



HCQU Northwest

Year End Review

For so many years, I dreaded those words, Year End Review... what kind of raise would I get, how did my boss think I was doing, did I meet my goals? After being with the HCQU for a couple of years now, I've turned those words into something positive.... Year IN Review! And by that, I mean, what an incredible year we've had together.

The HCQU welcomed four new staff members, including those with the PCRCC project, we said goodbye to two long time co-workers and friends, and got to see so many of you throughout the year.

Our annual event had a new location and theme, where we all danced and sang the day away! Even if it was really hot!

The HCQU staff attended four expos throughout our footprint, and handed out over 1000 pieces of Milestone gear.

Training requests have increased, and we got to spend more and more time with all of you! Things are picking up, and we are excited to ring in 2026 with everyone.

Krista



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Welcome to the HCQU!



Amber Connor, Behavioral Health Specialist I joined the team at Milestone HCQU Northwest on November 20, 2025, as a Behavioral Health Specialist.

I earned both my bachelor's degree and master's degree in psychology from American Public University. Previously, I worked for McKean County Department of Human Services. I held positions as a Program Specialist for the Intellectual/Developmental Disability Department, as well as both an Ongoing and Intake Caseworker for Children and Youth Services. Prior to that I worked as the department secretary for both the Outpatient and Psychiatric departments for The Guidance Center.

I am a mother to an almost 17-year-old son and married to a high school math teacher for almost 20 years. I enjoy reading, crocheting, fishing, and traveling with my family.



New Year, New Health Goals!

January is the perfect time to hit the reset button and focus on simple steps that can make a big difference in your health. Why not make a health-focused New Year's resolution this year? Even small changes can lead to big improvements. Here are a couple simple steps to start with in the New Year.

Move a little more every day! Regular movement improves circulation, reduces blood pressure, boosts mood, and reduces the risk of heart disease.

- Walk 10-15 minutes after meals.
- Take the stairs.
- Stretch 2-3 minutes once every hour (or when you can).
- Aim for 30 minutes a day even if broken into short chunks.

Drink more water. Most adults function better with more hydration.

- Aim for 6-8 cups per day (more if active) or $\frac{1}{2}$ your weight in ounces.
- Replace one soda/juice per day with water.

Add one piece of produce to each meal-no complicated diet needed. More fiber and nutrients help manage weight, cholesterol, and blood pressure.

- Add some fruits and vegetables at meals.
- Keep frozen vegetables around (when picked at their peak they are as healthy as fresh.)

Sleep at least 7 hours a night. Quality sleep is underrated! Poor sleep increases stress hormones, blood pressure, food craving and inflammation.

- Go to bed and wake up at the same times every day.
- Avoid screens 30 minutes before bed.
- Keep your bedroom cool and dark.

Reduce stress in tiny ways. Lower stress =lower blood pressure and stronger immunity.

- Do a quick 2-minute mindfulness break.
- Step outside for fresh air once a day.

HEART HEALTH MATTERS! Heart disease remains a leading concern, but small changes have a big impact. Adding more steps to your day, cutting back on salt, and getting consistent sleep are easy ways to protect your heart. Some clinics offer quick heart check-ups in February, marking it a great time to schedule one. Local community health fairs, public health department announcements, or non-profit outreach programs in your county sometimes offer free or low-cost screenings, especially around the new year or during heart health awareness periods. February is American Heart month, and many free or low-cost screenings tend to happen in February or are tied to community health fairs. Check with your doctor's office and mention you're looking for a heart health screening or for a cardiovascular check-up. Call and ask to see if any free or low-cost events are going to be coming up and schedule early.

STAY ON TOP OF PREVENTIVE CARE! January is also a good time to schedule annual exams and screening. Whether it's a physical exam, bloodwork, or age-appropriate screenings like mammograms or colonoscopies, getting these done early in the year helps you stay on track for long-term health.

TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL WELL-BEING! The winter months and post-holiday stress can affect your mood and energy. Providers encourage patients to reach out early if they are feeling off. Telehealth visits and online mental health tools make it easier than ever to get support without leaving home.

MAKING A RESOLUTION YOU CAN KEEP! This year set a realistic health goal-like walking 15 minutes a day, practicing mindfulness, or booking that overdue check-up. Small consistent steps make big improvements over time, and starting new sets you up for a healthier, more energized 2026. Wishing you all a, Happy 2026!



Winter Driving Tips



Here we are again . . . snow, sleet, freezing rain, you name it; winter is upon us! One thing we don't need on top of the cold and slush is a fender-bender, or to get stranded somewhere and not be prepared. Here are some tips from the Automobile Association of America (AAA) to help you stay safe this winter:

- * Make sure you have winter tires and they are properly inflated
- * Always wear your seatbelt
- * Keep your gasoline tank at least half-full; this helps prevent winter freeze-up
- * Bring your cell phone with your local AAA's telephone number, plus blankets, gloves, hats, food, water and any needed medications in your vehicle
- * Let family & friends know where you are going and your estimated time of arrival
- * Drive slowly! Everything takes longer on snow-covered roads, so leave earlier and remember that accelerating, stopping, turning – nothing happens as quickly as on dry pavement. Give yourself time to maneuver by driving slowly
- * Don't break so hard that your tires lock up and you start sliding without any control
- * Keep the heel of your foot on the floor and use the ball of your foot to apply firm, steady pressure on the brake pedal
- * Don't power up hills. Applying extra gas on snow-covered roads just starts your wheels spinning. Try to get a little inertia going before you reach the hill and let that inertia carry you to the top. As you reach the crest of the hill, reduce your speed and proceed downhill as slowly as possible
- * Don't stop going up a hill. There's nothing worse than trying to get moving up a hill on an icy road. Get some inertia going on a flat roadway before you take on the hill
- * Finally—and this is my favorite--Stay home. If you really don't have to go out, don't. Even if you can drive well in the snow, not everyone else can. Don't tempt fate: If you don't have somewhere you have to be, watch the snow from indoors



Have a safe and happy winter!

Tim Juliano, RN

PCCRC Year In Review:

Building Connections & Supporting Families

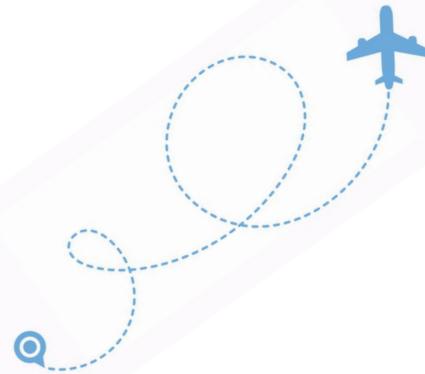
This year marked the exciting launch of our new program across the state. Our team successfully completed outreach to all nine counties in our service area. We proudly represented PCCRC at community events, including Youth Fest in Bradford, PA, during the spring and the Summer Picnic with HCQU staff. Darryl even went viral on Facebook live with his presentation to the HEROES support group.

In June, our staff attended the Case Study Workshop in Mechanicsburg, which provided a valuable opportunity to meet face-to-face with colleagues from across the state and strengthen collaborative efforts. In August we attended a virtual conference with the PA Regional Collaborative Summit. We attended the RCPA conference in September and attended the many educational workshops. In October we had a busy month with two educational conferences, we attended the Lifesharing conference and the Pediatric Complex Care conference where we learned from other professionals who have been doing this work already!

June was a pivotal month as we opened our first family for Pediatric Coach Services. Additionally, our Family Facilitator assisted a family with their discharge, ensuring a smooth transition and continued support.

By fall, referrals began to increase significantly, and our team has been busy helping families navigate the system and access the resources their children need. This surge reflects growing awareness of our services.

Looking Ahead, our goal for the coming year is to continue learning, growing, and expanding our program to support as many families as possible. We remain committed to guiding families through complex systems and ensuring every child receives the care they deserve.



Winter Health Tips from Pediatricians

Winter is a beautiful and festive time, but we can see a rise in contagious illnesses in children during this time of year. Below are some tips from pediatricians to help families navigate these unpleasant issues.



See the full article (linked below) for more information on each tip. This article is for educational purposes only, and is not meant to replace a physician's medical advice.

You can't always trust AI when searching health-related topics. AI can be a helpful tool, but can also lead to inaccurate, confusing, or misleading results. When in doubt, please check with a qualified healthcare provider.

Measles is coming back. This highly contagious virus can cause severe complications and even death. Check with your child's doctor for the recommended MMR vaccine schedule. See this article for more info and tips on preventing measles: "[Increased Measles Activity: How to Protect Your Family](#)" by CHOP.

Strep throat is most commonly seen in children aged 5-15. It is rare in children under 3. This illness is highly contagious and requires testing to confirm. Typical symptoms are a fever and sore throat, and no cough. It's vital children stay hydrated while ill and recovering. A bland diet, warm saltwater gargles, and hot tea with honey can help relieve the sore throat. Antibiotics are typically necessary to fully resolve strep throat—always finish a course of antibiotics as prescribed, and do not stop early once the patient starts to feel better, to avoid delaying recovery or creating antibiotic-resistant bacteria.

Cold medicine is not recommended for children under age 6, due to their higher susceptibility to side effects. Pediatricians recommend nasal saline drops/sprays for all ages, and/or mentholated ointments/rubs for those over age 2. Honey, *for children over the age of 1, ONLY*, is also an effective cough remedy—1 tea-spoon every few hours on its own or mixed with warm water. Cool mist humidifiers can also help cough and congestion. Check with your child's doctor for questions on illness management. Seek medical attention for concerning symptoms.

We wish you a healthy, safe, and enjoyable winter season!

Alyssa Raimondo-Swanson, Pediatric Coach, Pediatric Complex Care Resource Center



The Support of a Faithful, Furry Friend



Since wolves sought food and shelter from humans 15,000 years ago, our relationship with animals has become a fundamental aspect of life for many of us. Research shows what pet owners have always known – animals improve our lives in a multitude of ways.

Physical Health – Studies have shown that physiological benefits (exercise, enhanced mobility & coordination) go beyond regular walking and throwing balls for dogs or wiggling a string for a cat. Just 15 minutes of interaction with a dog showed improved heart rates in young adults. Dogs and their owners tend to synchronize their heart rates, leading to improved autonomic regulation (heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, digestion, body temperature). Service dogs can alert owners to oncoming seizures or changes in blood glucose levels. Cats purr at a frequency between 25 and 140 Hz. Vibrational therapy (10-50 Hz) has been shown to enhance bone repair and strengthen tendons and joints. Additionally, cat ownership has been associated with reduced risk of heart attack and stroke.

Structure and Routine – Providing everyday care for pets can help people learn to be more disciplined in their own care. One study found that when teens with type 1 Diabetes were given fish to care for, they were more likely to independently check their blood glucose levels when encouraged to pair it with the twice-daily feeding of their fish.

Emotional Health – Research and anecdotal evidence shows that pets relieve stress, decrease anxiety, and ease loneliness via decreasing Cortisol (the “stress” hormone) and increasing Oxytocin (the “love” hormone). They facilitate emotional expression – many people are more comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings with a pet that they may not express with other people. In fact, pets have been found to provide better social support than other people in those with Depression. In addition to Depression and Anxiety, PTSD and Autism also have been shown to respond positively to pets. Social bonding is strengthened; for example, a 2002 study found that 74% of people experiencing homelessness say dogs are their main social support. Being responsible for another living being can support self-esteem by increasing confidence and improving self-perception – everyone needs to matter to someone.

Cognitive Health – in the geriatric population, studies have shown that animal-assisted therapy stimulates memory and communication, in addition to improving mood and lowering pain perception.

With all these benefits, why don't more of the people we support have pets? There are several barriers that can play a role:

Consistency of care – the benefits of love and companionship go hand in hand with the responsibility of everyday care for the animal. If there are concerns that an individual cannot consistently care for that dog or cat they desperately want, they could begin with a less “demanding” pet. Start with a fish, which doesn’t require much beyond feeding a couple of times a day and cleaning the tank every week or so. Once the person gets into a routine of caring for the fish, they may be ready for something that needs (and gives) a bit more – a hamster or guinea pig, for example. Regardless of the pet, there should be a plan in place to teach and support the person as they take increasing responsibility for their pet.

Affordability – According to the ASPCA, (without insurance) the average small dog costs \$512/year, while a cat costs \$634/year, a Guinea pig \$304/year, and a fish \$27/year.

For those who cannot afford or are just not yet ready for a pet, perhaps they could offer to walk a neighbor’s dog or volunteer at a local shelter. There are also local organizations that provide therapy dogs in nursing homes and schools that may be willing to partner with an IDA provider, as well as pet-assisted mental health therapy on an individual basis.

Another option is a realistic/robotic pet. The typical price range is \$40-150. There are multiple options; when choosing a substitute pet, it is important to consider what benefits the person hopes to get. If the person is looking for something to soothe them, consider a weighted pet. Many of them breathe (cats also purr), which can also be calming. Responsive feedback from an interactive pet can decrease loneliness and improve empathy and socialization. If the person would benefit from an increased sense of purpose, there are robotic pets that have feeding schedules, some of which will actually shut down if they are not fed. People may need some assistance setting them up, depending on the level of technology required. They will also need recharged/batteries replaced.

Amy Tobolski, Clinical Supervisor

The following sites offer some good options worth considering:

[Doll & Pet Therapy for Alzheimer's and Dementia](#) | [Lifelike Dolls that are Weighted](#) | [Animated Robotic Pets that Bark & Pur](#) | [Joy for All Dogs & Cats](#) | [Kittens that Sleep and Breathe](#) | [Companions that Make the Best Gifts for those w/ Memory Loss](#) | [AlzStore](#)
[10 Best Robot Dog Toys for Kids to Learn Responsibility](#) (2025) - Toy Brands

Letter from the Director

After experiencing less daylight every day until December 21st I am excited that we now gain more daylight every day until the first day of Summer in June when it starts dropping again. While I do not have many winter hobbies I do like being outside whenever possible. I learned many years ago that I am not a very good skier or snowboarder but I did pick up ice fishing as a winter activity. Walking on ice is not normally something that I would advise people to do, but with proper footwear and ice cleats, most are okay. For those who like to be warmer, walking in a store/shopping mall is a great alternative and somewhat safer. Overall the stores are less crowded when they first open in the morning and some places have clubs or measured routes to help promote walking. As always drink water and if outside, remember to put on sunscreen to help prevent sunburn. While there are very cold days in our future, please dress warmly on milder days and find some safe and healthy ways to move our bodies.

If you or the individuals that you work with would like trainings on being healthy (or eating healthier) just email Krista at kfitzsimmons@milestonepa.org to submit a request. We can do trainings virtually, in-person, or you can take classes online via our LMS at <https://northwesthcqu.learnupon.com/>, so keep your requests coming to us. Stay safe and keep on moving.

Darryl

Winter Word Search

Instructions: Try to find all of the hidden Winter words in the word search puzzle below. (Words can be spelled forwards, backwards, diagonally, up, or down.)



Word List

BOOTS	GLOVES	MUFFLER
COATS	HIBERNATE	SKATING
FREEZING	HOLIDAY	SNOWBALL
FROZEN	MITTENS	WHITE



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