



Goals and Key Initiatives

2024



Allegheny County
Department of
Human Services



Our goals

Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is here to help people during their most vulnerable times, providing them with services and support that prevent and resolve crises. We help children and youth grow up safer and healthier and adults live more securely and independently. In these ways, the “human services” we plan, fund and deliver are helping individuals and families in Allegheny County to thrive.

We've set five goals to guide us and our partners in serving our community well. We aim for our network of human services to:

- Improve access to care

- Prevent overuse of coercive services

- Prevent harm

- Increase economic security

- Ensure quality

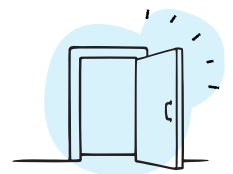
These goals guide our daily work, whether that's helping families pay for child care and transportation, delivering meals to older adults, or making sure people who need treatment for serious mental illness get the care they need.

We can reach our goals more quickly if we devote time and attention to several big, bold initiatives that will make our systems and our organization work better for everyone we serve. This document outlines our key initiatives in 2024—which are in addition to our core work of running effective systems of care for people. Each initiative fits within a goal it will help advance.

Our initiatives

Improve access to care

DHS aims to make it easier for people to know where to turn for help and then actually get the help they need. In 2023, we made progress toward this goal by increasing our investments in key helplines (211 and Allegheny Link) and as a result, both of these served more callers, faster than in the prior year. We also expanded several of our programs and directed more of our services to those with the highest needs.



2024 Initiatives to improve access to care

1. **Second shift.** While a share of DHS's services is available 24-7, these are mostly crisis and protective services for children and vulnerable adults. The human services that might prevent crises close at 5 p.m. If we could alter schedules so that more programs were open during those times, we could help people before situations became crises and be available for people who work during the day. Through this initiative, we will assess what it would take to make evening/weekend hours possible at family support centers and for delivering typical outpatient behavioral health (BH) and other services. This includes the initiation of important BH care (medication management for people with mental illness and initiation of medication for opioid use disorder); providing outpatient mental health and family-based mental health care; justice-related services; and delivering preventive programs like family support and child care.
2. **Finding, scheduling and initiating services.** We will increase people's ability to get the help they need by expanding their ability to self-initiate enrollment in services and schedule appointments (focusing, this year, on some behavioral health appointments for youth), as well as making it easier and faster to find services:
 - **Self-initiate services.** For those who need developmental supports, DHS will make it easier for individuals and families to register for these supports through a mobile-enabled website. They'll be able to use the site to begin enrollment and upload and sign documents—exercising more control

over the intake process with less need to schedule appointments or mail documents. This will provide consumers and staff alike with greater visibility into the status of applications.

- *Appointment scheduling.* DHS will make it easier to find a mental health appointment for youth by centralizing information so that families, youth and others who support the young person (e.g., service coordinators and providers) can see when a next appointment is available. This year, we will focus on putting scheduling in place for higher-intensity mental health services (family-based, partial hospitalization, case management, Intensive BH Services) and outpatient care. This will improve the mental health search experience for over 11,800 youth.
- *Information and help.* DHS will continue to invest in United Way’s PA 211 Southwest and work with providers and community partners to ensure that 211 provides accurate, up-to-date human services information. By centralizing resource information at 211 and having highly trained 211 resource navigators designated to answering calls from Allegheny County specifically, 211 will become the go-to place to look for quality human services information. 211 receives about 50,000 calls, texts, and chat contacts from Allegheny County each year, and as the quality and quantity of resource information at 211 grows, DHS will partner with 211 to expand the service’s visibility in high-need communities and make it faster and more convenient for people to go from contacting 211 to actually getting services.

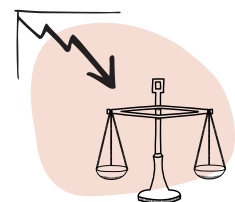
3. **Access to services for seniors.** Our work in informing, reaching and serving older adults will lead to fewer older adults experiencing food insecurity, provide better choices in nutrition options, increased participation and social connections, and diversified funding for the senior center network. It includes:

- *Outreach to seniors.* DHS will reach more under-served adults by implementing a new communication platform that shares real-time information about older adult services. This strategy will reach 48,000 seniors.
- *Increasing service use among seniors.* We will kick-off a two-year effort to update and expand the knowledge of our community-based services, including senior centers and our home-delivered meals and congregate meals program, which has increased its nutritional choice and cultural appropriateness.



Prevent overuse of coercive services

DHS (and government generally) has great responsibilities, including protecting children, youth and vulnerable adults from harm—and with that comes significant authority. We seek to use this power as narrowly as possible and have been putting in place efforts to reduce the overuse of coercive services while still protecting individuals and the community. In 2023, for example, the County safely reduced families’ involvement with child protective services by providing them with programs and services without their needing to be part of an open case with our Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF).



2024 Initiatives to prevent overuse of coercive services

4. **Prevention services for families.** Each year, DHS receives 15,000 calls of concern about children. Most of these referrals are related to a family need (e.g., housing), rather than abuse or neglect. Rather than open a child protective services case, DHS could connect families with a network of community partners who provide services that would address the family's needs. But we don't need to wait until someone makes a referral to child welfare to provide assistance. If more people knew about the resources available to families in their communities, fewer children and families would need to undergo unnecessary screenings and investigations. This initiative will focus on building greater understanding in our community and institutions about how to support families; improving families' access to existing services; and fully implementing a child welfare practice that allows staff to nimbly provide services (without having to open a case to do so). To achieve these crucial aims, we will:
 - *Partner with communities in providing referral information.* DHS will support community partners in informing schools, hospitals, and police departments (the three largest sources of referrals) about alternative approaches to safely addressing possible child welfare concerns. This will include education about the resources available to families as well as information about the referrals they are making, such as number and disposition of those referrals.
 - *Increase families' use of existing services.* DHS will make the path to prevention services and basic needs resources simpler and better-known to families.
 - *Fully implement a new child welfare practice.* While we are working to make the path to services clear to families, community agencies, and institutions, it will still be the case that a family becomes referred to child welfare when they need supports. Last year, we began implementing a practice wherein case workers can order services for families (like in-home programs) without opening a case. We will implement this practice fully in 2024, including by completing our training of staff and supervisors. We also will collect feedback to improve the quality of this practice and the services.

5. **Reduced law enforcement encounters and jail entry.** DHS will implement community-led initiatives to improve public health and safety by preventing law enforcement encounters and jail entry through:
 - *Behavioral health teams.* Instead of law enforcement having to respond to 911 calls for people experiencing a BH crisis, officers will be able to send out behavioral health teams instead, starting in a set of pilot areas. (These are Penn Hills, Monroeville, McKees Rocks, and Allegheny County Housing Authority sites.)
 - *Peer-operated overnight respite.* These peer respite sites will be for people experiencing escalating mental health symptoms and emotional distress. The behavioral health teams can transport people in crisis to respite or individuals can go there directly—all without calling 911 first.
 - *Expanded Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion (LEAD),* which provides police with alternatives to arrest and incarceration. We currently serve 11 municipalities and will expand to 22 municipalities during 2024.
 - *Medications and support.* By the end of 2024, the County will offer medications and peer support to every person who enters the jail and has an opioid use disorder (OUD). These medications, such as buprenorphine, naltrexone and methadone, can reduce addiction for people with OUD. This initiative will come at a critical intervention point for people and enhance their recovery.
 - *Reentry program.* We will redesign our reentry program through a solicitation for services at the jail and in the community. This reentry system will embed principles of Recovery-Oriented Cognitive Therapy, take a strengths-based approach, and incorporate evidence-based practices.

Prevent harm

DHS helped prevent harm and avert crises in 2023 by adding respite care and informal mental health and crisis support services; and by expanding our mobile response. We also launched a community violence reduction initiative in communities with high rates of violence and reduced hospital readmissions by providing direct follow-up and services to adults being released from the hospital.



2024 Initiatives to prevent harm

6. **Better flow out of emergency shelters and into housing.** DHS is leading a County effort to generate housing options to restore people's movement out of the emergency shelter system and into housing. We will work to make additional housing units available for people who have been staying in shelters. The resulting flow will benefit individuals and families by allowing them to move more rapidly into housing while creating room in our shelters for people staying on the street.
7. **Best-in-class treatment and care for adults experiencing serious mental illness** by increasing their adherence to medication, improving the availability of step down to clinical services, and by refining housing services so they are more cost-effective:
 - *Medication adherence.* DHS will increase medication adherence rates for people with schizophrenia and bipolar disorder by launching a new set of supports for these individuals.
 - *Step down.* We will finalize and fund a plan for high-risk patients with dual-diagnoses to step down from involuntary hospitalization to clinical services. These services aim to reduce the likelihood of death, incarceration, and any return to inpatient hospitalization in the first year after an individual exits involuntary hospitalization.
 - *Mental health housing.* DHS will work to better meet the housing and services needs of people with serious mental illness by right-sizing spending on room and board, ensuring that Medicaid-compensable services are being billed to Medicaid, and reinvesting savings.
8. **New approaches to reducing harm from stimulant use.** DHS will help advance recovery from addiction for 700 people with substance use disorders (SUDs) by developing, testing, and adopting new approaches to treating people with stimulant use disorders. Unlike opioid use, stimulant use lacks medications that increase recovery. DHS is supporting evidence-based approaches that provide people who have stimulant use disorders with access to quality treatments.
9. **Effective interventions for intimate partner violence (IPV).** These include:
 - *Real-time IPV interventions.* DHS will work with the courts and other partners to identify people using violence who are at high risk of continuing this behavior. We will pilot and test real-time interventions that protect victims/survivors and deter people from continuing to use violence. Interventions include expanding the screening for IPV lethality risk that police officers conduct; sending clear messages about consequences of continued violent behavior to people who are deemed high risk; responding to continued violent behavior; and connecting people to services to support behavioral change.
 - *IPV interventions for families.* DHS will work with the National Network for Safe Communities to design interventions that help parents/caregivers experiencing IPV and their families by identifying and supporting victims at high risk of continued IPV and piloting ways of breaking the cycle of abuse with those using violence.

10. **Treatment for youth with acute needs.** DHS will implement a reimbursement rate approach that provides incentives for residential treatment facilities to accept young people with acute behaviors.



Increase economic security

In 2023, DHS was able to reduce the economic burden on low-income families by more adequately compensating family members/kin who are caring for children when they are in child welfare out-of-home placement; through our pilot of a discounted bus fare program for over 14,000 low-income riders; and through a cash transfer program for grandparents caring for children and a cash transfer program that supported the financial wellbeing of young adults involved in the child welfare and homeless systems.



2024 Initiatives to increase economic security

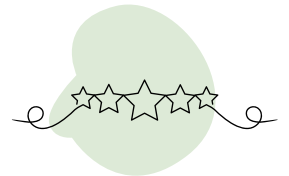
11. **Discounted bus fare program.** DHS will make permanent the discounted fare program that offers half-off the cost of all Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) rides for participants. The program will be available to over 100,000 working-age Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) recipients and their children. This program follows a successful Allegheny County pilot that assessed the impact of reduced public transportation fares on ridership and mobility, showing that it facilitates residents' access to employment and comprehensive services including healthcare, education and training, and other social services. Both Allegheny County and PRT have committed to exploring options for augmenting the discount, with the ultimate goal of providing cost-free PRT trips for individuals with limited financial means.
12. **Financial support models to reduce homelessness.** DHS will test models for reducing homelessness, including reconnecting unhoused people with family and closing the gap in rent payments for people exiting homelessness.
13. **Promoting economic security programs.** DHS will increase the use of its existing programs for building economic security in low-income households, including Financial Empowerment Centers and support to families in maximizing their enrollment in entitlement programs. We will do this by improving the capacity of our providers to connect families with programs and services through training and other strategies; streamlining our approach, including by determining the benefits of a common IT system; and examining the effectiveness of our economic security approach.
14. **Advocacy for a better safety net.** Poverty is part of what makes life precarious for young families, makes mental health worse at every stage of life, and makes losing hours at a job turn into a housing crisis the next month—leading many people to our doors for help. To the extent we can, we will advocate for a better safety net. In 2024, this will include:
- **Supporting the State's Medicaid 1115 waiver application.** This waiver would allow us to better meet health-related social needs in the county, including through housing assistance, nutrition supports, greater access to physical and behavioral health services, reentry supports, and continuous Medicaid enrollment for children under age six.

- *Raising awareness.* DHS will work to ensure that elected officials and community members know about the basic needs of our community members and we will monitor state and federal policy actions that have the potential to address those needs. Examples of state and federal policy changes being considered are proposals to expand the federal child care tax credit, increase SNAP benefits, increase funding for housing and eviction prevention, and support homeowners and landlords in repairing and weatherizing their properties.



Ensure quality

Meeting our mission requires knowing if people are getting quality service ... and fixing things when they are not. We have added “ensuring quality” as a goal for 2024, with the initiatives below.



2024 Initiatives to ensure quality

15. **Improved community and client feedback methods.** Feedback from the people we serve is crucial to improving our services and DHS has long gathered this input. This year, we will augment:

- *Allegheny Engage.* DHS will create a consistent mechanism for community feedback by bringing to scale its main platform for gathering input, Allegheny Engage. This will entail increasing the number of people who use Allegheny Engage by using marketing and outreach strategies and improving the vibrancy and impact of the platform. We will create two or more campaigns per quarter that include gathering feedback, updating participants on how we have used their feedback, seeking input about proposed programs and services, and connecting people to Allegheny Engage through live meetings and videos.
- *Point of Service feedback.* We also will gather client feedback at the point at which they are receiving a service by DHS or our providers. These data collection efforts will be ongoing and seek client input automatically (just after the point-of-service). By the end of 2024, we will have ongoing and automated data collection/reporting for 20 service touchpoints, with data collected from at least 5,000 clients.
- *Advisory boards.* DHS has a number of advisory boards whose members are responsible for providing guidance or making decisions about policy and resources. We will ensure that each of these boards is current in their membership, have clear missions and charters, and that we are sharing their work/findings/recommendations with the human services network and publicly.

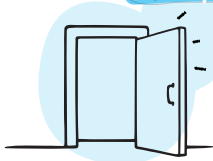
16. ***A strong quality assurance system in child welfare.*** DHS will build-out its current quality assurance system and increase the consistency of decision-making across child welfare offices:

- *Quality assurance in child welfare.* DHS will increase its efforts to conduct reviews of ongoing cases, analyze and disseminate performance data, and provide feedback to our partners and other decision-makers that focuses on improving service delivery and case practice. These quality assurance reviews and actions will be for both internal and provider services.
- *Consistency in decision-making.* We will improve the consistency of decision-making across our regional child welfare offices, including by using information gathered through the quality assurance process.

17. ***Better contracting and payment processes for providers.*** DHS will redesign its contracting and payment processes and incorporate updated technology—making the processes faster, removing duplication, and improving the quality of our data. We will reduce the time to execute initial contracts and amendments, reduce the time to pay providers, increase visibility of the status of any contract (for staff and providers), and improve the quality and usability of data.

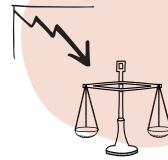
DHS Initiatives

Improve Access



- Second shift
- Finding and scheduling services
- Access for seniors

Prevent Overuse of Coercive Services



- Prevention services for families
- Reduced law enforcement encounters and jail entry

Prevent Harm



- Better flow from shelters into housing
- Best-in-class treatment for adults experiencing serious mental illness
- New approaches to reducing harm from stimulant use
- Effective intimate partner violence interventions
- Treatment for youth with acute needs

Increase Economic Security



- Discounted bus fares
- Models to reduce homelessness
- Promoting economic security programs
- Advocacy for a better safety net

Ensure Quality



- Improved client and community feedback methods
- Strong quality assurance in child welfare
- Better provider contracting and payment processes



