



# The Chairman's Corner

by

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## OPIOID SETTLEMENT

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After a class action lawsuit against companies involved in manufacturing, distributing, and selling opioids was successful, and with that the announcement of the settlement terms and the beginning of annual payments in 2022, Columbia County Human Services and county Mental Health Center Director of Community Services Dan Almasi and the county Health & Human Services committee have been busy formulating ways in which the funds can best be allocated.

Ultimately, Columbia County will have received a total \$2.2 million from the settlement, with annual payouts concluding in 2039. "The settlement was front loaded," said county Controller Jim Brieg. "We received \$107,000 in 2022 and \$285,000 this year. Until 2039, the yearly payout will average around \$40,000."

Per terms of the settlement, some of the funds come with restrictions on how they may be used, while others are unrestricted. Fortunately, the restrictions, which come in the form of a 14-page document, are not all that restrictive. Boiled down, the funds are intended to help victims of the opioid epidemic.

"The \$2.2 million sounds like a lot of money, and it is, but it's going to trickle to us until 2039. When you first hear the amount, you get all excited, but the fact it's going to be dragged out over an extended period of time, and the fact there are these qualifiers, kind of takes away some of the luster," said Director Almasi.

When all is said and done, however, the matter remains of how to best spend the funds. To that end, around the beginning of the year, Director Almasi, in seeking recommendations and suggestions, organized a work group comprised of "leadership from various behavioral health non-profits, community members, and interested parties. Our very first decision was that we needed to organize what we called community listening sessions."

A total of four public listening sessions were held throughout the county, one each in Hudson, Chatham, New Lebanon, and the Valatie area. The idea, said Director Almasi, was to learn "where the gaps and needs are. What do you think needs to be improved upon? What service do you think we need to create that does not currently exist here in Columbia County? We received tremendous feedback on different ideas and suggestions, and, interestingly enough, among the four listening sessions there were some themes that popped up."

One theme that arose, Director Almasi said, was a call for "more prevention services, to start substance abuse education very early on, before the person has a problem. And not only for the younger population, but for the adult population as well."

A second theme concerned the confusion that family members and friends may feel when someone is experiencing a crisis in terms of where they should turn in the midst of that crisis.

“While every group and organization has an 800 number, the public is calling for a standardized clearinghouse, if you will, where they can turn if someone is experiencing a drug and/or alcohol problem, need food, need a place to stay. A single number we could market that you could call where someone can answer your questions, and if they can’t, they’ll take your number and contact you with the answer by the end of the business day,” said Director Almasi.

Meanwhile, of course, the process continues.