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Allegheny County's Human Services System Responds to the COVID-19 Pandemic

When COVID-19 put an immediate halt to “business as usual,” Allegheny County’s human services system, comprised of the Department of Human Services (DHS) and its network of almost 400 community service providers, responded to the pandemic with swift action and creativity, coming together under new, difficult and often frightening conditions to support the County’s most vulnerable residents. We’ve heard countless stories of providers that have stepped up to the challenge and we’ve witnessed a depth of compassion and commitment on the part of frontline staff that is humbling. Staff responsible for ensuring the safety of children and the elderly found ways to continue to provide that essential service while putting their health – and even their lives – at risk. Those working directly with individuals with behavioral health needs or intellectual disabilities likewise put their own lives in jeopardy to protect and support these vulnerable clients. Hundreds of staff pivoted from their regular duties to deliver food and other essential supplies to those unable to secure them for themselves.

In recognition of this extraordinary response, DHS reached out to staff and providers to learn about the ways in which they were adjusting to new and changing client needs. We received dozens of stories, [which we posted online](#) and included in our [On the Frontline](#) newsletters. The following vignettes describe some of the ways in which DHS and its network of community providers have adapted to serve those in need.

Keeping people safe and healthy

Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Caseworkers

This epidemic has required many DHS caseworkers to go beyond their normal duties, or at least think more creatively and compassionately about how they can meet needs during these uncertain times. A caseworker in DHS’s Mon Valley child welfare office was assisting a mother of two who tragically lost her legs in an accident a year ago. While still adjusting to life with a disability, and now worrying about COVID-19, things got additionally complicated when one of her children unplugged their refrigerator before bed, leading to the loss of all their perishable food. Without a car, out of money and unable to access other transportation, she was panicking. While checking in on the family, the caseworker learned of the food situation. As this was early on in the epidemic, many of the now-established food delivery mechanisms were not yet in place. The caseworker sat in a car queue at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Foodbank in order to make sure the family had enough to eat, and then arranged for subsequent weekly deliveries.



Holy Family Institute

Holy Family Institute (HFI), which has been providing “help, healing and hope to children and families throughout Western Pennsylvania” for more than 100 years, realized the best way to continue to support their clients during the pandemic was to shift to remote service whenever possible. HFI staff transitioned to technological solutions to assist with applications for benefits, housing, student aid and unemployment; help clients make safety plans and complete the Protection from Abuse (PFA) order process; support clients in maintaining their sobriety; and offer guidance to parents who were facing additional stress from spending more time at home and serving as their child’s teacher.

While technology has played a major new role, in-person services remain critical for many clients. One such client, a 19-year-old woman who gave birth earlier this year, had been struggling to properly feed her baby and was not changing the baby on a regular basis. After a few weeks of face-to-face visits, carefully held with appropriate safety measures, the client had learned better parenting skills and felt more comfortable with her baby.

South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM)

In late March, an extended family of eight members—two grandparents, two parents and four children—fled the New York City area to escape the spreading pandemic and moved in with a related family of five in the South Hills.

It seemed like a good idea—except that the family didn’t realize that some of them were already infected. A few days later, some of the 13 now living together in a three-bedroom house were starting to show symptoms. Quarantining in the limited space would be a challenge.

SHIM sprang into action to coordinate and deliver cleaning supplies, PPE, food and backpacks with extra supplies. The family split up into two residences, and SHIM provided bedding, coordinated utility, rent/mortgage and unemployment assistance, and guided them through applying for other public benefits.



Making sure that nobody goes hungry

Center of Life

Hazelwood's [Center of Life](#), primarily known for its youth-focused programming, 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 breakfast and lunch delivery 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.

ACCESS

As movement in Allegheny County and across the world slowed down in March, demand for [ACCESS](#) door-to-door paratransit service slowed, too. Although ACCESS continues to provide essential trips to places of employment, medical appointments, grocery stores and the like, its capacity was being significantly under-utilized. So ACCESS repurposed its fleet of vehicles and drivers to coordinate essential deliveries with providers across the County and to deliver food and medical supplies to community members in need. In coordination with United Way's 2-1-1 hotline, ACCESS program staff have also conducted over 1,000 check-in calls with older community members, connecting them to food and other resources in the community while providing essential social connections during this challenging time.

Bible Center Church and Homewood Children's Village

Homewood's Bible Center Church and the Homewood Children's Village have been working together to serve neighborhood youth since the Children's Village was founded in 2008. So when COVID-19 hit, the two organizations were well-situated to join forces to address food insecurity. Homewood Children's Village has food delivery experience from providing food for children and their households since 2013, while Bible Center Church's Oasis Transportation Company has vehicles that typically would be used to transport children to and from school and that, during the pandemic, were sitting idle. With grants from local foundations and the United Way, by the end of July the two organizations together had delivered 54,229 meals (11,350 to children, compared to their typical number of 300 kids at any given time) and distributed 18,172 diapers and more than 8,000 wipes (these are items that can often be difficult for families to obtain or afford).



Providing a safe place to quarantine and recover from coronavirus

Community Human Services

For nearly 50 years, Community Human Services (CHS) has provided low-income individuals and those experiencing homelessness in our region access to stable housing, quality food and community resources.

Not surprisingly, individuals experiencing unsheltered homelessness and those living in group (congregate) housing have a harder time separating themselves from possible contagion. Responding to this need, CHS quickly put its decades of experience to work, partnering with the County's Department of Human Services to operate Safe Haven, a hotel turned temporary isolation and quarantine facility for those at-risk of or impacted by the disease.

Safe Haven accepts referrals from a number of partners, including homeless shelters, street outreach providers, and organizations serving refugees and immigrants. It also houses frontline staff who were exposed to COVID-19 and need a place to stay until they can safely return to their families.

Helping parents through pandemic-era pregnancies and early parenthood

Hello Baby Cares/Healthy Start Pittsburgh

In February, Healthy Start Pittsburgh was preparing to roll out its new [Hello Baby](#) prevention program for new parents. But when the pandemic hit, 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.

Rapidly shifting gears, Healthy Start created "Hello Baby Cares," a modified version of the program in which staff delivered more than 200 "care boxes" to new parents, containing diapers, wipes, face masks, hand sanitizer and baby books; offered listening ears, screened for mental health issues, and connected women to breastfeeding counselors, food pantries, translation assistance and other needs; and provided crucial support and advocacy for women who were reluctant to give birth in a hospital setting during a pandemic, such as arranging for virtual appointments with doulas, who provided prenatal education and were then "present" at delivery (via iPad).



Beverly's Birthdays

While investigating ways to continue to support children and families in a COVID-19 environment that put a halt to regular programming, Beverly's Birthdays learned that food banks don't supply formula and that families were struggling. So to fill the gap, this agency of nine staff became DHS's infant supply storage closet.

Through a multi-faceted effort (promoting a crowdfunding program, making arrangements to buy items at cost from Giant Eagle, scheduling pickups by 93 agencies, turning their small office into a warehouse with boxes stacked to the ceiling and renting two portable units for extra storage space), staff began to secure and distribute formula, diapers, baby wipes, snack packs, hygiene items and baby food. As of early June, less than three months into the pandemic, Beverly's Birthdays had already secured and distributed \$120,000 in food and supplies.

Making sure that everyone has accurate and timely information

Casa San José

Casa San José is a Pittsburgh-based non-profit that serves Latino immigrants throughout southwestern Pennsylvania. Since 2013, Casa San José has been focused on the Latino community's integration and self-sufficiency, but now that includes survival as well.

All during the pandemic, Casa San José has been on the ground, assisting families and distributing resources. High among the needs they have been filling are Spanish language resources about the pandemic and connections to Spanish speaking health professionals and clinics. The center has continuously posted reliable and accurate Spanish language bulletins, tips, notices and webinars on social media and online covering the coronavirus and other survival needs; partnered with UPMC to host a [Facebook Live information session on COVID-19, in Spanish](#), which reached nearly 3,000 viewers; and brought resource agencies to the center's food distribution site, to explain about COVID-19, rental assistance, immigrants' rights and the U.S. Census.



Connecting students and families to school and telehealth by providing computers and internet access

Allegheny County Department of Human Services

When the pandemic hit, DHS not only equipped its staff to work remotely in a matter of days, it also provided technical assistance to providers, transitioned its call centers to VOIP phones and stepped forward to fill the gap in technology for families and students who needed technology to access telehealth, teletherapy, telework and online school.

As of the end of October, DHS has distributed more than 1,000 laptops and has provided internet access through a combination of Wi-Fi hotspots (348) and community access spots (11). To help residents find internet access away from home, DHS has also put together a community [Wi-Fi map](#) that includes libraries, universities and other publicly available sites.



Supporting recovery, one person at a time

POWER

The early months of drug and alcohol recovery are a difficult time but could seem nearly impossible when combined with a pandemic, a hospitalized family member and uncertainty about having adequate food. At [POWER](#) (PA Organization for Women in Recovery), staff did more than provide recovery support. Without transportation or a source of income, getting food became a critical need. One POWER mentor, learning of a client whose food had been stolen from her rooming house and whose food benefits for the month had already been used, found out that staff could visit a food bank distribution site to pick up food for their clients. The mentor went to the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank and explained the situation to a staff member. She was permitted to pick up the food and dropped it off to a thrilled client. That started a process wherein POWER staff regularly deliver food to clients when needed.

