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UNH Awarded \$450,000 Grant to Help New Englanders with Spinal Cord Injuries Transition Back to Their Homes and Communities

Project PATH Aims to Improve Quality of Life, Cut Health Care Costs

By [Sharon Keeler](#)
UNH News Bureau

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DURHAM, N.H. -- The University of New Hampshire has been awarded a \$450,000 federal grant to provide northern New England residents who have recent spinal cord injuries with the services and skills necessary to make a successful transition back to their homes and communities.

The program, called Project PATH (Promoting Access, Transition & Health) will serve up to 80 people in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, Maine and Vermont, thanks to a three-year grant awarded by the National Institute on Disability Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) to UNH's Department of Recreation Management and Policy. NIDRR is part of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services.

According to Janet Sable, UNH associate professor of therapeutic recreation and Project PATH principal investigator, the program focuses on empowering people with spinal cord injuries to engage in health-promoting behaviors and activities.

"The year following a recent injury is a critical opportunity for interventions," says Sable. "Project PATH has two related goals. We want to help prevent costly and common secondary medical problems, including skin ulcers, infections, shoulder injuries, substance abuse and depression. We also want to provide people with the skills and support necessary to make a successful transition back to their families, friends, jobs and community."

A range of services will be offered to support the project's goals, including wellness education, personalized fitness programs, accessibility training, and functional and recreational skill development.

The federal grant builds on support from the N.H. Department of Health and Human Services Health Care Transition Fund, which awarded UNH a community grant of \$99,273 in 1998 for an 18-month pilot program. The UNUM Foundation also provided funds to develop the research component.

The highly successful program linked Northeast Passage, a program which provides sports and recreation opportunities for individuals with physical disabilities, UNH's Department of Recreation Management and Policy, and HealthSouth of Concord. Northeast Passage is now officially a part of UNH.

Bob Gammon, of Sanbornton, is a client who was enrolled in the pilot program. After a fall left him paralyzed last year, his case manager at HealthSouth referred him to Project PATH.

"Everything is a challenge at first. You look at all the things you did in your spare time before the injury and you think that's all gone," says Gammon. "The PATH project has shown me that a lot of the things I did before can still be done -- from mowing the lawn to riding my ATV. I don't know of any other program like this where they work with you to show you how to do sports and activities. They show you what equipment is available, and they train you how to use it. They help you enjoy life again."

New community partners for Project PATH include HealthSouth of Portland, Maine, and Woburn, Mass., and the Northeast Rehabilitation Health Network. These partners will refer patients for inclusion in the project.

"The program is flexible, and people use it in different ways," says Jill Gravink, UNH assistant professor of recreation management and policy and director of Northeast Passage. "Sometimes, their primary care physicians don't have experience working with spinal cord injuries, and we can point them toward the resources they need. Sometimes it's just listening. They want to know how they are going to live their life, when their life has been turned so upside down."

The long-term goal of Project PATH is to demonstrate that helping people with spinal cord injuries develop independence and active lifestyles improves their long-term health. The outcome would be a national model supported by health insurance providers.

"There are 10,000 new spinal cord injuries each year, and the average age of the approximately 200,000 people with injuries nationally is 31 years," says

Gravink. "Eighty-five percent of the activities these people do after their injuries are socially isolating, as well as sedentary. We want health insurance providers to look at this type of program and fund it, because they'll see that it can help decrease follow-up health care costs."

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