being named a **2025 Top Rural Hospital by the Leapfrog Group**, a national distinction recognizing ex-

cellence in patient safety and quality. The hospital was one of only five rural hospitals nationwide—and the only hospital in New York State—to receive this honor. Gouverneur Hospital also expanded its Behavioral Health services, including a school-based extension at Gouverneur Central School, to help address the growing need for mental health care. In addition, through the generosity of the Gouverneur Hospital Auxiliary, the hospital acquired critical new equipment such as a **GE iPanda Infant Resuscitation Cart** to strengthen emergency care for newborns and a **Generator RFG3 ClosureFast System** to support advanced treatment of vein-related conditions.

At **Massena Hospital**, the past year brought significant milestones that reflect continued investment in local care. The hospital **completed its first full year of Wound Care services**, a valuable addition that is now caring for patients from across St. Lawrence County and neighboring counties, allowing more individuals to receive specialized treatment close to home. In May, Massena Hospital celebrated the **transformation of its Emergency Department** with a ribbon-cutting ceremony honoring the community partners who made the approximately **\$250,000 project** possible, in-

cluding the **Massena Hospital Foundation, Massena Hospital Auxiliary, and numerous donors**. The redesigned space—serving more than 14,000 patients annually—enhances comfort and privacy while improving efficiency and workflow for clinical teams.

Community philanthropy continues to shape Massena Hospital's future. The **Massena Hospital Foundation and Massena Hospital Auxiliary** are also funding the **outpatient lab draw refresh and expansion project**, an investment of approximately **\$125,000** that began in 2025 and is expected to be completed in early 2026. The project will modernize and expand the lab area to better meet growing demand and improve the patient experience.

Critical access hospitals serve as essential lifelines for rural communities, and Becker's Healthcare noted that the leaders on this year's list demonstrate an "unwavering commitment to advancing healthcare access" and to sustaining the resilience of their organizations. McGregor's recognition underscores the St. Lawrence Region's ongoing commitment to ensuring that patients receive exceptional, compassionate care where and when they need it.

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Rochester Regional Health's Canton-Potsdam Hospital Patient Credits Early Detection and Advanced Medicine with Life-Saving Care, Close to Home

POTSDAM, NY— Fred Hartford, a Massena resident and former smoker, consented to a routine lung screening ordered by his primary care provider and he expected a normal check-in.

Fred was not experiencing any symptoms and felt fine. However, that screening did reveal a small nodule deep within his lung—one nearly impossible to reach with conventional tools. Fred's medical team would later determine that the **nodule was Stage 1 lung cancer.**

A coordinated effort between Rochester Regional Health's Canton-Potsdam and Rochester General Hospitals was set in motion when that tiny spot was found early, ultimately leading to a successful diagnosis, treatment, and recovery.

"I never would've known anything was wrong," Fred said. "I felt the same as any other day. But that CT scan caught it early, when it was still small enough to treat. That made all the difference."

How Fred's medical team used new technology

The initial biopsy determined Fred's nodule was too small and located too deep within the lung to safely reach. "They told me it wasn't safe to do it," he recalled. "They needed the new robotic machine." That new machine was the Ion™ Robotic Bronchoscopy platform, recently introduced at Canton-Potsdam Hospital. Within months of its arrival, Fred became one of the program's early patients.

Pulmonologist Rishi Kumar, MD used the state-of-the-art robotic navigation to guide a tiny instrument through Fred's airway with precision, reaching the nodule safely and obtaining a biopsy without the need for more invasive methods. **The care team suspected, and a**



{Fred and Susan Hartford visit with Pulmonologist Rishi Kumar, MD whose expertise with advanced robotic bronchoscopy technology helped detect Fred's lunch cancer early—proving that life-saving care can happen close to home.}

biopsy confirmed, Fred had Stage 1 lung cancer and it was detected early enough to be cured. "Robotic bronchoscopy allows me to reach hard to access areas of the lung with enhanced precision, bringing us right up to the disease to obtain tissue," said Dr. Kumar.

"It wasn't painful at all," Fred said. "I was asleep, and when I woke up, my throat was maybe a little sore, but that was it. The technology let them get to a spot they never could have reached before."

Susan, Fred's wife, remembers how supportive the care team was. "Dr. Kumar explained everything in a way we could understand," she said. "He was honest, comforting, and very clear about why waiting for the Robotic Bronchoscopy was safer. That meant a lot to us."

A partnership from Potsdam to Rochester

Once the biopsy confirmed that the nodule

needed to be removed, Fred traveled to Rochester General Hospital. Upon arriving, Thoracic Surgeon Shuyin Liang, MD, worked with General Surgeon Apostolos Kandilis, MD, from Canton-Potsdam Hospital to perform a successful minimally invasive operation. Because the **cancer was caught at an early stage, Dr. Liang was able to perform an anatomic segmentectomy, which preserves more lung tissue compared to traditional lobectomy. No additional treatments were needed beyond surgery.**

Since Dr. Liang and Dr. Kandilis work closely as a team, Fred was able to have his post-operative follow up appointment with Dr. Kandilis, avoiding unnecessary long-distance travel during his recovery. Dr. Kumar collaborated closely with the surgical team in Rochester, ensuring continuity of care throughout Fred's treatment.

"That partnership be-

tween the hospitals was huge," Susan said. "It felt like one team working together for Fred."

For the Hartfords, the value of having advanced technology and specialty expertise within Rochester Regional Health's St. Lawrence region cannot be overstated. "So many people our age just can't travel," Susan said. "If you can get modern, life-saving care right here, people are more likely to get screened, more likely to be seen, and more likely to catch things early." "The tools we use to obtain biopsies not only give us a diagnosis but also extract enough tissue to perform advanced testing to give patients access to the most current treatment options available," continued Kumar. "Robotic bronchoscopy is enabling earlier, safer and a more reliable diagnosis that guides timely and targeted care, turning uncertainty into precision and hope into action."

"The whole team took excellent care of me, from the pulmonology office to the surgeons," he said. "They were honest, they were careful, and they did what was best for me."

Fred's message for others: "Listen to your provider. Don't put off screening. You might be scared, but getting checked could save your life. It saved mine."

About Robotic Bronchoscopy at Canton-Potsdam Hospital

The Ion Robotic Bronchoscopy platform allows providers to reach small, difficult-to-access areas of the lung with far greater accuracy than traditional methods, leading to earlier detection and treatment of lung disease. Dr. Rishi Kumar and the Canton-Potsdam Hospital team have completed more than 90 procedures since launching the program, expanding access to advanced pulmonary care for those living throughout the St. Lawrence region.



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