Sullivan County
Supporting Sullivan Seniors Planning Project

The Challenge
According to the U.S. Census, in 2014, seniors age 65 and over accounted for more than 22 percent of the population of Sullivan County, with 29 percent of households having one or more senior living there; both measure a full 2 percentage points higher than the state average. 35 percent of those seniors have some form of disability. Almost 20 percent of Sullivan County residents live below the poverty level, with the majority of them being seniors and children.

Sullivan County is a rural county at the foot of the Catskills with an average population density of just 80 individuals per square mile. The rural nature of the county means there are almost no public transportation options, long and sometimes treacherous travel to town, and village centers where residents must go to shop, socialize, and tend to personal and medical appointments.

In addition, the 2015 Robert Woods Johnson Foundation Public Health Report ranked Sullivan County 61 out of 62 counties in health outcomes, only ranking better than the Bronx in New York City, due presumably to the fresh Catskill air.

While it has been difficult for officials to gain hard data, county offices estimate that as much as 40 percent of Sullivan County does not have access to broadband or high-speed internet, and there are several pockets in all regions of the county with no internet or cell phone access at all.

Basic services are available to seniors through the Sullivan County Office for the Aging and the Department of Public Health. Those services include information and assistance regarding long-term care; general screening of social, medical, and financial needs; congregate meal sites in four (of 13) municipalities; referrals to care providers; home energy assistance; home health care; and limited transport in population centers. The main offices are located in the center of the county in the towns of Monticello and Liberty respectively. There are no satellite offices and little to no field staff due to small budgets and competing priorities, raising questions around adequate outreach to ensure awareness and then, accessibility to those services by seniors across the county. Anecdotal data suggests that homebound seniors in particular have little knowledge of and access to the limited services that are available.

The Project
CCE Sullivan County (CCE Sullivan) seeks assistance from a team of three Engaged Cornell students to design and implement a research project that will help us more accurately identify the current state of need of Sullivan County residents, age 60 and up by gender and ethnicity in the larger socio-economic context of the entire county, including disparities in accessibility and quality of services, opportunities, and supports between populations; map the landscape of relevant services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) across life areas/disciplines (physical health, mental health, community connection, family, etc...).
available for seniors age 60 and up; identify barriers to access of existing SOS; and identify gaps in the SOS. Student roles would be assigned by discipline and population. For instance:

**Student A**
- Collect, analyze, present current socio-economic state of Sullivan County residents *under age 60*
- Assess SOS needs of Sullivan County residents *under age 60* by gender and ethnicity

**Student B**
- Collect, analyze, present current socio-economic state of Sullivan County residents *age 60 and above*
- Assess SOS needs of Sullivan County residents *age 60 and above* by gender and ethnicity

**Student C**
- Map existing services, opportunities, and supports (SOS) available for Sullivan County adults by age group, i.e. 18-24, 25-35, 35-45, 45-59, 60 and above

**Student Team**
- Identify socio-economic and demographic indicators to be collected to present a picture of the current socio-economic state of Sullivan County residents by age cohort
- Identify life areas and/or disciplines under which to categorize SOS
- Plan and implement assessment of availability, accessibility, and quality of identified SOS for residents by age cohort, gender, ethnicity
- Identify gaps and disparities in SOS by age, gender, ethnicity
- Publish and present joint report
- Propose a process whereby Sullivan County stakeholders may begin to address gaps and disparities in availability and accessibility of SOS across life areas/disciplines for adults over 60

This project will provide CCE Sullivan with baseline information to engage local stakeholders in an intentional educational, planning, and program-development process to ensure that the SOS needed for the growing senior population in the county are relevant, available, accessible, acceptable quality, and an ability to respond to anticipated needs of future generations.

Ultimately, through research-based knowledge, public issues education, collaborations, partnerships, and promoting active and representative participation, the project will enable the community to shape their collective future.

The Engaged Cornell work in Sullivan County will provide a baseline assessment of the state of affairs for Sullivan seniors in the larger community context. CCE Sullivan will continue to survey seniors and update the program landscape map at least every other year as a means to assess the benefits of the project to the community over time. In the meantime, output and outcome data related to the research project and subsequent activities will be collected,
summarized, and reported to the CCE Sullivan Program Advisory Committee (PAC), and interested students and faculty, for the duration of program development and implementation activities. The PAC is a subcommittee of the board of directors and their role is to provide input and general oversight of program evaluation efforts.

**Association Oversight, Expertise, and Support**

CCE Sullivan’s role will be to:

- provide a supportive setting with basic office tools for the student(s) during the summer project;
- provide day-to-day administrative supervision;
- provide input to student(s) and faculty during research project development based on local knowledge;
- provide community connections and referrals to student(s) to implement research;
- provide mentorship in workplace skills, relationship development, and community outreach.

If needed, CCE Sullivan will assist Cornell student(s) in securing local housing, which will be paid for through Engaged Cornell funds.

Project oversight will be provided by Susan Hamilton, CCE Sullivan director of programs. Hamilton will have weekly check-ins with student(s) to address administrative or benchmark and timeline related needs, concerns, and successes.

Programmatic direction and consultation will be provided by Bonnie Lewis, caregiver resource educator, and Sean Welsh, energy and consumer educator. Both educators have more than a decade experience at CCE Sullivan working in family and consumer sciences with senior citizens, their caregivers, and families. They have established relationships with the Sullivan County Office for the Aging, the Alzheimer’s Association, Action Towards Independence, Adult Care Home, congregate meal sites, and AARP and will serve as liaisons and connectors to the senior population. The team will meet as needed to provide tips, insight, contacts, and brainstorms with the student(s).

**Why the Project Matters**

The Supporting Sullivan Seniors Planning Project aligns with both the CCE Sullivan and NYS CCE Strategic Plan Initiative A: University-Community Engagement, Objectives A.1-1.3 and Objectives A.2-2.1, and Initiative B: Core Programming, Objectives B.1-1.2, Objectives B.2-2.3, 2.4-2.5, and Objectives B.4.1-4.2.

The project falls under CCE Sullivan’s Community and Economic Vitality and Youth and Family Services program areas and thus requires a multidisciplinary approach. As noted in the local and statewide plans of work, CCE has a commitment to Sullivan County citizens and local officials to build their capacities so they can solve problems and build strong and vibrant communities. Our family emphasis includes human development and social wellbeing, economic wellbeing, and quality of home and work environments to enable vibrant and resilient communities.
CCE Sullivan has hosted a program that is somewhat unique to the CCE system for almost 15 years, the Caregiver Resource Center. The Caregiver Resource Center is funded through the local Office for the Aging with state and federal Office for the Aging funds and provides informal educational opportunities and referrals for people who provide in house care for aging relatives or friends. Research shows that physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually healthy caregivers are able to give their care-receivers have a safer and better quality of life as they age.

We have had several internal discussions about the lack of language in the statewide and local plans of work addressing the senior population. CCE Sullivan knows that Cornell University has been expanding and strengthening its research and work around aging and related issues and participated in the Dr. Pillemer’s Building Community Legacies Together (BCLT) research project for the first time in 2015. The CCE Sullivan board of directors will be updating the local plan of work language in 2016 to better reflect CCE Sullivan activities with and for the aging population.

This proposed Engaged Cornell project provides an opportunity to diversify Cornell's participation in the interests of Associations through real and relevant applied research. With Baby Boomers retiring in droves now, and for the next 10–15 years, this project is an exemplary example of how the land grant university system can engage with local communities through CCE associations to address emerging and time sensitive issues.

**Team Members**

Colleen Monaghan  
cm638@cornell.edu  
CCE Sullivan County  
Executive Director

Susan Hamilton  
sch248@cornell.edu  
CCE Sullivan County  
Director of Programs

Bonnie Lewis  
bil25@cornell.edu  
CCE Sullivan County  
Caregiver Educator

Sean Welsh  
sw288@cornell.edu  
CCE Sullivan County  
Energy and Consumer Educator