In February 2022, The Keene Sentinel launched the Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab, an ambitious effort to fund a dedicated health solutions reporter to better explore the problems of health care access in Cheshire County. This was unlike anything we had done before, with the project fully covered by donors and grants. We started this project after more than 30 listening sessions with people within the local health care sector, from medical professionals and business leaders to patients. Through those conversations, we found that the Monadnock Region needed a revamped model for health care news coverage.

With the idea of a “Lab” in mind, we set off to provide in-depth health coverage in different ways than we had in the past. The donor-funded model allowed us to dedicate our health reporter, Olivia Belanger, to fully focus on the health beat.

Having the Health Lab as a resource has allowed The Sentinel’s reporting to expand beyond the day-to-day coverage and concentrate more on long-form, solutions-based stories that our readers need. In addition, the Lab has created a weekly online health newsletter, hosted Facebook Live discussions with local experts and created a family resource guide, and as you read this, a new podcast has launched.

This letter is part of our first impact report that details further what we were able to achieve in 2022 and hope to produce in 2023. Through this endeavor, we’ve learned that the community will support new journalism initiatives, such as the lab, and that we can reach new audiences, particularly those that are underserved. Our goals remain to provide a deeper level of health care coverage for this region and to save lives.

We are deeply grateful to those who donated to our initial campaign and hope, during the next few months, to raise what we need for 2023 and make progress for 2024. If you’d like to contribute, please reach out to me at twilliams@keenesentinel.com

Respectfully,

Terrence L. Williams
President & COO

ABOUT THE HEALTH LAB
WHAT IT IS

The Sentinel’s Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab informs its readers about health issues within the area through in-depth stories and multimedia projects. The beat focuses on solutions journalism, which not only outlines the problems, but presents possible ways to fix them through real-world examples. In pursuit of this mission, the Health Lab offers a more comprehensive picture of the region’s mental and physical health, where the root causes of health issues lie and how to better our community.

ABOUT OLIVIA
HEALTH SOLUTIONS REPORTER

Olivia Belanger is the health solutions reporter for The Sentinel and main reporter for the Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab, keeping readers informed on issues like mental health, the opioid crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Before joining The Sentinel’s staff, Olivia spent a year as the health, nonprofit and education reporter for the Watertown Daily Times in Watertown, NY.

A 2018 graduate of Keene State College, Olivia decided to move back to the area in 2019 to tell the unique stories of the Monadnock Region. The Bartlett native now lives in Keene with her fiancé, Ryan, and their Bernese mountain dog, Koa.

When off duty, Olivia can be found drinking an iced coffee, teaching herself a new hobby or looking — literally everywhere — for a dog to pet.
### MEET OUR FREELancers

**Kelly Burch**

Kelly Burch is a freelance journalist with more than 15 years experience. She enjoys making complex health topics accessible to readers, with a particular interest in mental, maternal and sexual health coverage. She enjoys working with the Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab and the Granite State News Collaborative to produce stories focused on her home state of New Hampshire.

**Mia Summerson**

Mia Summerson is a freelance journalist based in Niagara Falls, NY. Formerly a Sentinel reporter, she has more than a decade of experience working for daily newspapers, covering topics including politics, business, entertainment and health. She has tackled stories for the Health Lab on health policies, COVID-19 and Medicaid reimbursement rates.

### One Year of Impact

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Thank you to our funders: Putnam Foundation, Cheshire Medical Center, NH Charitable Foundation, The Richards Group, Clark-Mortenson, Fenton Family Dealerships and numerous individuals; and partners, Nackey Loeb School of Communications and the Granite State News Collaborative.
In early June, The Sentinel was tipped off to a trove of documents published on the N.H. Office of Licensure and Certification’s website detailing the emergency suspension of several practitioners’ licenses at Cheshire Medical Center in Keene, after gallons of fentanyl solution were discovered to be missing.

The resulting nine-story series that ran through July cast a light on the circumstances involving eight gallons of missing fentanyl solution - much of it stolen - from the local hospital. We brought to light how various staff people lost their licenses in the investigation, which the public might not otherwise have known.

Many of these articles outlined the incident, our questions that the hospital wasn’t answering and gave readers a window into rarely covered state medical licensing hearings. Beyond that, we wanted to provide readers with solutions. How are hospitals supposed to operate to prevent this from happening?

We called every hospital in the state to set up interviews about their drug diversion policies and also tracked down drug-diversion experts to get their insight. What we found is there are few federal requirements for hospitals to adhere to when it comes to drug diversion policies, leaving that responsibility of creating a comprehensive one on the hospitals themselves. Because of this, experts said having policy in place is rare.

We also felt it was important to bring these stories back to their human element. Taking on a solutions journalism approach, we decided to unpack how common addiction is for health care workers, and what supports specifically geared toward that population are in place.

We’re proud of how these stories came out — in a short amount of time — on such a significant development for our area.

For years, we’ve had of a shortage of health care workers. The COVID-19 pandemic made this situation even worse, stretching across the entire health care sector in the Monadnock Region and beyond. Health facilities are facing an unprecedented number of vacancies, and patients are seeing delays in care.

So, how do we fix it?

We explored this question for this story, interviewing 17 people over the course of several months, from health officials to advocates to patients.

A majority described the current situation as dire, with older generations of employees retiring from the workforce at a rate outpacing those entering it.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the situation, with a surge of people leaving the field due to burnout and increased stress, as well as sick patients — mentally and physically — requiring care.

And even though there are various efforts underway across the state to address the shortage, we found that there is still significant work needed to be done to have a substantial impact.
When I first became a reporter nearly five years ago, I had only one goal in mind — to have an impact on the community I was covering.

I’ve felt that purpose through various story assignments over the years, especially since joining The Keene Sentinel’s news team in 2019. I was given guidance in ways I wasn’t before, resulting in stories with better angles, better sourcing and better writing.

But even still, I felt stunted — and, frankly, burned out — by the endless hustle of daily news. I craved the time and space to dive deeper into my health beat but was struggling to find a way to do so.

Then last winter, the Sentinel’s President and COO Terrence Williams presented me with a new opportunity: The Monadnock Region Health Reporting Lab. As we envisioned the concept, I could focus on the long-form, solutions-based journalism I had craved. This approach would not just entail coverage of health care, but would explore how we, as a community, could make it better.

The Lab has provided me with the flexibility and focus that I always wanted. Though I’ll never get my dream job as a singing-dancing-doctor (my top choice as a kid), this position is about as close to having one as I could imagine.

I was able to take out my notebook, bursting with story ideas, and actually start reporting on them. I was given an outlet through The Check-Up, our weekly online newsletter, to share my own health experiences and showcase local health resources.

As you’ve seen in this report, the Lab has made significant strides in less than a year. Though there were certainly hiccups along the way, this was a better inaugural year than any of us could’ve imagined.

We’ve produced 75 stories, seven of which highlighted potential solutions. I’ve written 41 newsletters that are being emailed to nearly 1,000 subscribers — a number that often stops me in my tracks. Of those subscribers, less than 200 actually buy The Sentinel, which means we have started to meet our goal of finding new readers. Additionally, the Lab — with support from our donors and the two local Rotary Clubs — published a 48-page community and family resource guide to give people the connections they need for health and family care.

Beyond the day-to-day work we’ve put into the Lab, I’ve also been able to have more experiences outside of the newsroom.

In May, I participated in the Solutions Journalism Summit in Sundance, Utah. The two-and-a-half-day “unconference” is the network’s annual gathering of roughly 70 journalists from around the world, exploring how reporters can respond to social problems using solutions journalism. The goal of this work is not to just highlight an issue or problem, but look for those who are making progress against similar challenges.

Due to the conference’s untraditional format, participants were able to take the reins on what they wanted to learn. The groups I attended talked about how to better utilize data in articles, how to use life experiences as a “super power” in reporting and how to battle the fatigue that almost everyone in the industry is feeling. The summit gave me more confidence in my knowledge of solutions journalism, but also as a journalist.

This is reflective of how I’ve felt this entire year. As a reporter, it’s easy to doubt yourself and compare your work to others. I’ve always struggled with imposter syndrome, so applying that to my career was a given. But through the Lab and its endeavors, I’ve grown more confident in my career and in myself. I’ve been able to expand my work beyond what I thought was possible.

In the coming year, I’ll be producing my first podcast, aimed at shedding light on those living with unseen illnesses. The Lab will also be hosting its first Health Fair, at which area residents can have a one-stop shop for local health resources.

I know these projects are just the start of another impactful year, which wouldn’t be possible without your support.

Thank you for your words of encouragement. Thank you for your donations. Thank you for giving me a space to grow.

Best,

Olivia Belanger