SARANAC LAKE — Trudeau Institute and Adirondack Health have been named co-Businesses of the Year by the Saranac Lake Area Chamber of Commerce.

The two Saranac Lake institutions formed an unexpected alliance this year as the hospital contended with supply shortages amid the coronavirus pandemic.

“The way these organizations interacted, solved a problem, and provided a positive impact to the Saranac Lake area, is exactly the type of extraordinary achievement the chamber seeks to recognize,” chamber board president Joe Shoemaker said in a statement. “Without widespread testing, our area would not have had the available data to move through the different phases of reopening. We are extremely grateful and proud of all their work.”

Patrick Murphy, executive director of the chamber, said this recognition is for the institutions’ employees, too.

“This recognition goes beyond just the organization level and is meant to highlight the extraordinary efforts of the employees who are working day in and day out to keep us safe,” he said in a statement. “We are proud to call them colleagues and neighbors. We are proud to have them in our community.”

During a virtual meeting hosted by the chamber last week, Adirondack Health CEO Sylvia Getman shared her experience inside the hospital before Trudeau Institute stepped in to help, offering a unique glimpse into the difficult decisions local health care professionals had to make at the height of this state’s coronavirus outbreak.
The first confirmed case of COVID-19 in New York state was announced on March 1, but new reporting and research suggests that Americans may have been exposed to the virus far sooner than that. When this state announced its first confirmed case of COVID-19, around 10,000 infections had already spread undetected, the New York Times reported last month.

The first confirmed case in Essex County was announced on March 17, one day after the first case in the North Country region was confirmed in Clinton County. The first confirmed case in Franklin County was detected on March 24.

The day after Essex County’s first case, hospitals around the region began restricting COVID-19 testing to hospital inpatients, patients in emergency departments awaiting admission, nursing home residents and those with known symptoms of COVID-19.

The testing restrictions, paired with a national shortage of supplies and limited testing capacity, meant not knowing the full scope of the virus in this region.

“Testing was very limited in the North Country, not just the North Country but in the state,” Getman said last week. “That shortage put us in a rationing position, which is just something we haven’t had to deal with on this scale.”

On March 22, hospitals across the state were directed to cancel elective surgeries. The order was designed to curb the spread of the virus and free up hospital beds for an expected influx of patients sick with COVID-19. Rural hospitals, including Adirondack Health, lost millions of dollars in lost revenue — prompting mass layoffs at some health care facilities here as the pandemic reached a fever-pitch in other areas of the state. Adirondack Health offered some of its employees voluntary furlough options.

At the same time, hospital administrators were asked to piece together plans for ways to expand their facilities’ capacity in the event of a surge.

On top of the shortage of testing supplies — specifically viral transport media, the chemical that specimens are stored in while transported to a lab for testing — hospitals had a limited supply of sterilized personal protective equipment for its staff, with no guarantee of how quickly more could be ordered.

“Those early weeks and months were pretty bleak most of the time,” Getman said. “We were making choices that in our careers we’ve never had to make.”
For Adirondack Health, an unlikely collaboration with Trudeau Institute, a biomedical research facility, was a “game-changer,” Getman said.

A conversation between a local husband and wife, one who works at Trudeau and the other at Adirondack Health, sparked conversations between the two institutions that would lead to Trudeau manufacturing the chemical reagents that the hospital needed to transport samples for testing. Administrators have not yet named the couple.

Getman said she “will never forget” the night the hospital received its first shipment of viral transport media from Trudeau. It was April 30, and minutes before the hospital’s board of directors was set to meet. Hospital staff immediately drove over to Trudeau and loaded up 2,000 vials into the back of a Jeep Grand Cherokee, Getman said.

“I can’t even begin to tell you what a relief that was in our industry,” she said. “I get a little emotional, because it was difficult times.”

The delivery of chemicals pushed the hospital’s testing capabilities into new territory, making a surge in testing possible in a time when the North Country region needed only to increase its testing to trigger the first phase of reopening.

Trudeau also stepped in to help sterilize the hospital’s personal protective equipment, allowing the hospital to reuse upward of 90% of its masks multiple times before they’re discarded.

“We decided that uncertain times call for a steady response,” Trudeau Institute President Atsuo Kuki said last week. “We wanted to take immediate action to care for those on the front lines who provide us all with health care.”

“This lurking invisible threat is visible to bioscientists,” he added later. “It is urgent that testing continues to detect this.”

Getman stressed that public safety precautions need to continue to be utilized.

“It is time for celebration, but I feel I need to be the bearer of bad news,” she said. “We can’t prevent this virus yet.”