

Anyone familiar with Allegheny County knows that community ties here run deep. People help people, and the county is known for its warm neighborhoods.

The Lifesharing through Family Living program is an ideal fit in this caring environment, assisting people with intellectual disabilities and those who open their homes and hearts to support them. Lifesharing is also a good fit for the Department of Human Services (DHS).

In Allegheny County, about 70 individuals with intellectual disabilities are currently benefitting from the Lifesharing program. It practices our values and mission to help the county's vulnerable residents by ensuring they remain actively tied to the community, able to make their own determinations about their lifestyle and have the benefits of living in a caring, family home.

For more information on the Lifesharing program, visit www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/lifesharing.aspx.


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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Lifesharing Through Family Living



Anthony

Anthony, who grew up in the 60's, avoids contact with his birth family. They were not understanding of him because of his intellectual disability. Combined with being in a school system that was also not responsive to his needs, Anthony has many bad memories of his childhood.

He spent many years in institutional settings, including Mayview State Hospital until it closed.

“He got yelled at school. He got yelled at home. So he ran away,” said Elise, with whom Anthony now lives via the Lifesharing through Family Living program.

Now, Anthony is all about family living. With Elise and her husband, George, Anthony has found a home in the couple's house in the North Hills of Pittsburgh. Importantly, Elise and George, who are both in a second marriage, found renewed purpose to their own lives.

Anthony continued:

“I feel that my husband and I are giving, caring people, but each day now, we have a purpose other than getting up and going somewhere,” Elise said.

The Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Office of Developmental Programs oversees the Lifesharing program, but county agencies, including Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) administer it locally via contracted providing agencies.

Lifesharing’s purpose is to improve the lives of people with intellectual disabilities. By moving into private homes, they become part of a family and receive the benefits of that, including integration into the

community, an active lifestyle, the support to make personal choices, and someone to look after their health and well-being.

Lifesharers are selected via an extensive screening process, including personal clearances and checks of their houses for safety and accessibility.

They receive a stipend to cover the costs of supporting a person with intellectual disabilities.

In Anthony’s case, his experiences in his last housing, a group home, were positive. In fact, he initially wasn’t interested in sharing a private home. But after visiting Elise and George’s house on weekends a few times, he changed his mind in 2009.

Part of his reluctance may have had to do with Anthony having some guarded behavior.

“Anthony did not hug at all,” Elise said. “If you went to hug him, he would stand there, stiff as a board. He now initiates hugs. He’s just so warm. It just melts your heart. He has blossomed. He speaks out. He advocates for himself.

“Our family and friends, our church – Anthony’s a part of all of that. When he’s not around, people wonder if he’s sick, is he OK? So he’s definitely part of our extended family and friends.” —

Robert

Robert lived with his mother until she died in her late 80s. That meant he went with her when she entered a nursing home and lived with her there. When she passed away, Robert’s sole surviving relative, a younger brother, developed brain cancer. Before he died, he arranged to have Robert enter the Lifesharing through Family Living program.

As a result, Robert’s life turned around. He lost 100 pounds after moving in with an empty-nester husband-and-wife.

He began to travel, visiting beaches and amusement parks, going to shows – all things he previously had not been able to do.

“I love it,” Robert said, emphatically. “This is home.”

Joyce and Earl, who took Robert in, are the kinds of caregivers who give and receive in the Lifesharing program, said Sandy Orr, Lifesharing Program

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Manager for DHS provider Mon Yough Community Services. They look out for Robert’s health and welfare.

Where they go, he goes.

And although in Robert’s instance his family has passed on, Lifesharers do not replace family – they extend it, Sandy said.

Robert’s life with Joyce and Earl is a clear example of this. He has his own room. He helps with chores – feeding the cats, washing dishes – and Joyce has kept a scrapbook of his travels since he has been with her and her husband – like any mom would do.

“He’s definitely part of our family. I can’t imagine life without Robert,” Joyce said.