



## On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

As we enter the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the pandemic, Allegheny County's human services system continues to refine the changes in practice and policy necessitated by the virus while preparing for the anticipated onslaught of need by those hardest hit economically, physically and socially. In a time of such uncertainty, one thing is clear; we will need to continue to demonstrate the creativity, compassion and commitment that have made it possible to provide vital services to Allegheny County residents during the past few months.

DHS is working on a plan to continue to spotlight the extraordinary efforts of its staff and provider partners on behalf of clients and will be reaching out to gather your input. In the meantime, if you have a story or idea to share, please contact [Nakia.Granberg@alleghenycounty.us](mailto:Nakia.Granberg@alleghenycounty.us).

### FRONTLINE STORIES IN THIS ISSUE:

**Jeremiah's Place** 1

**Transitional Services  
Inc.** 2

**Hello Baby Cares  
/ Healthy Start  
Pittsburgh** 3

**Pittsburgh Mercy** 4

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

## JEREMIAH'S PLACE

At Pittsburgh's only crisis nursery, providing free emergency child care services for children (ages birth through age six) for a few hours or days based on the needs of each individual family, the staff at **Jeremiah's Place** are experienced at adjusting and adapting to changing needs – skills that have been especially useful over the last few months.

Between school closures, changing work environments, virtual learning and even job loss, adjusting to the “new normal” has been difficult for

many families. To relieve some of that stress, Jeremiah's Place has extended its respite care services. Parents served by Jeremiah's Place can schedule a time to send their children to the center for a few hours or for an overnight stay – with no questions asked – providing them with time to run errands, do housework or just watch a few episodes of a favorite television show. And the children have a chance to interact with other children and caregivers in a safe and friendly environment that is following state and CDC prevention guidelines. For both parents and children, even a short break during these stressful times can provide a much-needed opportunity to regroup and refresh.

Another challenge for many local families is being able to access basic necessities. Jeremiah's Place has partnered with local foundations, businesses and nonprofit organizations to hold grab-and-go events where families can pick up packages of food, gift cards for groceries, and other essentials such as diapers, wipes and baby supplies. More than 100 families have participated in these events, which are held approximately every six to eight weeks.

“Services for families are more important now than ever,” said Jordan Shoenberger, director of operations and development. “It’s been a difficult year for us at Jeremiah’s Place, but we’re still here, chugging along and continuing to do what needs to be done to help our families.”

---

## TRANSITIONAL SERVICES INC.

Transitional Services Inc. (TSI) was celebrating 50 years of service in the community when the focus quickly changed to addressing the coronavirus pandemic. Day programs were required to suspend services. People served in TSI's residential setting, Royer Group Home in East Liberty, had their daily routines significantly altered, with much more time spent at home. Along with ensuring the health and safety of staff and clients, TSI knew how important it was to maintain as many routines as possible and engage folks in things they could anticipate and enjoy.

With spring on the horizon, TSI's amazing staff went to work continuing the annual tradition of planting a vegetable garden. Under the guidance of staff member Leslie Gales, Royer residents began the growing process by planting seeds in small containers. They tended to the seeds daily, providing the right amount of water and

monitoring carefully to make sure they were getting adequate sunlight. In late May, the vegetables were transferred from their small pots to Royer's outdoor garden, where the residents continue to handle the daily responsibilities of growing and harvesting the vegetables.

Everyone shared in the pride and satisfaction of preparing wonderful meals using the vegetables from the garden. Not only do folks get to enjoy the fruits (or in this case, vegetables) of their labor, the experience fostered responsibility, teamwork, social skills, commitment and most importantly, fun. In this time of uncertainty, it is important to keep a sense of routine while ensuring that the people TSI serves are safe, happy and healthy. The garden project provided those living and working at Royer the opportunity to engage in meaningful and familiar activities which added to a sense of security during this difficult time.

---

## HELLO BABY CARES / HEALTHY START PITTSBURGH

*Healthy Start staff creatively help mothers through pandemic-era pregnancies*

Ask a woman to name something she would not want to do during a pandemic and giving birth would rank pretty high on the list.

But pregnancies can't be postponed. Happily, a team of highly qualified helpers has gone beyond the call of duty to support women delivering babies in Allegheny County amidst COVID-19.

As one component of its new **Hello Baby** program for families giving birth in Allegheny County, DHS contracted with Healthy Start to assist families with the most complex needs.

Healthy Start brought its Hello Baby staff, headed by program director Meagan Niebler, on board in February, but they had only a few weeks of planning before COVID-19 dramatically changed the situation. The usual problems that accompany pregnancy were dwarfed by new ones: mothers wondering who could be with them in the hospital, people losing their jobs, physicians switching to telehealth appointments.

The Hello Baby program rollout was delayed until September, but given these extraordinary circumstances, Healthy Start rapidly shifted gears and created "Hello Baby Cares." By April 22nd, they were offering, as Niebler calls it, "a warm hug to new parents."

Over the next four months, Hello Baby Cares delivered nearly 200 "care boxes" to new parents, containing diapers, wipes, face masks, hand sanitizer and baby books. Their social workers and family engagement specialists offered listening ears, screened for mental health issues, and connected women to breastfeeding counselors, food pantries, translation assistance and other services to address their needs.

Along with this work, Healthy Start has also provided other crucial support and advocacy for women who were reluctant to give birth in a hospital setting during a pandemic.

"A lot of women were seeking support for home births," said Jada Shirriell, CEO of Healthy Start. "There was a huge increase in fear about giving birth in a hospital without the desired support people, and many women were foregoing prenatal treatments because they couldn't bring their other children to appointments. So the full scope of normal care was not being provided."

In response, Healthy Start developed the Virtual Doula Program, through which doulas provided prenatal education and were then "present" at delivery. Because, early in the pandemic, Magee-Womens Hospital (where nearly half of all Allegheny County births take place) was permitting only one live support person in the delivery room, the doula generally provided birth support by iPad.

"In one of our first births during the pandemic," Shirriell explained, "labor was not progressing quickly, and the doctor recommended a caesarian section, but the doula advocated for her and she had a successful vaginal delivery. Without the doula's involvement, the mother would have had to give in."

As Hello Baby approached its delayed kickoff in September, Healthy Start transitioned the delivery of care boxes and COVID-19 supports to Family Centers throughout Allegheny County, so that its own staff could assume their intended role of assisting high-risk families.

"Hello Baby is a novel program and we still have a lot to learn," Shirriell said, "but I've already seen so much enthusiasm and passion about doing all we can to support positive outcomes for newborns and their families."

---

# PITTSBURGH MERCY

As COVID-19 hit earlier this year, Pittsburgh Mercy found itself working on many different fronts as its staff continued to serve people through behavioral health, substance use, intellectual disabilities, physical health and homelessness services, among others. Over the last eight months, through creativity, hard work and collaboration, Pittsburgh Mercy quickly adapted to this “new normal” as part of the job — and as a labor of love.

## **Telehealth**

Within three short weeks, the community health and wellness provider launched telehealth services so clinicians could safely continue to provide services to children and adults. In the first six months of the pandemic, Pittsburgh Mercy provided over 50,000 physical and behavioral health virtual visits using secure telehealth technology.

## **Testing and Physical Health**

Pittsburgh Mercy Family Health Center, on Pittsburgh’s South Side, became an Allegheny County Health Department COVID-19 community testing site, conducting over 1,000 tests for the public in addition to staff testing. By regularly testing staff, they were able to make clinical decisions to keep people safe, mitigate risks and stop the potential spread of coronavirus. Also, Pittsburgh Mercy Pharmacy’s team has been making the rounds of the agency’s residential sites to administer flu shots.

## **Homelessness Services**

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) designated Pittsburgh Mercy’s Operation Safety Net (OSN) as the provider to visit the city’s homeless camps during the height of the pandemic shutdown. The OSN team helped install portable toilets, sinks for handwashing and water buffalos to provide safe hygiene while giving care to those experiencing unsheltered homelessness. The case managers, outreach workers and medical staff continue to make wellness visits. As part of the Pittsburgh Mercy Family of Care, Bethlehem Haven’s team has also been doing some incredible

work behind the scenes to bring essential services to women experiencing homelessness during the pandemic.

## **Addressing Food Insecurity**

Pittsburgh Mercy’s community-based teams, in partnership with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, delivered pre-packaged boxes of food to families and individuals in need. Intervention staff constructed “ready-to-eat” food boxes for delivery to those served by OSN and packaged boxes at the Light of Life Donation Center for families in the community, while other staff delivered meals to veterans.

## **Quarantine Home volunteers**

Five brave staff members volunteered to provide compassionate care at two “quarantine homes” established specifically to serve people living in Pittsburgh Mercy’s residential sites who contracted COVID-19 during a spike over the summer.

## **Reaching out**

- McAuley Ministries, Pittsburgh Mercy’s grant-making foundation, continues to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic, awarding \$631,000 in grants (as of November 1, 2020) to community organizations.
- Pittsburgh Mercy Parish Nurse & Health Ministry Program has been utilizing Zoom to host free and public Health Ministry Virtual Meetings each month. These meetings provide peer support, learning and conversation around selected topics, as well as candlelight meditation and prayer gatherings for anyone who chooses to attend.

## **Little Things Mean a Lot**

The following list, while by no means inclusive, demonstrates ways in which staff, volunteers and people served put resources and creativity — and love — to work:

- Initially, a number of staff members assembled makeshift face coverings for colleagues

and people served; when cloth masks were recommended as a key prevention strategy, others spent the early spring sewing masks. Clear face coverings were made for staff and people served who speak with American Sign Language (ASL), allowing them to read lips.

- Community Treatment Teams (CTT) offered twice-a-week virtual bingo games to keep those served engaged and enjoying life.
- Paths to Wellness colleagues reached out to people served at residential sites with 'Packages of Love' containing personal hygiene packages and with inspiring communications to maintain connection when coronavirus mitigation efforts kept them apart.
- Pittsburgh Mercy Intellectual Disabilities Services held physically distanced lawn picnics and encouraged art as an uplifting activity.

- Despite these stressful times, tobacco cessation specialists have continued to successfully help both staff and people served to quit smoking.
- An OSN volunteer rallied her work colleagues at UPMC hospitals and donated more than 4,400 masks to Pittsburgh Mercy's homeless services.
- An Outpatient and Service Coordination client donated brand new tents, sleeping bags and other supplies for people experiencing homelessness.
- With the help of staff, children and transition-aged residents created inspiring chalk drawings that brought smiles to the faces of weary staff.

