



On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

FRONTLINE STORIES IN THIS ISSUE:

ACCESS 1

**Human Services
Administrative
Organization** 2

**Justice Related
Services** 3

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](#).

ACCESS

As movement in Allegheny County and across the world slowed down in March, demand for **ACCESS** door-to-door paratransit service slowed, too. Nevertheless, ACCESS service has remained stable throughout the pandemic, providing essential trips to places of employment, medical appointments, grocery stores and the like. In collaboration with community partners, ACCESS has tapped into newfound capacity in the ACCESS system to connect essential goods like food and medical supplies to community members in need.

With the support of the **United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania’s Transportation Network** and other partners, ACCESS transportation providers are using their fleet of vehicles and drivers to coordinate essential

deliveries with community agencies around the County. Some of these agency partners include Global Links, Community Kitchen, AgeWell at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Pittsburgh, Greater Pittsburgh Food Bank, Praise Temple Church and Northern Area Multi-Service Center, to name a few.

Pittsburgh **Community Kitchen**, a food-focused nonprofit based in Hazelwood, saw an increased need for food deliveries during the onset of the pandemic. “We had seniors calling us because their caregivers were no longer able to come and prepare meals,” noted Jennifer Flanagan, Founder and Executive Director of Community Kitchen. “We saw a shift with children temporarily staying with aunts and uncles and grandparents due to school closures

because their parents were essential workers, which put more strain on those households.” Community Kitchen estimates that over 25,000 meals have been delivered by ACCESS providers to the greater Hazelwood community since March.



Global Links, an organization focused on redirecting medical surplus to communities

around the world, saw a need to deliver personal protective equipment to agencies working directly with vulnerable populations in southwest Pennsylvania. Since March, ACCESS providers have delivered 2,700 boxes of these essential supplies to over 240 different agencies in Allegheny County. “[The] continued support has been phenomenal and we are grateful for the supplies to keep our staff and residents safe,” said Mary Kay Bonn of Chartiers Center, a recipient of these supplies.

Northern Area Multi-Service Center (NAMS) is a current ACCESS provider that also facilitates community service programs for older adults and other individuals. When the coronavirus pandemic began, NAMS focused on maintaining a sanitized



and safe vehicle fleet, providing essential services to clients, and maintaining job security for much of their staff. James Carlin, a longtime driver for NAMS, shared the gratitude many community members feel for the service. He also stated, “In my mind, as much as [people] need the

service, I also need the job. It goes hand in hand with each other.”

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 some essential social connection during this challenging time.

Across the County, an ACCESS trip is more than a van driving from one neighborhood to another. An ACCESS trip plays an integral role in providing essential services to communities during a crisis and beyond. Collaborative efforts with strategic partners resulted in reaching community members in need and a newfound perspective on what a well-connected human services and transportation network can accomplish.

HUMAN SERVICES ADMINISTRATIVE ORGANIZATION

Human Services Administrative Organization (HSAO) provides service coordination for children, youth and adults with mental illness; one of its specialties is service coordination for adults with mental illness who are involved in the criminal justice system.

Jason Comfort, Mental Health Court probation liaison, has been with HSAO for nearly four years and has many years of experience in the field of mental health. For the past three years, he has worked in Allegheny County’s Specialty Courts as part of the Mental Health Court team. Jason has always demonstrated a commitment to quality client service, prioritizing client needs and working collaboratively with other providers to help clients achieve positive outcomes. When the COVID-19 epidemic hit, his standards didn’t

waiver. He has continued to work to ensure that client services are not disrupted and that individuals are being released from incarceration as quickly as possible. He took the lead on facilitating jail releases for 14 adults who were in need of inpatient drug & alcohol treatment and/or housing or were simply waiting to go home. He's linked those individuals with the appropriate benefits as well as additional community supports such as the community treatment team (CTT), peer support, service coordination, and drug & alcohol case management. Jason's work is representative of HSAO's response to a challenge unlike any seen before in Allegheny County.

JUSTICE RELATED SERVICES

Justice Related Services (JRS) works with the Allegheny County Jail, District Courts, and behavioral health and other community providers to support adults with mental illness, mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorder, or a dual diagnosis of mental illness and intellectual disability, who are involved in the criminal justice system. Services are provided during and following Court proceedings and incarceration to promote successful transition back into the community and to decrease the likelihood of recidivism. This is accomplished through assessment, development of a treatment plan, and providing access to treatment, supports and recovery programs. During the pandemic, JRS has continued to plan, coordinate and facilitate release of individuals incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail, Torrance State Hospital or the State prison system. The following scenarios illustrate staff accomplishments during the pandemic, when even the smallest activity became complicated and complex.

Joseph Lapcevic, a staff member of Justice Related Services - Diversion, assisted an individual transitioning from Torrance Forensic State Hospital to a Community Residential Rehabilitation (CRR) group home for adults with mental illness.

Joe transported this woman from the hospital in Blairsville to the CRR in Allegheny County. He successfully connected her to language interpretation, treatment and medical services in the community, supported her during the transition to the CRR, helped her get her charges reduced to a summary charge, and made sure she had appropriate clothing and personal hygiene items.

Early in the pandemic, before regular processes were put into place, Chloe Taylor, a County support specialist for Justice Related Services, helped to plan and facilitate an individual's release from jail to a community program. She ensured his safe transfer to the program by coordinating with the Courts, Jail, Probation Office, the individual and his family, while quelling his concerns and those of the provider and his family. On the day of his release, Chloe went to the Jail and transported him directly to the program to make sure he complied with the Court order (while making sure he got necessary clothing and food). Since his release from the Jail, he has enrolled in behavioral health treatment and has been doing well. He is currently focusing on complying with his probation requirements and is attending family sessions to attempt to reconcile with his wife.

JRS clients continue to make progress despite the challenges of COVID-19. For example, one client achieved all necessary treatment requirements for her probation and is now living independently on her own. She has found work, has successfully completed her probation supervision and is in the process of reunifying with her children.

Another client released from incarceration during the pandemic has been thriving in the community. He has been active in his treatment, has been caring for his infant daughter and has been actively searching for work – applying for 27 jobs in one day! He continues to remain motivated in his recovery and is excited about making a new start.