



Mille Lacs Health System



Community Health Needs Assessment Report

**Mille Lacs Health System
Onamia, Minnesota**

Published September 30, 2025

Introduction

Mille Lacs Health System is a not-for-profit, community owned organization. Based in Onamia on the southern edge of Lake Mille Lacs in central Minnesota, Mille Lacs Health System serves many of the individuals living around the lake and in communities to the south. Mille Lacs Health System includes a 18-bed critical access hospital that has a level IV Trauma Center, a 35 unit assisted living facility with separate 8-unit memory care wing, home care, hospice, Basic Life Support (BLS) and Advanced Life Support (ALS) ambulance service, as well as an attached medical clinic. Mille Lacs Health System also operates clinics in the towns of Milaca, Isle, Hillman and Garrison and our medical staff provides coverage to the Ne-la-Shing Clinic on the nearby Mille Lacs Reservation. Mille Lacs Health System operates retail pharmacies in Onamia and Isle, Minnesota.

Our mission is “to assist those residing and visiting the Mille Lacs area in achieving and maintaining optimal health.”

Our organizational values are:

- We hold a reverence for life.
- We strive to ensure access for all.
- We strive to serve all with compassion and hospitality.
- We believe in open, honest and direct communication at all levels.
- We believe collegiality, teamwork, and participation are necessary for excellence.

Our services include:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| • Addiction recovery | • Laboratory testing |
| • Audiology | • Men's health |
| • Behavioral health | • Neurology |
| • Cardiac rehabilitation | • Nutrition services |
| • Cardiology | • Orthopedics |
| • Chiropractic care | • Pain management |
| • Colon cancer screening | • Podiatry |
| • Dermatology services | • Rehabilitation services |
| • Diabetes education | • Respiratory care |
| • Diagnostic imaging/radiology | • Senior care unit |
| • Ear, Nose and Throat | • Sleep medicine |
| • Emergency Services | • Surgery |
| • Family medicine | • Transitional care |
| • Home care | • Urgent Care |
| • Hospice | • Urology |
| • Infusion therapy | • Women's health |
| • Internal Medicine | |

Surgical services at Mille Lacs Health System include abdominal procedures, breast surgery, elbow surgery, endoscopic examinations (colonoscopy, upper endoscopy and hemorrhoid treatment), Ear, Nose and Throat/plastics, hand surgery, knee surgery, OB/Gynecology, Pain Management, podiatry, shoulder surgery and urology.

The hospital also provides swing bed services for patients who have recovered from an illness or injury but are not yet able to care for themselves at home. It's designed to meet each patient's need for continued rehabilitation and recovery in a hospital setting. Services include skilled nursing for IV or extended antibiotic infusions, wound care, post-surgery care, physical therapy, speech therapy, occupational therapy, respiratory therapy, nutritional support, counseling, insulin monitoring, and enteral feeding.

Despite rapid technological change and the economic stresses of today's healthcare environment, Mille Lacs Health System remains strong. Numerous medical and surgical specialists have joined our healthcare team, providing diagnostic and support services that allow for a sophisticated level of diagnoses and treatment in a local setting.

Our mission and values compel us to strive to be the best place to give and receive care. That means we genuinely care about not only the medical care we give, but also the employees who

provide that care. We believe in order to assist our patients with maintaining optimal health; patients need to be seen as an important part of our team. In addition to traditional services, we now provide counseling services as well as health education, wellness, and rehabilitation programs.

As with everything we do at Mille Lacs Health System, you and your individual needs are at the center of the care you will receive at our hospital. The plan we develop together will include education about your illness, treatments, medications, and discharge planning. Educational materials for you and your loved ones are available to supplement the teaching you receive by members of the healthcare team, which may include the following: physicians, mid-level providers, nurses, nurse's aides, discharge planner, pharmacist, respiratory therapy, speech therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, nutritional services, radiology technicians, laboratory technicians, social services, and spiritual counselors.

Thanks to the hard work of many dedicated employees, directors, and trustees — and strong support from area communities — healthcare in the Mille Lacs region has become better and better since those first patients were admitted to the Onamia hospital in 1956. We are proud to play a significant role in improving the quality of life of the people and communities we serve. We are proud of being part of a community-driven, community-supported healthcare system. We look to the future with confidence.

Mille Lacs Health System is pleased to submit this Community Health Needs Assessment. We do so both as a matter of compliance with Section 501(r)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, as mandated in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, and as an obligation to those we serve. As an organization, we have taken this change in law as an opportunity to improve our community service and continuously focus on meeting the changing health care needs of our community.

Consistent with the requirements of Section 501(r)(3) the Community Health Needs Assessment Report is organized as follows:

- Our Community
- Review of Previous Community Health Needs Assessments
- Community Health Needs Assessment Methodology
- Prioritized Significant Community Health Needs
- Health Resources

Our Community



Mille Lacs Health System is located in the city of Onamia in Mille Lacs County, Minnesota. However, we have historically defined our “community” as a broader area, including the communities around the southern half of Lake Mille Lacs and the towns south of the lake down to Milaca. Based on inpatient and outpatient usage in recent years, our primary service area includes the following zip codes and towns:

- 56359 – Onamia
- 56342 – Isle
- 56386 – Wahkon
- 56338 – Hillman
- 56450 – Garrison
- 56353 – Milaca

Over 80% of our inpatient and outpatient usage is from individuals living within this primary service area. The remaining usage is attributable to individuals living in the broader community as well as individuals

vacationing near Lake Mille Lacs. Throughout this document, all references to our community refer to these six towns and their surrounding countryside.

Although our defined community does not exactly align with the borders of Mille Lacs County, we use Mille Lacs County as a proxy for our community for purposes of quantitative demographic data. We believe any differences between the demographics of our actual community and Mille Lacs County are minimal.

One special aspect of our community is Lake Mille Lacs itself. According to the Mille Lacs Area Tourism Council,

“Minnesota's beautiful Lake Mille Lacs area is where you'll find the memories you've been looking forward to creating. We are the premier Walleye factory in central Minnesota, just 30 minutes from Brainerd and 90 miles north of Minneapolis and St. Paul. We offer something for everyone in the family. Whether you're making a trip to Onamia, Isle, Wahkon, Malmø or Garrison to see the huge walleyes or the fall colors, picnicking in the two State Parks, hiking or biking our multi-use trails, cross-country skiing or just relaxing in a cozy resort, it's a trip worth taking. The visitor to Mille Lacs is presented with an array of recreational options. Each and every season reveals a different dimension of Mille Lacs. Fishing for Walleye, Muskie, Bass and more. Snowmobiling, Swimming, Bird & Wildlife

watching, Shopping, Museums, Golfing, Hunting, Casino Gaming, Community Festivals. If your desire is to make your convention or business meeting a success, then visit our area with all its amenities. From small group meetings to entire company week-long retreats, our convention and meeting spaces can accommodate you.”

Our community also includes the Grand Casino Mille Lacs Hotel. With 494 rooms, the Grand Casino Mille Lacs is one of the largest casino hotels in the state of Minnesota. Such attractions mean that temporary visitors are extremely common, and we are a popular retirement location.

In 2020, the U.S. Census Bureau conducted the nation’s most recent census and published that data by county. Similarly, the Population Health Institute collects and reports health data and demographic data by county on an annual basis. U.S. census data is primarily from the 2020 census, with some figures being estimated based on that census and others being actual data from subsequent years. Population Health Institute data is as of July 2023.

Comparison of Demographic Changes – Minnesota and Mille Lacs County

	MN 2021	MN 2023	MN Change		Mille Lacs 2021	Mille Lacs 2023	Mille Lacs Change
Population	5,707,390	5,737,915	0.53%		26,867	27,427	2.08%
Age < 18	23.1%	22.7%	-1.73%		23.5%	23.1%	-1.7%
Age 65+	16.7%	17.8%	6.59%		18.2%	18.7%	2.75%
Female	49.9%	49.9%	-		49.2%	49.1%	-0.2%
Caucasian	83.0%	76.9%	-7.35%		90.1%	88.8%	-1.44%
African American	7.4%	7.6%	2.7%		0.7%	0.7%	-
American Indian	1.4%	1.4%	-		6.3%	5.5%	-12.7%
Asian	5.4%	5.5%	1.85%		0.7%	0.8%	14.29%
Hispanic	5.8%	6.5%	12.07%		2.8%	2.5%	-10.71%
Per Capita Income	\$38,881	\$43,000	10.59%		\$29,149	\$32,000	9.78%
Uninsured	5.9%	6.0%	1.69%		8.1%	8.0%	-1.23%
Rural	26.7%	28.1%	5.24%		70.8%	81.8%	15.54%

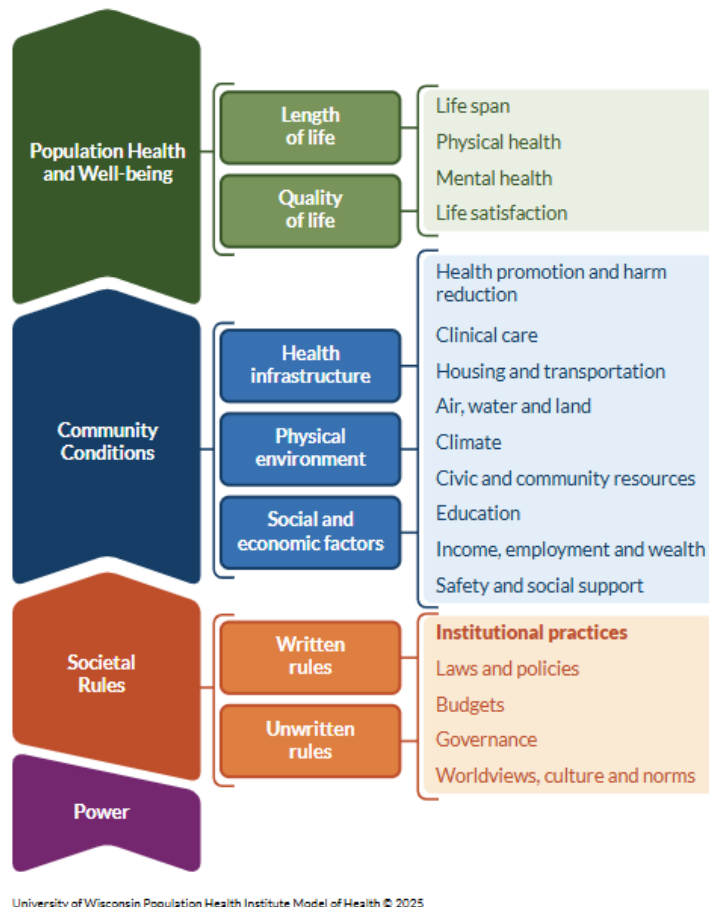
Mille Lacs County is primarily Caucasian. We have a large Native American population living in and around the reservation of the Mille Lacs Band of the Ojibwe, although Native Americans are the one minority demographic that decreased in Mille Lacs County between 2021 and 2023. Throughout the community health needs assessment process, we carefully considered the special health needs of the Native American population.

Both Minnesota and Mille Lacs County have experienced similar trends in our aging populations. In 2021, Mille Lacs County had a larger percentage of youth and elderly individuals than Minnesota as a whole. Between 2021 and 2023, both the state and our community experienced a decrease in the percentage of youth and an increase in the percentage of elderly individuals. Mille Lacs County continues to have a higher percentage of elderly individuals in our community than Minnesota.

Although the percentage of uninsured individuals in our community decreased between 2021 and 2023, the rate increased in Minnesota overall. Similarly, per capita income increased more in Minnesota between 2021 and 2023 than it did in our community overall. Unfortunately, Mille Lacs County still has a higher uninsured rate and a lower per capita income than in Minnesota overall.

Our community is largely rural, with small towns surrounding Lake Mille Lacs and spread out south of the lake.

The Population Health Institute (“PHI”) publishes annual health data for every county in the United States. The data is aggregated into population health and well-being, community conditions, and social rules. The PHI separates population health and well being into length of life and quality of life. Community conditions are comprised of health infrastructure, physical environment, and social and economic factors. Social rules include written rules and unwritten rules.



Source: University of Wisconsin Population Health Institute

Demographic Comparison – Minnesota and Mille Lacs County

	Minnesota	Mille Lacs County
Life expectancy	79.3	73.9
Frequent physical distress	10%	13%
Frequent mental distress	16%	19%
Adult smoking	13%	20%
Adult obesity	34%	43%

The county health rankings provide a comparison of our community's health. Relative to the state, our community is positioned among the lower ranks for overall health factors and outcomes.

Mille Lacs County Health Rankings out of 87 Minnesota Counties

	2016	2019	2022	2025
Overall Health Factors	82	82	83	84
Overall Health Outcomes	77	78	84	84

Out of 87 Minnesota counties, Mille Lacs County ranks 84th in health factors and 84th in health outcomes, close to last in each measure.

Mille Lacs County's health factors have declined over the past ten years. Since current health determinants strongly influence future outcomes, these rankings suggest that residents might face shorter lifespans and lower quality of life due to previous unfavorable choices and living conditions. If poor health habits and circumstances persist, this negative trend is likely to continue.

Review of Previous Community Health Needs Assessments

Mille Lacs Health System conducted community health needs assessments in 2013, 2016, 2019 and 2022, publishing the related Community Health Needs Assessment Reports in September 2013, 2016, 2019 and 2022 respectively. In those assessments, the following needs were identified:

2013	2016	2019	2022
Access to care	Behavioral health	Transportation & access	Mental health
Obesity	Chronic diseases	Substance abuse	Elder health
Chronic diseases	Obesity	Mental health	

Between October 2022 and September 2025, the following actions were taken to address the identified significant health needs. These included hiring two new mental health providers to see patients in our clinic, and continuing to recruit additional help. Recruiting four new family practice APPs and two additional MD's to join our staff. Securing the future of our Long Term Care facility by partnering with Cura to take over ownership of our Skilled Nursing Facility.

A copy of the 2022 Community Health Needs Assessment is available on Mille Lacs Health System's website at <https://www.mlhealthorg/patients-visitors/patient-resources>.

Community Health Needs Assessment Methodology

Mille Lacs Health System's executives led the planning, conduct, and reporting of the community health needs assessment. We contracted with CliftonLarsonAllen LLP, a professional services firm, to assist with the community health needs assessment process.

Interviews

We gathered qualitative information and perspectives on community health needs through one-on-one interviews with key community stakeholders. These interviews were conducted in July 2025.

The primary goal of these interviews was to ascertain a range of perspectives on the community's health needs. We gathered information from the following specified groups within our community:

- People with special knowledge or expertise in public health
- Government health departments and other government agencies
- Leaders, representatives or members of medically underserved populations
- Leaders, representatives or members of low-income populations
- Leaders, representatives or members of minority populations.

In addition to medical providers and department heads from Mille Lacs Health System, the following agencies, organizations and businesses participated in the community health needs assessment process by contributing their perspectives, opinions and observations. We thank them for their past and continued assistance.

- Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services
- Onamia Police Department
- Milaca Public Schools
- Onamia Public Schools
- Mille Lacs County Commissioners

We believe each of these organizations is a qualified representative of the identified groups because the nature of their work brings them into contact with those groups on a regular basis. For many of the organizations listed, the nature of their mission and purpose requires them to consider the special needs of the groups identified.

Quantitative Data

The community health needs assessment included consideration and analysis of the following publicly available data:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
 - https://www.cdc.gov/stop-overdose/caring/fentanyl-facts.html?CDC_AAref_Val=https://www.cdc.gov/stopoverdose/fentanyl/index.html
 - <https://www.cdc.gov/children-mental-health/data-research/index.html>
- Mille Lacs Area Tourism Council
 - <https://www.exploreminnesota.com/profile/mille-lacs-area-tourism-council/10015>
- Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe Department of Health and Human Services
 - <https://millelacsband.com/government/resources1/departments-of-health-human-services>
- Mille Lacs County 2023-2027 Community Health Improvement Plan
 - <https://www.millelacs.mn.gov/1209/Community-Health>
- Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services' Mille Lacs County Adult Mental Health Needs Assessment
 - <https://www.millelacs.mn.gov/DocumentCenter/View/3802/Mille-Lacs-County-Adult-Mental-Health-Needs-Assessment-PDF>
- Mille Lacs Health System
 - <https://www.mlhealth.org>
- Minnesota Department of Health

- <https://www.health.mn.gov/communities/suicide/documents/2025suicidelegreport.pdf>
- <https://www.health.state.mn.us/facilities/ruralhealth/docs/wfcrecrprt25.pdf>
- <https://www.health.state.mn.us/data/mchs/pubs/cannabisuse2025.pdf>
- National Institutes of Health
 - <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>
 - <https://www.nih.gov/news-events/nih-research-matters/trends-us-methamphetamine-use-associated-deaths>
 - <https://nida.nih.gov/publications/research-reports/methamphetamine/what-are-long-term-effects-methamphetamine-misuse>
 - <https://nida.nih.gov/research-topics/commonly-used-drugs-charts#prescription-opioids>
- Population Health Institute's county health rankings
 - <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/methodology-and-sources/methods>
 - <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/app/minnesota/2022/overview>
 - https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/sites/default/files/media/document/CHR2022_MN_0.pdf
 - <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/health-data/minnesota/millelacs?year=2025>
- U.S. Census Bureau
 - <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/MN.millelacscountyminnesota/PST045221>
- American Health Care Association/National Center for Assisted Living, "State Of The Sector: Nursing Home Labor Staffing Shortages Persist Despite Unprecedented Efforts To Attract More Staff"
 - <https://www.ahcancal.org/News-and-Communications/Press-Releases/Pages/State-Of-The-Sector-Nursing-Home-Staffing-Shortages-Persist-Despite-Unprecedented-Efforts-To-Attract-More-Staff.aspx>
- World Health Organization ("WHO")
 - <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>
- Health Resources & Services Administration
 - <https://data.hrsa.gov/tools/shortage-area/hpsa-find>
 - <https://data.hrsa.gov/topics/health-workforce/ahrf>

Information Gaps

Mille Lacs Health System did not receive input directly from all members of the low-income, minority and medically underserved populations in our community, instead obtaining input from individuals and organizations that work with those individuals on a daily basis. Although we are unable to identify any specific information gaps, we recognize that members of those populations may have provided different information if they directly participated. Additionally, we recognize that other individuals who weren't invited to participate may have provided different input.

Mille Lacs Health System did not receive input directly from the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Representatives from the Band were invited to participate but no response was received. We

obtained information from individuals and organizations that work with the Band on a regular basis. Although we are unable to identify any specific information gaps, we recognize that members of the Band may have provided different information if they directly participated.

Request for Feedback

Mille Lacs Health System was willing to consider written comments related to its prior Community Health Needs Assessment Reports and Implementation Strategies but received no such input. If any reader would like to provide input on this community health needs assessment, they can submit their comment(s), in writing, to the following address:

Attention: Chief Executive Officer
RE: Community Health Needs Assessment
Mille Lacs Health System
200 North Elm Street, P.O. Box A
Onamia, MN 56359

Determination of Significance

While many needs were identified during the community health needs assessment process, this report focuses on those needs that were deemed significant by Mille Lacs Health System. A health need's significance was evaluated based on many factors. The factor given the most weight was the relative importance placed on the health need by the community participants as a whole. Other factors included potential preventative impact, the likely quantity of change, and impact on quality of life. The decision was made by Mille Lacs Health System's executives.

Prioritization of Significant Community Health Needs

The significant community health needs were then prioritized by Mille Lacs Health System based on various factors including potential preventative impact, the likely quantity of change, impact on quality of life, proximity with other health needs, our mission, cost, and community satisfaction. The decision was also made by Mille Lacs Health System's executives.

Prioritized Significant Community Health Needs

Through the community health needs assessment, Mille Lacs Health System identified the following significant community health needs and prioritized them in the given order:

1. Primary Health Needs
 - a. Mental Health
 - b. Access to Health Care
2. Secondary Health Needs
 - a. Substance Abuse
 - b. Obesity
 - c. Elderly Care

The following is a discussion of these significant community health needs.

Mental Health

Mental health across all age ranges remains a significant concern among community members. For children and young adults, depression and anxiety are commonly reported, while older adults frequently face challenges such as depression, loneliness, dementia, and Alzheimer's Disease. Each of these issues has been a longstanding concern within our community.

According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as of 2021, one in five U.S. children, ages 3 to 17, had been diagnosed with a mental, emotional, or behavioral health condition. According to the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, the prevalence is even higher among low-income youth (21%), youth in the child welfare system (50%) and youth in the juvenile justice system (70%). Additionally, an estimated 49.5% of adolescents have had a mental health disorder at some point in their lives. Among children ages 3-17, 11.4% were diagnosed with ADHD, 11% were diagnosed with anxiety, 4% were diagnosed with depression, and 8% were diagnosed with various other behavior problems.

Based on publicly available data, our community members suffered from mental distress slightly more than the average Minnesotan in 2020 (approximately 15%), but the percentage in our community increased to 19% by 2022 while only increasing to 16% across Minnesota. This means the ratio of adults suffering from frequent mental distress increased from one-in-six to almost one-in-five in recent years.

Community participants expressed concern for mental health conditions, with far more concern for the low-income population in our area. Our area has an abnormally high suicide rate and it slightly worsened within the last year. Although publicly available data is not recent enough to evaluate changes in the last year, between 2018 and 2020 Mille Lacs County averaged 26 suicide deaths per 100,000 individuals, which is almost double the national average of 14 suicide deaths. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, the suicide rate for American Indians in 2022 was 25.4 per 100,000 with the next highest rate among any race being 15.5 per 100,000 among Caucasian youth. From the Minnesota Department of Health:

“In 2022 and 2023, American Indian or Alaska Natives had a higher suicide rate than other racial or ethnic groups in Minnesota. Conversely, white Minnesotans made up 86% of suicide deaths in 2023, highlighting differences in the racial/ethnic distribution of suicide compared to the underlying population.

“Suicide is complex and requires a comprehensive public health approach that involves all facets of society. A public health approach starts with convening, connecting, and communicating with partners from multiple sectors, all working together to prevent suicidal experiences. MDH and the Taskforce engaged with Minnesotans across the state in a data-driven planning process.”

The above facts all appear to support participants' concerns about the long-term mental health conditions in our community.

Cognitive decline among elderly individuals is a recognized issue nationwide. In our community, resources such as the geriatric psychiatric unit at Mille Lacs Health System are available. Community participants indicated an interest in increased access through additional beds and health care providers (specifically those who are Medicare certified), particularly for low-income individuals. Concerns were also raised regarding the limited resources for children. Access to effective care for children is affected by various factors, including the fact that affordable facilities

typically operate at or near capacity, while facilities with available space may charge higher fees that are inaccessible for low-income families. This situation can result in extended wait times for children to receive needed health care. Additionally, mental health concerns may be viewed differently than other health issues, which can influence whether individuals seek care. These perceptions may be especially pronounced in rural communities. There may also be increased difficulty when parents or adults consider mental health care for their children or elderly relatives. Community participants reported that the stigma associated with mental health issues does affect access to care in the area.

In a 2013 survey by the Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services, transportation was identified as the top concern related to mental health. In our assessment, community participants echoed that this is still a very real issue. The community has always had extremely limited mental health care services, partially because several larger communities have such services within a reasonable distance (approximately 100 miles or less) from Mille Lacs County. Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services communicated that a transportation advisory group was created. This group works to collaborate with different entities and agencies to leverage resources in order to alleviate transportation issues.

Accessing effective mental health care often necessitates multiple appointments over an extended period, making travel distance a significant obstacle for individuals with limited financial resources or time. This issue is particularly pronounced among low-income and rural populations. For those with access to a vehicle, expenses related to fuel and vehicle maintenance may pose challenges, while others may lack private transportation altogether. The absence of a public transportation system in our community, coupled with the limited availability or high cost of alternative transport options, further exacerbates these barriers. Additionally, some individuals, especially those with lower incomes, may be unable to secure time off from work for repeated appointments due to concerns about job security. Young and elderly members of the community face additional difficulties, as they often rely on others for transportation to access care.

Access to Health Care

Throughout the interview process, access to health care was frequently identified as one of the most significant health needs in our community.

The initial concern for community members was for individual's ability to physically reach a medical provider. As previously outlined, the rising costs associated with vehicle ownership and recent increases in fuel prices have diminished the capacity of lower-income individuals to rely on personal vehicles as they did in the past. Additionally, the local area lacks ride-sharing options such as Lyft and Uber, taxi services, and regular public bus/train transportation. Consequently, these transportation challenges often result in residents utilizing ambulance services for non-emergency medical needs simply as a means of accessing hospital care.

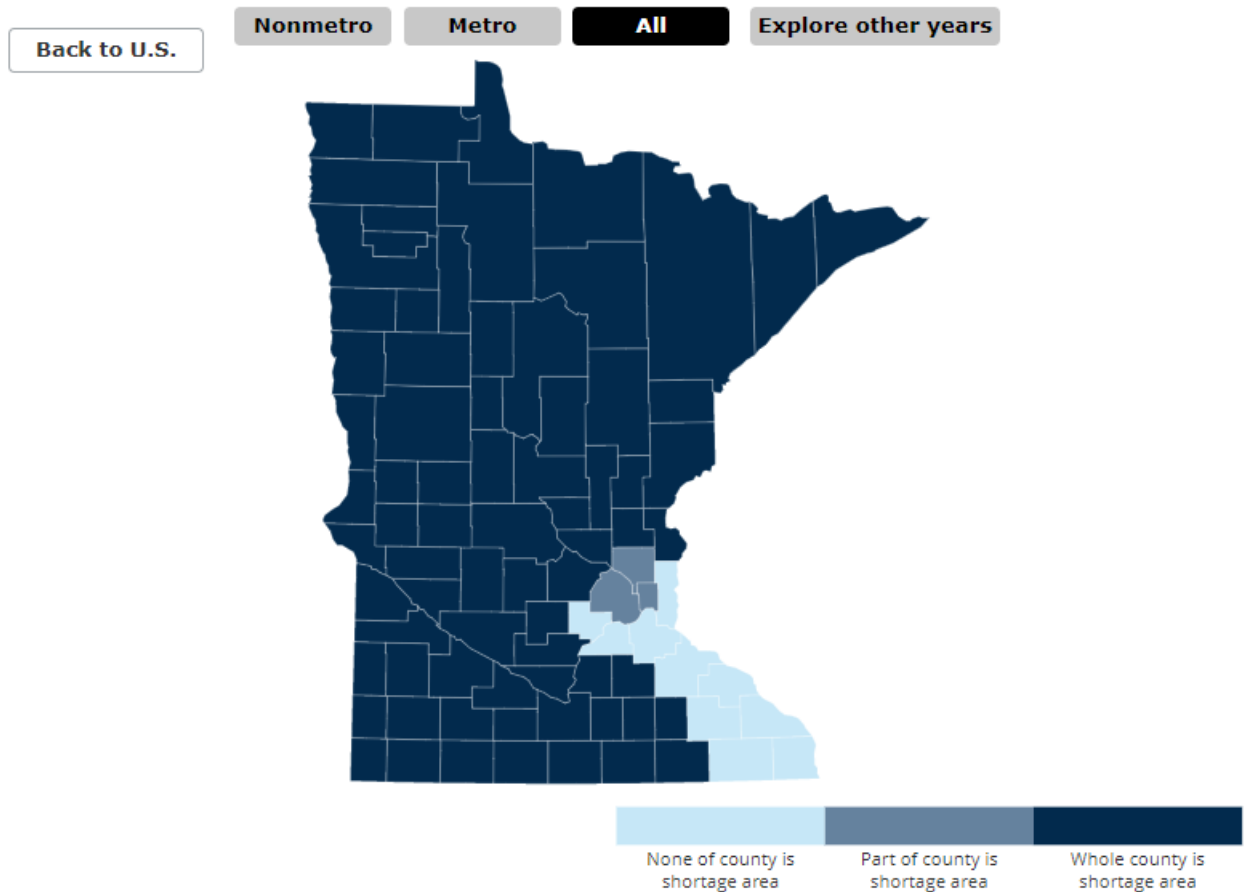
Financial barriers to healthcare access have emerged as a substantial issue. According to community participants, a considerable number of adults and children postpone or forego essential medical services due to economic limitations. This trend extends to mental health care and prescription medications, with some individuals opting to skip doses or refrain from filling prescriptions in order to manage costs. Medicaid recipients are especially affected by these cost barriers. In Mille Lacs County, Medicaid enrollment is notably high at 29.8%, compared to approximately 22% in Minnesota. Consequently, reductions in Medicaid funding can have a direct and significant effect on a large segment of the community.

Over the past decade, telemedicine has seen increased adoption among healthcare providers nationwide as a means to maintain continuity of patient care. Mille Lacs Health System continues to utilize telemedical offerings to control healthcare costs and deliver services not otherwise accessible within the community. While community members recognize the value of these services, concerns have been raised regarding the potential challenges of fostering strong doctor-patient relationships through virtual appointments. This issue is particularly pronounced in mental health care, where building trust and rapport is essential.

Healthcare services in Mille Lacs County have historically been limited. Mille Lacs Health System has expanded access and enhanced care quality but continues to encounter difficulties recruiting physicians and clinical care providers to the area. Community members reported that while Mille Lacs Health System collaborates with individuals outside its service region to deliver specialty services regularly, residents are often referred elsewhere for specialized medical needs. Participants indicated a desire for additional local specialists, including surgeons, neurologists, oncologists, ENT specialists, and obstetricians. Recruiting efforts for these roles are ongoing. Access to mental health and substance abuse programs also remains challenging, despite efforts by Mille Lacs Health System and other organizations to increase staff in these areas.

In 2021, Mille Lacs County had one medical provider for every 1,580 residents, which was approximately 30% worse than Minnesota's average of one medical provider for every 1,130 residents. Similarly, Mille Lacs County had one mental health provider for every 370 residents, compared to Minnesota's average of one mental health provider for every 280 residents.

Health Professional Shortage Areas: Mental Health, by County, 2022 - Minnesota



Mille Lacs County's shortage of mental health professionals is not a problem specific to our community or even to Minnesota. It is a nationwide problem and one that does not have an easy fix.

Substance Abuse

Substance abuse covers a broad range of health issues, including tobacco, alcohol, prescription drugs and illicit drugs. Participants—including law enforcement officials, social service workers, and medical professionals—indicated that the most prevalent substances abused in our service area are tobacco, methamphetamines (“meth”), opioids, heroin, cocaine, and alcohol. Of particular concern to participants is the number of drug overdose deaths related to Fentanyl-laced substances. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine. It was originally developed as a painkiller for extreme post-surgery pain and late-stage cancer patients. Powdered fentanyl looks just like many other drugs. It's commonly mixed with drugs like heroin, cocaine and meth and made into pills that are made to resemble other prescription opioids. In its liquid form, fentanyl can be found in nasal sprays, eye drops, or coated on paper or small candies. Aside from its extreme potency, fentanyl is dangerous because of its difficulty to detect. Drugs may contain deadly levels of fentanyl that you wouldn't be able to see, taste or smell. It's nearly impossible to tell whether something has been laced with fentanyl except by directly testing for fentanyl. The overdose concern appears warranted in our community. Between 2020 and 2022, Mille Lacs County averaged 46 overdose deaths per 100,000 people,

approximately 209% higher than Minnesota's average of 22 drug overdose deaths per 100,000 people.

According to the National Institutes of Health, alcohol is the most commonly abused substance in the United States. In a 2023 survey, 84.9% of adults reported drinking alcohol at some point in their lifetime and 67.1% reported that they drank alcohol in the last month. In the same survey, 21.6% of youth ages 12-17 reported drinking alcohol at some point in their lifetime and 6.9% reported drinking alcohol in the last month. 23.5% of adults reported that they engaged in binge drinking within the last month. The same study found that 2.9% of youth between the ages of twelve and seventeen had alcohol use disorder (AUD), a chronic brain disorder marked by compulsive drinking, loss of control over alcohol use, and negative emotions when not drinking. AUD in this age-group was more common among girls than boys. Unfortunately, only 7.9% of people who had AUD reported receiving any kind of treatment within the last year.

According to the Population Health Institute, in 2023, 24% of adults in Mille Lacs County and 23% of Minnesotans indicated that they drink excessively. Additionally, 32% of Mille Lacs County and 31% of Minnesota driving deaths involved alcohol impairment. Alcohol abuse is a significant concern because of its commonality and the major impact it has on our community.

- In the United States, the rate of alcohol-related emergency department visits increased 47% between 2006 and 2014, which translates into approximately 210,000 additional visits per year.
- In 2017, approximately 10.5% of U.S. children lived with a parent who has AUD.
- Overall, alcohol contributes to about 7.1% of all emergency department visits.
- An estimated 178,000 people die from alcohol-related causes annually, making it of the leading causes of preventable death in the United States.
- In 2022, alcohol-impaired driving accounted for 32% of all driving deaths.
- In 2010, alcohol misuse cost the United States approximately \$249 billion, with three-quarters of that being attributable to binge drinking.
- Research indicates that alcohol use during the teenage years can interfere with normal adolescent brain development and increase the risk of developing AUD.

According to the National Institutes of Health, methamphetamine ("meth") use in the United States increased by 43% between 2015 and 2019, but the rates of overdose deaths attributable to meth close to tripled in the same time period, implying a much greater risk of overdosing if you use meth. The data further suggested that people who use meth have become more diverse. Historically, meth use has been prevalent among middle-aged white people. But the researchers found a tenfold increase in methamphetamine-use disorder (MUD) without injection among the African-American population. This was much larger than among other racial and ethnic groups. MUD without injection also quadrupled among people aged 18-23 years, which was a much larger increase than the growth among older age groups. At the national level, several socioeconomic factors are also associated with meth use and MUD. These include low educational attainment, low household income, lack of insurance, housing instability, and involvement with the criminal justice system, generally indicating that it has a great impact on lower-income individuals. There were also stronger relationships between meth use and other illnesses, such as hepatitis, HIV/AIDS, sexually transmitted diseases, and/or depression.

Community participants expressed concerns about meth primarily because of the major consequences of its use. According to the National Institutes of Health, people who use meth long-term may exhibit symptoms that can include significant anxiety, confusion, insomnia, mood disturbances and violent behavior. They may also display psychotic features including paranoia, visual and auditory hallucinations, and delusions. Psychotic symptoms may last for months or years after a person quits using meth, and stress has been shown to precipitate spontaneous recurrence of meth psychosis. These and other problems reflect significant changes to the brain caused by meth use. Neuroimaging studies have demonstrated alterations in the activity of the dopamine system that are associated with motor speed and impaired verbal learning, as well as severe structural and functional changes in areas of the brain associated with emotion and memory. In addition to the neurological and behavioral consequences of meth abuse, long-term users also suffer physical effects such as weight loss, severe tooth decay, tooth loss and skin sores.

Heroin abuse made a resurgence in the late 1990s and early 2000s when a nationwide effort was made to crack down on meth production in the United States by limiting access to the necessary ingredients for its production. While those efforts were effective in reducing the manufacture of meth in the U.S., the long-term results were (a) that meth production moved to other countries who could then import it to the U.S. and (b) the decline of meth was accompanied by an increase in heroin abuse. Heroin can cause damage to various organs, including the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys. It can also cause breathing problems, collapsed veins, and poses special problems related to the transmission of HIV, Hepatitis C, and other diseases that can occur with sharing needles. The resurgence of opiate-related problems in the United States has increased emergency room visits, crime, homicides, high school dropouts, and loss of employment across the nation.

Participants noted concerns regarding marijuana (cannabis) use. Data from the Minnesota Department of Health indicate that cannabis-related poisonings rose from 281 cases in 2018 to 788 in 2023, reflecting a corresponding increase in cannabis use. Additionally, the proportion of poisonings involving children under age five, when cannabis was identified as the poison, increased from 7% to 24% during the same period. Recreational cannabis use was legalized in Minnesota in May 2023, with dispensaries expected to open in 2025. It is important to note that tribal governments are not required to adhere to state licensing timelines. Given the current trends, the incidence of cannabis-related poisonings may continue to rise.

Obesity

As indicated above in the “Our Community” Section, four out of every ten adults in Mille Lacs County are obese. Community participants indicated a multitude of factors that impact obesity, such as:

- Excessive use of electronics like video games, social media and television
- Too much time spent working leaves little time or energy for physical activity
- Limited availability of healthful foods through local stores and restaurants
- The cost of healthful foods such as lean meats, fruits and vegetables
- A shortage of affordable, convenient exercise options for adults and youth
- A culture of preparing and sharing unhealthful foods at social gatherings

The concerns above can be summarized as two overall factors that are likely to impact obesity in our area: healthy eating and active living. Poor physical health (obesity) was also identified as an

area of concern in the 2023 – 2027 Mille Lacs County Community Health Improvement Plan published by the Mille Lacs County Health Department.

Outside of Milaca, access to affordable, healthy foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables and meats is a significant concern in our community. There are currently no grocery stores located in the area. Residents are able to purchase food at stores in Onamia, Isle, Garrison and Milaca, although selections are generally limited to basic foodstuffs (e.g., bread, milk, eggs), processed foods, boxed foods, and canned goods. Additionally, a food pantry is available in Onamia but it only delivers food to participating individuals once per month. Otherwise, residents can only access the limited foods that are available at gas stations, convenience stores, dollar stores and similar businesses throughout the county. Similarly, while residents enjoy some restaurants and fast-food chains throughout the county, the foods offered by those restaurants tend to be relatively unhealthy.

If healthy foods were to become more easily accessible in the area, community participants expressed concern that healthy eating would still not be instantly achieved for a couple of reasons. First, community members may not have sufficient cooking experience and knowledge to be able to turn healthy foods into meals that they and their families would happily eat. Improvement in this area would likely require significant education on meal preparation and recipes. Second, as adults in our community work very hard to support themselves and their families, they may not have sufficient time to regularly prepare healthy meals. One reason for the popularity of fast food and packaged meals is that they tend to be prepared quickly. Improvement in this area would likely require either education on efficient meal preparation or occupational/living changes that provide community members with more time to prepare healthy meals.

As discussed above in the “Our Community” Section, Mille Lacs County has a wealth of outdoor activities. Unfortunately, many of these activities such as boating, fishing and hunting may not be easily accessible to low-income individuals, community members who need to work long hours or multiple jobs, youth and elderly individuals. While 81% of Minnesotans live within a half mile of a park or three miles of a recreational facility, only 46% of our community members meet this criterion. Furthermore, the 46% of our community that live relatively close to a park or recreation center are the individuals living in or around the city of Milaca. Individuals living throughout the rest of the county do not have such access. After Milaca, the next largest town in our community is Isle; the third largest is Onamia. Both Isle and Onamia have a fitness center operated by the respective school district, although the location, cost and hours of operation can each limit accessibility. Additionally, the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe has an aquatic and fitness center in the southwestern corner of Lake Mille Lacs but it is only open to Band members and Band employees.

Elder Health

As mentioned in the “Our Community” section above, over 18% of our community is age 65 or older. This is slightly higher than the national average of 17.7% and Minnesota’s average of 17.8%. We feel it important to consider the special health needs of the significant number of elderly individuals in our community. These health needs can be broken down into three general issues of chronic health conditions, transportation, and appropriate housing.

First, community participants expressed concern regarding the general deterioration of health as community members age. According to the World Health Organization,

“At the biological level, ageing results from the impact of the accumulation of a wide variety of molecular and cellular damage over time. This leads to a gradual

decrease in physical and mental capacity, a growing risk of disease and ultimately death. These changes are neither linear nor consistent, and they are only loosely associated with a person's age in years. The diversity seen in older age is not random. Beyond biological changes, ageing is often associated with other life transitions such as retirement, relocation to more appropriate housing and the death of friends and partners.

“Common conditions in older age include hearing loss, cataracts and refractive errors, back and neck pain and osteoarthritis, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, diabetes, depression and dementia. As people age, they are more likely to experience several conditions at the same time.”

While Mille Lacs Health System can directly treat some of these health conditions through our cardiology, diabetes, kidney health, orthopedics, respiratory care, urology, rehabilitation and senior care services, many specialty services require traveling to larger hospitals in cities like Minneapolis (90 miles from Onamia), St. Paul (94 miles) and St. Cloud (55 miles). Community members expressed concern that elderly individuals who are able to drive may not be comfortable dealing with busier traffic conditions in the larger cities and that others in our community don't have consistent, reliable, affordable transportation in the first place. As mentioned above, degrading visual acuity and mental capacity are two common conditions that afflict older individuals, making driving more stressful and dangerous as a person ages. Additionally, because many older individuals live on a fixed income, community members worry that the cost of maintaining a vehicle (repairs, insurance, etc.) and large surges in the price of gasoline leading to a larger financial burden on elderly individuals than many other adults.

Finally, participants expressed concern that elderly individuals in our community may live on their own, including after a spouse has passed away, longer than may be healthy for them. The negative impact of living independently can include difficulties with maintaining and cleaning the home, meal preparation, administering medications, taking care of wounds/injuries, and response time when a significant health condition like a heart attack or fall occurs. The World Health Organization indicates that an elderly individual's living conditions and social circumstances can significantly impact their physical and mental health.

“Although some of the variations in older people's health are genetic, most is due to people's physical and social environments—including their homes, neighborhoods, and communities, as well as their personal characteristics....

“Physical and social environments can affect health directly or through barriers or incentives that affect opportunities, decisions, and health behavior. Maintaining healthy behaviors throughout life, particularly eating a balanced diet, engaging in regular physical activity and refraining from tobacco use, all contribute to reducing the risk of non-communicable diseases, improving physical and mental capacity and delaying care dependency.

“Supportive physical and social environments also enable people to do what is important to them, despite losses in capacity.... In developing a public-health response to aging, it is important not just to consider individual and environmental approaches that ameliorate the losses associated with older age, but also those that may reinforce recovery, adaptation and psychosocial growth.”

Health providers and medical professionals in our community indicated that there are enough nursing home beds in our area—including independent living, assisted living and skilled nursing—but that not all of these beds can be utilized due to staffing shortages. The shortage of nursing home staff is a national crisis that also impacts our community. A March 5, 2024 article by *the American Health Care Association / National Center For Assisted Living* indicates that:

- 99% of nursing homes currently have open jobs, including 89 percent who are actively trying to hire for registered nurse (RN) positions.
- 72% of nursing homes say their current workforce levels are lower than pre-pandemic staffing levels.
- 94% of facilities say it is difficult to recruit new staff with 67% of facilities citing a lack of interested or qualified candidates as an extremely big obstacle.
- 78% have offered bonuses, including sign-on bonuses.
- 46% of nursing homes have limited new admissions, with 38% having to turn away residents weekly and/or monthly, and 7% having to turn away residents daily.
- Nearly 20% have closed a unit, wing or floor because of labor challenges.

These staffing shortages indicate that our community may need to identify alternative ways to care for and protect elderly individuals, especially those living on their own without a strong family or social network.

Conclusion

Mille Lacs Health System conducted this community health needs assessment to better understand the community and the individuals served. The hospital will develop a strategy to respond to the significant community health needs and will create an Implementation Strategy to formalize those responses. That Implementation Strategy will be approved by Mille Lacs Health System's Board of Directors no later than February 15, 2026 and will be used by the organization as a guide for thoughtful, impactful decisions and actions in the coming years.

The following pages include a list of resources currently available in the community to address the significant community health needs discussed in this report. Despite efforts by Mille Lacs Health System, it is recognized that this list may not be all-inclusive. We welcome any information to add available resources and increase its usefulness. Such information can be sent to the address provided on page 11 of this report.

Health Resources

The Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services provides support to community members in numerous ways, including community health, adult developmental disabilities, child and adult mental health, child and adult protection, chemical dependency, child support, child welfare, elderly services, financial assistance, foster care, special needs, and veterans' services. For a complete list of their activities, one can contact them at:

- 525 2nd Street SE, Milaca
- (320) 983-8208
- <http://www.co.mille-lacs.mn.us/1177/Community-Veterans-Services>

Members of the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe can also contact the Band's Department of Health and Human Services which provides support to its Tribal community members in various ways, including dental care, health care, behavioral health, community support, public health, and family services. For a complete list of their activities contact them at the Ne-la-Shing Clinic.

- 43500 Migizi Drive, Onamia
- (320) 532-4163
- <https://mlbo.dev/government/department-of-health-human-services>

In addition to governmental support, the following health care facilities and related organizations are currently available within the community.

Hospitals

Mille Lacs Health System, located at 200 North Elm Street in Onamia, is the only hospital in the community. However, community members may also choose to use the following hospitals that are relatively close:

- M Health Fairview Northland Medical Center – 911 Northland Boulevard, Princeton
- Welia Health – 301 MN-65, Mora
- CentraCare - St. Cloud Hospital – 1406 6th Avenue N, St. Cloud
- Cambridge Medical Center – 701 Dellwood Street S, Cambridge
- CHI St. Gabriel's Hospital – 815 2nd Street SE, Little Falls
- Essentia Health St. Joseph's Medical Center – 523 N 3rd Street, Brainerd
- Riverwood Healthcare Center Hospital – 200 Bunker Hill Drive, Aitkin

Clinics and Specialty Practices

- Mille Lacs Health System Urgent Care – 200 N Elm Street, Onamia
- Mille Lacs Health System Onamia Clinic – 200 N Elm Street, Onamia
- Mille Lacs Health System Isle Clinic – 375 W Isle Street, Isle
- Mille Lacs Health System Garrison Clinic – 27378 State Highway 18, Garrison
- Mille Lacs Health System Hillman Clinic – 26362 370th Avenue, Hillman
- Mille Lacs Health System Milaca Clinic – 150 10th Street NW, Milaca
- MLHS Chiropractic and Physical Therapy of Milaca – 150 10th Street NW, Milaca
- Ne-la-Shing Clinic – 18562 Minobimaazidi Loop, Onamia
- Riverwood Garrison Clinic – 27278 State Highway 18, Garrison
- Select Urgent Care – 190 Central Avenue S, Milaca
- Rum River Life Choices – 1006 5th Street SE, Milaca

- St. Raphael's Chiropractic Care Center – 120 Central Ave N Suite C, Milaca
- Milaca Chiropractic Center – 105 Central Avenue S, Milaca
- Natural Elements Health Center – 14094 9th Avenue SE, Milaca
- Molacek Family Eyecare – 132 2nd Avenue SW, Milaca
- Eagle Eye Design – 15204 190th Street, Milaca
- Milaca Family Dental – 1015 5th Street SE, Milaca
- NorthBound Dental – 140 2nd Street SE, Milaca
- Attain Home Care & Supports – 210 2nd Avenue SE, Suite 102, Milaca
- Minnesota Doulas – 512 2nd Street NE, #1, Milaca
- A New Story Birth Center – 16802 145th Avenue, Milaca
- Central Minnesota Diagnostic – 525 10th Street NE, Milaca
- Pearl Crisis Center – 235 2nd Street SW, Milaca

Mental Health Services

- HomeGrown Counseling – 225 2nd Street SW, Milaca
- Mille Lacs Health System – 200 North Elm Street, Onamia
- Lighthouse Child and Family Services – 160 3rd Avenue NW, Milaca
- Nexus-Mille Lacs Family Healing – 407 130th Avenue S, Onamia
- Arrows Family Services – 160 3rd Avenue NW, Milaca
- Hoffman Counseling Services – 545 State Hwy 23, Milaca

Substance Abuse Treatment Services

- Freedom Center – 140 2nd Avenue N, Onamia
- Clear Horizons – 155 2nd Avenue SW, Milaca
- Sobriety First – 210 Central Avenue N, #1, Milaca

Senior Living Facilities

- Lake Song Assisted Living – 206 Crosier Drive, Onamia
- Mille Lacs Band Assisted Living Unit – 43475 Oodena Drive, Onamia
- VitaCare Living Isle – 540 E Isle Street, Isle
- Scandia Senior Care – 15622 13th Street, Foreston
- Milaca Elim Meadows Health Care Center – 730 2nd Street SE, Milaca
- Stepping Stones Group Home – 560 3rd Avenue S, Milaca
- Sunrise Village – 115 9th Street NW, Milaca
- Care Force Homes – 250 4th Avenue SE, Milaca
- Centennial Manor – 210 1st Street E, Milaca
- Centennial Terrace – 380 1st Street E, Milaca

Transportation Resources

- North Central Transportation – 265 10th Street NE, Milaca
- Timber Trails Public Transit – 535 8th Street NE, Milaca
- Mille Lacs County Transportation Department – 605 8th Street NE, Milaca
- Mille Lacs County Transportation Department – 1100 State Hwy 47, Isle

The Mille Lacs County Department of Community & Veterans Services maintains a list of behavioral health resources, although most of the facilities are outside of our community. That list is available online by clicking the “Mental Health Professionals and Services” link at the bottom of the Department’s adult mental health website, <https://www.millelacs.mn.gov/1195/adult-mental-health>.