

Annually, Allegheny County schools file approximately 6,000 truancy citations with Magisterial District Judges. The reasons why students miss school are many including transportation issues, bullying, and addiction, but regardless of the cause, the detrimental effects of truancy often last well beyond the school-aged years.

In 2013, the Allegheny Department of Human Services (DHS) began partnering resource specialists with local Magisterial District Judges to address the negative impacts of chronic truancy. The six resource specialists assigned to these courts play a critical role in supporting DHS's efforts to improve education outcomes for local youth. Each week, specialists attend truancy hearings in Allegheny County's 46 Magisterial District Courts to support judges, assess family needs and provide information on a myriad of local resources.

As illustrated by the two stories told here, resource specialists are bridging the gap between truant students and potentially life-changing services. By facilitating consistent, improved engagement between students, caregivers, schools and the court system, DHS is ensuring that all children we touch, regardless of barriers, have access to the education they need.

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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Truancy Prevention



Judge Martin

“In this day and age, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that if a child is not going to school, they have an increased likelihood of getting involved in the system,” said the Honorable Armand A. Martin, Magisterial District Judge for Liberty Borough.

Yet, despite knowing the daunting future that can face truant youth, local resources have traditionally been scarce. In the instances where a truancy prevention program was available, it often was designed only for youth of certain ages or who met very specific criteria.

For ineligible children, schools and judges were left with few options: file a citation, issue a fine to the parent or child, and hope for the best.

“Fining people is not always productive. People aren't working, and if you can't afford to put meals on the table for your kids, how are you going to do it when you are having to pay a fine? Fining parents is the last thing we want to do. We want to understand why children are missing school, and we want to find ways to support each family's unique needs.”

That's where Stacey, Liberty Borough's resource specialist, came in.

Each week, Stacey attends Liberty Borough's truancy hearings, listening to the youth's stories and identifying challenges that the family may be facing. She speaks with the child's caregivers to come up with a plan, and then uses her wide range of resources to put that plan into action.

Sometimes the solution is as simple as finding a service that will help a younger sibling get to school on time so the older sibling does not have to serve as caretaker past his or her school start time. Other solutions may involve letting a caseworker know that a child in the system is having issues with attendance.

"There isn't one quick answer to solve truancy. That's why it's invaluable to have people in the court room who know all of Allegheny County's resources. Truancy cases are still challenging, but at least now I don't feel helpless. All the groups working together – the schools, the courts, and DHS – are what is going to make better outcomes for our kids," Judge Martin concluded.

After 37 years of experience in the field, the Honorable Blaise Larotonda, Magisterial District Judge for Mount Lebanon, knew there had to be better options for truancy cases – he was just unsure of where to find them.

"We are severely limited in the resources we have. Any time we can have someone give us more resources, especially in truancy, it's very valuable," said Judge Larotonda.

He found those resources through his resource specialist.

"Erin's a networking expert. She comes in the court room and listens to the hearings. I can look at her and say, 'What options do we have?' and she always has several things we can try."

"We needed someone from DHS to give us some direction and to give us more options to help these kids. I love that Erin is here. This is invaluable."

One of the greatest resources Erin has offered to Judge Larotonda is the connection to DHS's wide array of services.

"Erin can get us matched up with mental health evaluations; drug and alcohol programs; or the Office of Children, Youth and Families (CYF) if we need it. It's like a one-stop shop!"

Although Erin has only been working with Judge Larotonda for a short time, he has already seen the potential impact that this program can have on local youth.

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