



On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

The Allegheny County human services system’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic embodies the very best of social work and is as important to our community as that of any first responder on the frontline. The following stories demonstrate the many ways that providers and their staffs have adapted to new, difficult and often frightening conditions to serve the most vulnerable among us. They are testament to the compassion and commitment of our frontline staff and agencies, and we are honored to showcase them here.

More stories about staff and providers making a difference during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found [here](#).

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FAMILY LINKS

Many Family Links clients depend upon their Behavioral Supports Consultant (BSC) for routine and consistency. BSC Lynn Yocum has been instrumental in coordinating the appropriate behavioral supports for one of her clients, providing her with necessary stability in her daily life. Unfortunately, in the midst of the pandemic, the client’s residential provider ended the contract with Lynn’s provider agency, meaning that the client – who finds change difficult – would have to adjust to a new BSC. Concerned that this would result in regression in the progress the client has made in recent months, Lynn stepped in and was able to navigate multiple entities, including the County, mental health supports and multiple providers, utilizing a variety of virtual and physically distanced interactions. Her efforts resulted in a coordinated plan that will allow the client to continue receiving the consistent support she needs to remain happy and healthy in her home.

LITERACY PITTSBURGH

The impact of the COVID-19 crisis is far reaching, impacting not only health but also financial security, particularly among the most vulnerable populations. While recessions typically hit the lowest-wage workers the hardest, these workers have suffered disproportionate and unprecedented job losses since mid-March 2020 (a 35% decline vs. 9% among high-wage workers). The economic recovery is also likely to take significantly longer for the groups that make up the low-wage workforce, especially those 54,000 adults in Allegheny County without a high school credential or adequate English language skills.

Helping these individuals gain vital skills and credentials is Literacy Pittsburgh's expertise. Their mission of better lives through learning is even more critical during this time of economic crisis. A high school diploma is a foundational requirement for any job in the middle skills workforce and will increasingly be required for low-skill jobs when available labor exceeds the supply of jobs.

Feeling a responsibility to reach those in need and broaden opportunities for those who are struggling, Literacy Pittsburgh is launching its first-ever student recruitment campaign in September. The goal is to ensure that individuals without a high school credential know that they can acquire the skills to become more competitive in a tough economy.

Digital learning is now a centerpiece of Literacy Pittsburgh's instructional model. Prior to the pandemic, the agency was engaging with digital platforms on a limited basis, planning to slowly incorporate technology into its work, while acknowledging that access to technology is a barrier for many of its clients. The pandemic changed that, and staff moved quickly to implement new instructional methods. With creativity and determination, staff launched YouTube channels, Google Classrooms, instructional videos for volunteer tutors, and live Zoom classes. Students have gained confidence using an unfamiliar platform

and have exhibited gratitude and willingness to learn at every step of the way.

Now, as the world settles into this "new normal," Literacy Pittsburgh is looking at how it can truly maximize virtual instruction and digital platforms while helping unemployed and underemployed individuals pursue a family-sustaining wage. Through a grant from the BNY Mellon Foundation, the agency will soon start a tech lending library for students, helping to break down a significant barrier to learning. A new Digital Literacy Fellow will develop the programming and capacity to accelerate the **digital literacy** of staff, volunteers and students.

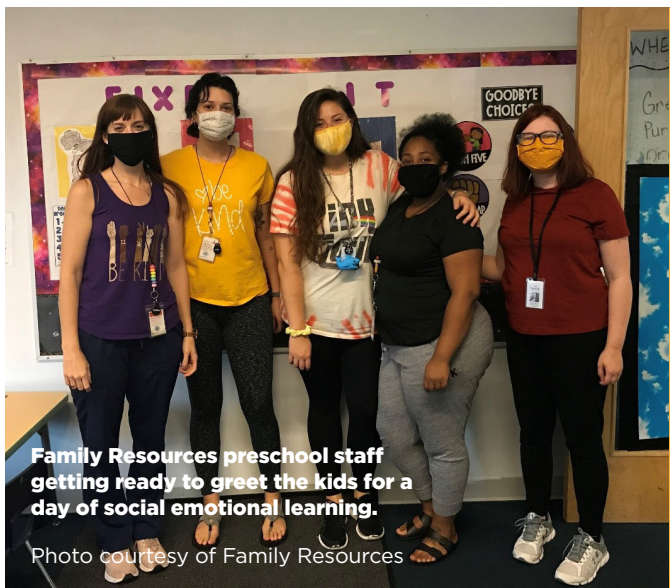
This fall, the agency is launching an exciting partnership with the Career Development Center at Jewish Family and Community Services (JFCS). A 12-week Career Accelerator class will help students without a high school credential jumpstart their job search. To qualify, students will have at least a ninth-grade education and the drive to make the commitment to this accelerated course. Literacy Pittsburgh will help students brush up on key skills and knowledge to pass the high school equivalency exams. JFCS will provide career search advice, resume preparation, and access to critical supports such as utility assistance, transportation or childcare if these present barriers to learning. Instruction will be a hybrid of online and in-person instruction. Students without access to technology will receive a Chromebook for use while enrolled in the program.

While the world around us has changed, Literacy Pittsburgh remains committed to its mission of Better Lives through Learning. The agency is prepared to play an important role in the economic recovery of our region and its families and encourages individuals without a high school diploma, or those who need help with math, reading or English language learning, to visit **www.startclassnow.org** or call 412-393-7600.

FAMILY RESOURCES

When the world slowed down on March 13, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Family Resources went on the fast track to incorporate the changes necessary to ensure staff and client health and safety.

The Beverly Jewel Wall Lovelace (BJWL) Out-of-School Time program and the preschool were temporarily closed during the crisis. The preschool reopened the last week of May and is now at full attendance. BJWL programming made significant adaptations through August and all 13 sites opened on August 31. The agency is proud to announce that three of its sites, Bedford Dwellings, Northview Heights and Hays Manor, will each house one of the newly formed Community Hubs, where students will receive virtual education and one-on-one support during the pandemic school closures.



Family Resources kept all program staff on payroll, even those employed in programs that were unable to operate during the pandemic, and awarded hazard pay to frontline staff in programs that were still operating.

In the midst of operating in the “new normal,” the horrific death of George Floyd and recognition of the disproportionate impact of the coronavirus on communities of color raised national attention to racism. These incidents resonated personally with Family Resources, since 75% of the agency’s clients

during the last fiscal year were Black, as are the majority of staff. In an effort to address ongoing racial injustice, Family Resources’ “Anti-Racism Town Hall” was born. Staff gathered virtually on the morning of August 6th to openly and honestly discuss how racism affects them and to learn what it means to be “anti-racist.” The discussion was passionate, educational, heartwarming and heartbreaking. The agency will continue to hold these town halls as long as staff have the desire and courage to participate.

The agency’s greatest sense of accomplishment comes from the emotional outpouring of gratitude, the smiles on the faces of BJWL kids when they pick up their Grab and Go lunches, and the satisfaction (and relief) on the part of preschool teachers when



the kids make it through a day of social distancing and mask wearing and still take home lessons they learned. And apparently clients are also pleased with the agency’s response; even with all the necessary

changes and precautions, client satisfaction scores continue to be ranked A to A-.

As the pandemic continued and civil discord became a larger reality, Family Resources, as a trauma-informed agency, felt the need to relaunch **“One Kind Word,”** which is designed to encourage kind actions that make a positive difference for parents and caregivers dealing with a stressful situation. This is especially important during a time when children are more isolated at home and incidents of abuse and neglect might not be apparent. The agency is utilizing social media and other media platforms to get out the word; Family Resources Executive Director Aimee LeFevers has been a guest on numerous Pittsburgh radio talk shows to raise awareness of the seriousness of child abuse.

CENTER OF LIFE: MEAL DELIVERY SERVICE

Although primarily known for its youth-focused programming, Center of Life in Hazelwood used the unexpected challenges caused by the pandemic as an opportunity to expand its reach and provide additional support for neighbors in need.

Center of Life had a food pantry prior to COVID-19, but the financial insecurity many families faced as a result of the pandemic meant that more people needed access to food. To meet the needs of these families, Center of Life began offering a meal delivery service for breakfast and lunch five days a week, reaching about 140 households each day. More than 100,000 meals have been delivered since the beginning of the pandemic shutdowns. These deliveries have allowed staff to stay physically connected to the families they serve and to keep up to date on any new needs families may have.

The meal delivery service has been made possible by a partnership between Pittsburgh Public Schools, Community Kitchen, Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and other contracted food providers. Plans are in place to continue delivering food to those in the community who need it most, and Center of Life is currently recruiting Hazelwood residents for paid positions to help with food deliveries.