Spring is almost here and we are having a very successful year at Valley Collaborative. Valley held its annual Stakeholders Meeting on January 20th, 2016. The forum included an FY’16 and FY’17 Collaborative update for Valley’s Member School Districts. School Committee Chairs, Business Managers, Special Education and State Legislators were all invited to attend. Due to solid financial management our FY’17 tuition rates and our FY’17 therapy fees will stay at FY’11 levels and will not see an increase for both member and non-member districts again this year. The budget was developed with input from various Collaborative staff with the goal of ensuring sufficient resources to maintain our high quality programs with low student to staff ratio.

Valley works with over 30 businesses in the Merrimack Valley so that students and adults with special needs can have meaningful vocational placements. In particular, I would like to mention Lantheus Medical Imaging for partnering with Valley Collaborative for being the corporate sponsor of the Independence Project which is a fundraiser to help students and adults with special needs overcome financial obstacles from being gainfully employed and living an independent rewarding life. Lantheus Medical has been a corporate partner, providing vocational sites for many decades for Valley students. Featured in this newsletter is a story of a family that would have been homeless if Lantheus Medical Imaging hadn’t so generously given to the Independence Project.

» continued on next page.

We are:  A Team

Valley Collaborative’s amazing leadership team.

We are: Independent

Page 3: When a mother in need reached out for help, she inspired a new project aimed at helping Valley community members in need.

We are: Training

Page 4: These Valley students are on their way to apprenticeships thanks to a program that prepares students to work in construction.
I would like to thank Peter Coe, Supervisor Facility GMP Services, Lantheus Medical Imaging for sitting on the Independence Project committee and helping to develop the guidelines and vision for the project. (See vision and mission statements on page 3).

The Adult Services Department is also pleased to announce the expansion of our mailroom services at Bristol Myers Squibb.

Through this expansion Valley Collaborative students and adults will be providing mailroom services to nearly 600 Bristol Myers Squibb employees and contractors. Jones Lang LaSalle Construction who oversees the work at the BMS facilities in Devens, MA featured our Valley Collaborative work team in a recent company newsletter referring to Valley Collaborative as part of the family.

Valley’s transitional and vocational programs have also been recognized for their high quality and effectiveness by other school districts and Collaboratives that want to develop similar programs. Valley was recently asked by FLLAC Educational Collaborative to consult on how to build these effective vocational programs in the communities they serve. Dr. Richard Murphy, Executive Director of FLLAC Educational Collaborative contacted Valley Collaborative in an effort to, as he put it, “learn from the best.” FLLAC wants to consult with Valley regarding our Vocational Programming as well as our Transition Planning process. We have been working with Tyngsboro and Tewksbury Public Schools helping them develop transitional and vocational programs. Valley welcomes the opportunity to help our colleagues develop high quality cost effective programs.

Last year’s overnight camping trip to Lonesome Lake Hut, New Hampshire was such a success that high school students will have the opportunity to participate in three different overnight trips in the White Mountains throughout the school year.

In October, students hiked their way back to Lonesome Lake Hut, including 14 new students who did not attend the previous overnight hike in May. After navigating their way up the Lonesome Lake Trail for over 2 miles and 1000ft of elevation gained, the students and staff enjoyed time to relax. They swam, read stories, and had fun in the lake and dock area outside the lodges. Later on, students were able to continue the hike through multiple side trails farther north of the lodge, or hike around the entire lake! In the morning, students and staff began the return hike down the mountain trail and returned to school with a tremendous experience that would carry over in the academic realm of Valley Collaborative’s Transitional High School!

As the winter fades away, students will be taking on another challenge. On March 30-31, they will be hiking Mt. Willard, a 2,800 ft mountain overlooking Crawford Notch. Willard has a round trip distance of 3.2 miles with almost 1,000 ft of elevation gained from the starting point at Crawford Depot in northern New Hampshire. The students and staff will enjoy a night in the Highland Lodge before hiking back out in the morning. Students are hoping to snow shoe, but if the weather refuses to cooperate, there is no doubt that staff and students will find new physical activities upon reaching their destination.

It’s difficult to put into words the benefits the school has enjoyed due to the incredible shared experiences between our students and staff members. The ability to create a community through these positive risk-taking activities has helped really shape the community and allowed us to push not just our students, but our entire community to places we could not have dreamed. We would like to thank the entire collaborative, from Dr. Scott to Josh Ciampa and Trevor Donahue in the Experiential Education Program, to the Board of Directors, for everything they’ve done to make this program a huge success!

Special Newsletter Thanks To:

Marilyn Humphries, photography
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An Urgent Appeal for Help Leads to a Vision for Independence

Back in the middle of November, I received a call from Maureen Vahey. Maureen’s son Leo is a graduate of Valley Collaborative, and is currently in our supported work grant through the Boston Massachusetts Rehabilitation Commission. Maureen said that they were being evicted from their apartment that afternoon, because they had run into some financial difficulty.

I stopped by Dr. Scott’s office to see if we could brainstorm how to help Leo and his mother. Dr. Scott called a number of area hotels to ask if they might be able to help us out. She spoke to the woman in charge of sales at the Radisson (Chelmsford), who agreed to allow the Vaheys to stay at the hotel at a discounted rate until January 4th. (The Radisson has been a worksite for Valley for many years and they are very supportive of Valley’s Mission.)

This solved their immediate needs, but they still needed a long range plan. We decided to create the Independence Project to help out those in need in the Valley community. We received a tremendous response from Valley employees who generously donated hundreds of dollars. Valley also reached out to our corporate partners. One of our corporate partners, Lantheus Medical Imaging. Lantheus, led by Peter Coe, made a sizable donation to the Independence Project that allowed us to make a difference in the lives of Leo and his mother.

On January 6th, the Vaheys were able to move into their new apartment only steps from Maureen’s job at Stop N Shop in Chelmsford! Currently, the Vaheys are doing well. Maureen has been promoted and is now working full-time at the deli at Stop N Shop.

Thank you to everyone in the Valley Collaborative community who helped support the Independence Project!
—Sean Curran, Project Supervisor

The Independence Project

Vision
- To uplift the quality of life for those students and DDS/MRC adults with special needs who are faced with hardships through the provision of resources that lead toward a greater sense of independence.

Mission, Goals & Objectives
- To assist students and DDS/MRC adults with special needs in need of support through short term poverty alleviation that will lead to long term empowerment via educational training and skill development toward becoming self-sufficient productive members of their communities.
- To vigorously strive towards achieving and producing the most socially responsible outcomes for those in need.
- To deliver a service with integrity and purpose in a respectful manner reflective of our donors.
- To provide relief for those in need of immediate assistance that have exhausted all other resources or for those awaiting long term assistance.
- To establish poverty relief that ultimately will lead towards self-sufficiency, thereby restoring and promoting independence of our students and DDS/MRC adults.

To learn more about eligibility requirements, or to make a donation, contact Melina Seitzinger, social worker at mseitzinger@valleycollaborative.org
For these Valley Students, Apprenticeship is Next Stop

Valley students got a hands-on look at what it takes to work in construction during a recent training. Representatives from the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the New England Laborers Union Training Academy were at Valley Collaborative Transitional High School from February 1-12 as part of the Massachusetts Construction and Career Development or MassCCD program.

MassCCD is what’s known as a pre-apprenticeship program, providing students in vocational programs with the classroom instruction and hands-on training they’ll need to be successful in an apprenticeship. Riley O’Keefe, vocational lead at Valley, praised the instructors for their insightful presentations, and for going above and beyond to tailor their program to the needs of Valley students. “The instructors were absolutely fantastic with our students in adapting their presentation styles to our unique population of students. They provided wonderful tools to ensure our students would be successful in the program,” says O’Keefe.

MassCCD is a partnership between the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the New England Laborers Union Training Academy and a number of core partners, including the AFL-CIO, the New England Carpenters and the Building Trades Employers Associations. Students who complete the program earn 30 hours credit towards the classroom requirement of an apprenticeship. They’re also registered with the state’s Department of Apprenticeship Training as having completed a pre-apprenticeship program.

While Valley has been involved in a partnership with the New England Laborers Union for two years, this was the first time that MassCCD has been offered to Valley students. O’Keefe says that he hopes that this is the beginning of a productive partnership. The MassCCD Program at Valley Collaborative was an absolute success. Our students and faculty were extremely impressed with the classroom experience and the hands-on activities that took place over the week long program,” says O’Keefe. “We look forward to continuing the MassCCD Program annually for years to come here at Valley Collaborative Transitional High School.”

Boda, What? For Valley Students, Gaming Challenge is No Game

Students from the High School recently enjoyed a brand new experience all the way from Sweden: Boda Borg!

Borg may sound like the name of some awful cuisine, but in fact it is a real-world gaming environment that students on site 2 went crazy over. Teams of 3-5 students and staff from Site 2 physically moved through the “Quests” tackling a variety of mental and physical challenges.

The scariest part of these challenges? No directions! From the moment students walked in, they needed to assess the environment, analyze potential problems to gain access to the next area, hypothesize potential solutions, and then physically complete the challenge. Every time the group failed, a small orb would turn red and the group would have to leave the quest and start again, or move on to another 1 of 14 quests.

Some of the challenges included science of optics, symbol deciphering, and some were just physically demanding! —continued on page 6
In the News: Valley Collaborative Recognized for Progress, Focus on Students

Note: the following is an excerpt from an article that originally appeared in the Lowell Sun on January 21, 2016.

By Rick Sobey

Speaking at the Valley Collaborative’s stakeholders meeting on Wednesday, Dr. Scott reported that the collaborative has received a “finding-free” financial audit for the second year in a row -- a sign that the collaborative has a solid financial picture, according to Scott.

“Our budgets are focused on meeting the needs of our kids, instead of being adult focused. We are trending really well in the right direction.”

—Dr. Chris A. Scott, Valley Collaborative Executive Director

The collaborative’s overall net position continues to grow and assets are increasing, she said. Meanwhile, services and total cost of tuition have remained the same since 2011 for member districts.

“Our revenues are trending up, and our expenses are trending down,” Scott said.

“We’ve been more cost-effective, and more children-focused.

“We’re no longer top-heavy administratively,” she added.

Scott said she’s had to make difficult staffing decisions, and has altered the budget mid-year in the last three years, similar to cuts made in K-12 districts.

However, tough decisions have put the Valley Collaborative’s balance sheet in a very strong position, she said. In addition, students now have access to state-of-the-art technology, music, art, physical-education and social-development opportunities.

““This transformation has happened because they’ve made sure the focus is on the students and not the adults,” said Billerica Superintendent Tim Piwowar, chair of the Valley Collaborative’s board of directors. “I have to credit her (Scott), the leadership and staff who support these students every day.”

Nashoba Tech Superintendent Judith Klimkiewicz, who is retiring, received an Award of Excellence for her numerous years on the board.
Picture this: A twelve-year-old male student, Sammy* (see below), is in math class learning fractions. Sammy often struggles with division and multiplication, but now he is even more confused. Another student in the hallway is yelling. The flicker and hum of the fluorescent lights is even more noticeable. The tag on his shirt is itching his skin. Sammy is now sitting at his desk with his head down and has stopped doing his work. He has shut down and will not talk to the staff that are trying to engage him. What can we do to help Sammy?

The Valley Middle School has introduced a new program, Zones of Regulation, to help students become more independent with self-regulation skills. Occupational Therapist, Joanna Bond, and Speech-Language Pathologist, Vicky Samborski, are teaching a weekly Zones of Regulation class to all of the Middle School students. Using a color-coded system, emotions are categorized into four colors: green, yellow, red, and blue. Students learn it is okay to be in the Green Zone, Yellow Zone, Red Zone, or the Blue Zone, and it is natural to feel silly, angry, frustrated, or sad at times. Students create an individualized “Toolbox” with sensory choices they can choose from and utilize throughout the day to help feel calm and regulated, such as using fidget items, sitting in a rocking chair, using a weighted blanket, or wearing noise-cancelling headphones. Students are learning they have the power to control their actions even when they experience heightened emotions and become dysregulated. In the Middle School, we are teaching students many strategies that help their bodies to feel more regulated so they are able to make safe and responsible choices, and more importantly, ready for learning.

*(Not student’s real name.)*
Today and Tomorrow Adult Program: “A Wonderful Asset to the Community”

Valley Collaborative students and adults have been volunteering at D’Youville Life and Wellness Community for over 20 years. Recently one of our transitional aides, Cathy White, and her team of student and adult workers were recognized as a “wonderful asset to their community” by Sister Kathleen Walsh, Director of Mission and Values.

While volunteering at D’Youville adults and students work directly with residents and staff transporting them to activities and meal-times. This direct support and interaction has proved invaluable to the quality of life for not only those they are serving but to our Valley workers as well.

**TJ Maxx**

At TJ Maxx students and adults gain the real life experience of what it’s like to work in a retail setting. TJ Maxx staff work alongside the Valley Collaborative team processing merchandise for distribution to the sales floor. This long-term partnership has proven highly successful, leading to independent employment for some of our adult workers. One individual in particular has worked as a fitting room attendant independently for seven years. The store manager reports that her skills and positive attitude are part of the reason for that department’s efficiency and success.

**Community Outreach is Elementary**

Over the past year the elementary school has worked to significantly increase its involvement in community outreach and activities that are functional for their students. This year, they have established a relationship with the Arts and Education Center from Ironstone Farms in Andover MA. This location provides a real life home environment for their students to practice life skills such as setting a table, making beds, doing laundry and chores, as well as social skills in the home setting. Additionally the students have access to the horse farm, where they have equine exposure and learn generalizing therapy skills.

Other outreach programs include our newest venture with spreadthebread.org. The students will be baking bread for community members in need and delivering the bread with hand designed wrapping. In this community outreach course they will be learning cooking skills, cleaning skills and generally feeling good about their participation with others. Please keep an eye out for their homemade bread coming to a community near you.

KAILA TYROS AND ALYSSA LAWLER WORKING AT TJ MAXX AS PART OF VALLEY’S TODAY AND TOMORROW PROGRAM, FUNDED BY DEPARTMENT OF DEVELOPMENTAL SERVICES (DDS).

ELEMENTARY STUDENT JOEY CORBETT AT IRONSTONE FARM IN ANDOVER. VALLEY STUDENTS HAVE ACCESS TO THE HORSE FARM THANKS TO A NEW RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ARTS AND EDUCATION CENTER AT IRONSTONE.
Valley Collaborative Leadership Team

Chris A. Scott, PhD
Executive Director
cscott@valleycollaborative.org

Karen Blackburn
Executive Assistant
kblackburn@valleycollaborative.org

Joia Mercurio
Assistant Director
jmercurio@valleycollaborative.org

Curt Malonson
Business Manager
cmalonson@valleycollaborative.org

Kenneth Wedge
Director of Technology
kwedge@valleycollaborative.org

Sean Glavin
Director of Operations and Facilities
sglavin@valleycollaborative.org

Kari Morrin
Coordinator of Therapeutic Services and Assessments
kmorrin@valleycollaborative.org

Annie Willis
Principal, Valley Elementary School
awillis@valleycollaborative.org

Nicole Noska
Principal, Valley Middle School
nnoska@valleycollaborative.org

Chris Cowan
Principal, Site 1
Valley Transitional High School
ccowan@valleycollaborative.org

Julie Fielding
Principal, Site 2
Valley Transitional High School
jfielding@valleycollaborative.org

Kristine Bonsack
Principal, Site 3
Valley Transitional High School
School to Work, School and Vocational Training (COAP), School and Life Skills Training (SCOAP), School and Life Skills ISN (SCOAP FOUNDATIONS) and ISN
kbonsack@valleycollaborative.org

Heather Valcanas
Adult Services Manager
hvalcanas@valleycollaborative.org

Denise Cook
Human Resources and Benefits Administrator
dcook@valleycollaborative.org

Pam Walker
Program Lead, Elementary School
pwalker@valleycollaborative.org

Brian Mihalek
Program Lead, Middle School
bmihalek@valleycollaborative.org

Joe Venskus
School Resource Lead, Site 1
jvenskus@valleycollaborative.org

Adam Griggs
Milieu Coordinator, Site 2
agriggs@valleycollaborative.org

Chrystalia Metrakas
Milieu Coordinator, Site 3
cmetrakas@valleycollaborative.org

Valley Collaborative Board

Chair: Mr. Timothy Piwowar
Superintendent of the Billerica Public Schools

Dr. Jay Lang
Superintendent of the Chelmsford Public Schools

Mr. Steven Stone
Superintendent of the Dracut Public Schools

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Superintendent of the Nashoba Valley Technical School District

Ms. Joan Landers
Superintendent of the North Middlesex Regional School District

Dr. John O’Connor
Superintendent of the Tewksbury Public Schools

Mr. Donald Ciampa
Superintendent of the Tyngsborough Public Schools

Mr. Everett (Bill) Olsen
Superintendent of the Westford Public Schools

Jessica Scalzi
Lead Nurse
jscalzi@valleycollaborative.org

Melissa McKenzie
Offsite Lead
mmckenzie@valleycollaborative.org

Riley O’Keefe
Vocational Lead
rokeefe@valleycollaborative.org