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Health Department of Northwest Michigan

Lean Into the ‘Village’

Community Connections supports residents amid soaring costs

“I felt like I finally had an advocate.”

“I was able to contact her by phone, text, and e-mail.”

“She always followed up. We were talking once or twice a week.”

These comments come from area residents who have received help through the Health Department of Northwest Michigan’s (HDNW) free [Community Connections](#) program. And with inflation in the U.S. climbing at its fastest rate in 40 years—up more than 8% from 2021—there’s a growing number of people needing support.

There’s no reason to feel alone. Lean into the Northwest Michigan ‘village.’

“We’re the ones who answer the phone,” said Jen Vollmer, HDNW’s Community Connections HUB Coordinator and Licensed Professional Counselor, noting that people can call themselves, make contact [through the website](#), or receive a referral from a friend, physician, or organization. “We aid people along their journey, whether it’s a one-time assist or a longer-term relationship.”

Community Connections provides a pathway for adults, children, and families to access resources at no cost and with no income qualifications. Through regional collaboration, the staff tracks available funding. The program provides one stop for residents to talk through their needs and access help.

The ease and variety of ways to engage—phone calls, home, or office visits—removes social barriers to health. There’s help for:

- Accessing medical, dental, or mental healthcare
- Buying food or securing a place to live
- Purchasing and preparing healthy foods
- Locating transportation
- Enrolling in health insurance
- Locating help with utility bills
- Finding educational and support programs for improving health, like quitting smoking
- Locating employment opportunities
- Talking through potential abuse or violence

The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is mandated by the Michigan Public Health Code to promote wellness, prevent disease, provide quality healthcare, address health problems of vulnerable populations, and protect the environment for the residents and visitors of Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego counties. For more information, visit nwhealth.org.

“Throughout COVID-19, Community Connections became more important than ever,” Vollmer said. “We met with people who had lost well-paying jobs, worked with families who went from two incomes to one through divorce or other circumstances, and more. Now with the cost of living doubling many prices, we’re here to help, to empower people to help themselves.”

Community Connections covers the four counties of northwest Michigan, as well as 27 other counties that make up the tip of the [Michigan’s mitt](#). In 2021 alone, the program aided 663 people in Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego counties. Regionally, [2,678 people](#) were helped last year.

While [news reports](#) and complaints of soaring costs are widely heard, Community Connections is taking action. To speak with staff, call 800-432-4121 between 8 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday through Friday. To register online, go to <https://northernmichiganchir.org/community-connections/community-connections-referrals/> and fill out the questionnaire.

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Cutline: Meg Smoot, Health Department of Northwest Michigan Community Health Worker, meets with families during Venetian Festival in Charlevoix to see if they need Community Connections.