

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

Date: January 14, 2021
To: Allegheny County Department of Human Services Contracted Service Providers
From: Brian Bell, Allegheny County Privacy Officer
Subject: Explanation for Collecting COVID Illness Report for Clients

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is requesting that its contracted Service Providers provide notification about clients who have tested positive for COVID-19, or have been exposed to others who have (effective 4/1/2020). They may do this through existing “critical incident” reporting procedures, or if the program does not already have procedures, by following the “Guidelines for Reporting COVID-19 Illness or Exposure - Clients ” posted on the Allegheny County Website.¹

This reporting requirement includes all clients regardless of whether the service is provided in-person or remotely. [We ask for reports of staff who have tested positive as well. In these cases, the names of those staff are not required.](#) The collection of reports of illness by DHS is for the purposes of coordinating care, tracking and monitoring the impact of the pandemic on DHS clients, and the administration of social services programming at large.

DHS serves as the administrator of Mental Health, Developmental Supports and other county-wide social service programs. As the administrator, it is critical for DHS to have timely and specific information to assess the impact of this pandemic on county residents, and to assess the compliance and performance of County service providers in providing supportive services and preventing the spread of illness within the challenging context of a global pandemic. [DHS clients are often enrolled in multiple services, so even for those engaged in telehealth, having these reports of illness can help to ensure safety in other programs and that appropriate supports are provided for their current needs. In the case of staff illness, it is important to understand whether additional staffing supports are needed within providers and more broadly within certain service systems.](#)

¹ <https://dhstraumaresourcelibrary.alleghenycounty.us/covid-19-information-for-dhs-providers/>

In addition to ensuring safety and the best care for DHS clients, this information will be used to determine resource and funding allocations that support the best provision of services now and as clients rebound from the social and economic impact of this event. It also will inform future pandemic preparedness efforts to ensure Allegheny County can support the needs of its residents should similar events occur in the future.

The sharing of this information with Allegheny County is permitted by the prevailing privacy and confidential laws and regulations for the United States and Pennsylvania to support DHS's role as a health oversight agency.²

The identified client information shared by DHS service providers is managed and governed directly by the DHS Privacy Officer and is restricted to a small number of individuals at DHS who support this effort. At all times, the information remains secure and confidential and is governed by the privacy and security rules of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996, as well as all state and local privacy and confidentiality regulations.

The Department of Human Services thanks you for your continued support of Allegheny County residents and for helping DHS to make meaningful improvements in the support systems and ultimately, the lives of those residents.

² Reading Title 55 Pa. Code § 5100.2 and Title 50 P.S. § 4305 together, the administrator of DHS is required to “administer the county mental health and intellectual disability program” and “review and evaluate facilities, and to cooperate with the department in the maintenance of established standards.” For DHS the administrator to perform his required function, Title 55 Pa. Code § 5100.32 authorizes disclosure of otherwise confidential information “[t]o the administrator, under his duties under applicable statutes and regulations.” DHS is a Health Oversight Agency under HIPAA. As such, DHS is authorized to obtain protected health information pursuant to 45CFR § 164.512(d)(1)(i) & (iii).