



Questions and Answers from DHS's State of Human Services Address and the Needs-Based Plan & Budget Hearing

Access

Q: *How do people gain access to and navigate DHS-funded services?*

A: There are a number of ways to connect with and gain access to DHS-funded services. Often the connection is made through a community provider with a DHS contract – the individual might not even realize it's a DHS-funded service. AlleghenyConnect (<https://connect.alleghenycounty.us>), our soon-to-be launched website designed specifically to eliminate the mystery and guesswork involved in reaching out for services, should be a friendly and easy way to connect with us. We also have a strong partnership with 2-1-1 and that's a great place to start if services are needed.

Q: *Will resources like crisis access and housing supports be spread across all of Allegheny County, not just the City of Pittsburgh?*

A: We are attempting to build up additional crisis capacity both through the peer support network and with resolve Crisis Center, particularly now that 9-8-8 is operational. We also hope to create engagement centers throughout Allegheny County where people can access more immediate support, such as behavioral health services.

Housing supports are county-wide. Transportation is an issue for many people, so we have made an effort to locate housing supports on bus lines, which tend to be in the more heavily populated areas, such as the City of Pittsburgh.

Q: *What is DHS doing to improve digital access?*

A: During the pandemic, DHS put significant resources into providing laptops, Wi-Fi Hotspots, headsets and other electronic devices to Allegheny County residents in need of a way to access virtual school, health, etc. Learn more about DHS's response to COVID-19 [here](#). We have now depleted available funding and it's not realistic to think that we can solve the digital divide on our own. But the federal government has prioritized digital access and we will support those efforts.

Q: *Some services are more effective in-person rather than virtual. What is being done to bring back services to in-person after they have been virtual for so long due to COVID?*

A: To the best of our knowledge, providers are offering in-person services, often in combination with remote services. Many have found that clients prefer virtual appointments for the convenience they offer; in some cases they've seen better compliance and outcomes. There might be some workforce issues at play here. If there are concerns about a specific provider not offering in-person

services, particularly in those areas where face-to-face interaction is deemed more effective, please contact the appropriate DHS office and we will follow up.

Q: *Was DHS able to serve more or fewer people during the pandemic when much of the work was virtual?*

A: Detailed information about numbers of people served during the pandemic are available [here](#), where you can find dashboards and reports about services during the pandemic.

Q: *Does the DHS building at 1 Smithfield Street have a public bathroom and shower?*

A: In the past year, we have created a warm, accessible dedicated space for clients, on the first floor of the Human Services Building at 1 Smithfield Street. We are working to make sure the restrooms are available from that space. Unfortunately, showers are not available and, since we do not own the building, we don't see this changing. However, the 2nd Avenue shelter is about to open and these amenities – and more – will be available there.

Q: *Who can people call when federal oversight and policy prevent people from accessing services?*

A: Our Director's Action Line (DAL) (1-800-862-6783) is a really good place for handling specific issues and would be the first place to go. DAL staff will gather more information on the specific problem and provide information and feedback to resolve the issue.

Q: *Many services require an individual to apply and establish eligibility multiple times. What are your thoughts on universal applications?*

A: This is a really challenging problem. We don't want to put people in a situation of having to repeat sensitive and often traumatic information over and over. We have worked a lot on this issue and have been at least partially successful in being able to populate a lot of our intake forms with data already available in the DHS Data Warehouse.

Q: *How is DHS reaching out to include the deaf, deafblind, and hard of hearing communities?*

A: DHS funds agencies that provide these services. In addition, we provide ASL interpreters for public meetings/hearings and well as transcripts of these meetings. We require the use of microphones at all large meetings. Our buildings are ADA compliant. There is clearly more we can do to ensure that all of our services are available and accessible.

Q: *What efforts are being made to relieve federal oversight that stifles the county's ability and flexibility to serve people where they are and according to their own needs?*

A: If we look at ourselves to see if we are doing everything we can to serve people and find barriers exist that are keeping us from doing so, we should raise the issue to the level of advocacy. Our program office staff and many, many providers are members of associations, advocacy groups and collaboratives that can and do have relationships with elected officials, and we need to take advantage of those relationships.

Q: *The region has experienced an increase of Hispanic population. For example, at the Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corporation, the demand of services in Housing, New Business and*

Employment had increased. Is there a specific strategy coming up by the County to address the increase of Hispanics moving to the region?

A: In 2021, in order to understand more about the growing Hispanic and Latinx community in Allegheny County, DHS commissioned a community needs assessment that included demographics, geographic locations, and ways in which our systems are and are not meeting the needs of the population. The researchers found that the Latinx population (those classified as Hispanic or Latino by the Census Bureau) grew by 80% (34,325 people) during the 10-year period between 2010 and 2020. The assessment also identified gaps in legal, behavioral health and language access services. We are working to expand contracts with organizations that serve the growing Latinx population and to increase the number and type of language access services available so that all residents can access the services they need, regardless of the language they speak.

You can view the needs assessment and a two-page infographic at:

- [Needs Assessment Report](#) (Español)
- [Needs Assessment Report](#) (English)
- [Infographic](#) (Español)
- [Infographic](#) (English)

Behavioral Health

Q: *Can you tell us about the Family Healing House?*

A: The Family Healing House is a residential facility for entire families in which one member is in recovery from a substance use disorder. The facility was developed in partnership with Auberle and is designed to avoid the typical rehabilitation model in which the individual is separate from their loved ones while they begin their recovery journey. Instead, Family Healing House provides support for the whole family in working toward/participating in the recovery process.

Q: *How can DHS streamline the \$100 million dollars committed by the state budget for school behavioral health services and intervention, using the services that already exist rather than schools starting from scratch?*

A: We work closely with schools and have school-based behavioral health liaisons that coordinate with the schools.

Q: *What are the efforts being made to increase the number of behavioral health services available for people who do not speak English?*

A: We've been working hard to make sure that interpretation is available whenever it's needed. We recently issued a Request for Proposals designed to make a significant impact in this area.

Childcare

Q: *Childcare is so expensive that sometimes people can't afford to go back to work. What is DHS doing to change this?*

A: Childcare is a huge priority for Allegheny County. DHS manages Allegheny County's Early Learning Resource Center, which provides information on quality childcare and personalized childcare referrals to childcare providers based on specific needs or preferences. The ELRC also administers the Child Care Works subsidized childcare program. In addition, we are trying to move the system to more non-traditional hours, so that childcare is available when people need it, including evenings and weekends and when families are in crisis.

Q: *Is there a way we can change requirements for Child Care Works to include undocumented children in need of care?*

A: Federal and state regulations deny subsidized childcare funding for undocumented families, but refugee resettlement agencies may be able to help on a case-by-case basis. We are not aware of current efforts to change those regulations.

Child Welfare

Q: *DHS recently received a waiver from the Commonwealth to use the new Universal Assessment. What is the Universal Assessment?*

A: Until now, child welfare caseworkers had several different assessments that had to be completed for every family involved in child welfare. These assessments were duplicative and not connected; in addition, they didn't readily lend themselves to working with families to identify their goals and the services designed to help them achieve those goals. The Universal Assessment, targeted to begin implementation in October and full launch in November, is a simple, holistic assessment that will change all of that.

Q: *What is Phoenix House?*

A: Phoenix House is an 8-12 bed residential facility for victims of commercial sexual exploitation. Developed in partnership with Family Links, the program is scheduled to open on 1/1/2023.

Equity and Inclusion

Q: *DHS has made a commitment to advancing racial equity and addressing the racial disparities that exist within our system. What progress has been made?*

A: Our commitment to equity is deeply imbedded in our strategic priorities. We know that we have to be intentional in the ways that we increase access to our services and investment in economic security to ensure that communities of color are among the primary beneficiaries of these interventions. We pay close attention to the involvement of communities of color in coercive systems which has resulted in a few of the interventions that were described. That said, we've been working diligently to invest and support our workforce in their efforts to normalize conversations about race which has resulted in the establishment of Employee Resource Groups that will help to improve staff engagement. We have matched all deputies with equity coaches who are working to support our department's leadership in strategic management and planning. Finally, we've bolstered our community engagement strategy by designating staff within OEE to support the ways in which we leverage advisory councils and community members in informing strategy and decision-making.

Homelessness and Housing

Q: *The recent federal Emergency Rental Assistance program really helped those who are financially struggling. Are there plans to continue that program?*

A: Unfortunately, that program is expiring and we will not receive additional funds at that level in the foreseeable future. We are working on a solicitation for a new coordinated rental assistance program using available funds in what we hope will be a more effective way.

Q: *Is there a way for DHS to work with communities to encourage property owners to create transitional housing, senior housing or affordable housing?*

A: When we have funding/resources available, we issue Requests for Proposals that promote this type of housing. We also have a lot of tenant-based subsidies through our Behavioral Health, Homelessness and other systems that require private landlords to provide housing to participants in those systems. We provide some incentives beyond timely rental payments and case managers to encourage landlords to participate, like a risk-mitigation fund and a Housing Navigation Unit that works with landlords to mediate disputes between them and providers and their program participants. DHS also partners with our local housing authorities and other affordable housing providers to jointly apply for housing for our program participants, such as our Fostering Youth to Independence, Family Unification Program, and Emergency Housing Vouchers with the Allegheny County and City of Pittsburgh Housing Authorities. Unfortunately, voucher programs require a certain degree of code compliance which is difficult for landlords to achieve with our aging housing stock. DHS has no funds to support that type of renovation.

Q: *Is there anything being done to support the housing choice voucher program? Landlords are often unwilling to participate.*

A: DHS is coordinating the Community Choice Demonstration Study in Allegheny County. The study, funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is aiming to overcome some of these obstacles with intensive assistance to families and participating landlords. Families must have at least one child to participate in the voluntary study. Among the help the project will offer to families: assistance picking a neighborhood, applying for housing, finding apartments and paying a security deposit.

Q: *Is there work being done to help people repair their credit, so they can transition from very vulnerable positions into potential home ownership?*

A: DHS works with transition-aged youth around credit development and recovery. Other resources in the County, such as the Economic Development Department, have resources to help people rebuild credit. We are more than open to partnering to support their efforts.

Q: *Are you willing to participate with other counties and stakeholders to find creative solutions to the housing crisis?*

A: Absolutely.

Q: *What's the relationship between housing affordability and the affordability of everything else?*

A: Housing is a basic need, so the rising costs of housing can have a greater impact on a household budget than non-necessities (that can be cut back without significant impact). Unfortunately, the cost of housing (both rental and for sale) is going up at a faster pace than overall inflation.

The housing market is very difficult to control and is very susceptible to supply and demand forces that local governments have little ability to impact, so as human service providers, we are left with very few options to intervene. We typically have programs to help people avoid eviction or foreclosure. In extreme circumstances, we assist when they become homeless.

Older Adults

Q: *Funding services for older adults is a small part of DHS's overall budget. What's the strategy going forward to increase that amount considering demographic changes?*

A: We have put some of our more flexible dollars into supporting these services and are actively working with health partners, the foundation community, providers and the advocacy community to address this issue. Ultimately, the best way to attract dollars from sources with a vested interest in older adults is to document the increase in need, present a clear evidence-based plan to meet the need, show Aging Service's efficacy at meeting needs among the older adult population, and request the resources. These are four key areas of Aging Services' focus.

Q: *How is DHS working to maintain housing for older adults?*

A: There are many reasons why older adults end up leaving their homes. Some are financial. Some result from residents not having the in-home support they need to perform their daily activities. Still others result from safety issues in the homes themselves. DHS Aging Services funds in-home services and support for caregivers, addressing two of these critical needs. DHS has invested millions of dollars into increasing the number of staff who perform in-home support and check on the health and safety of adults living in their homes. Regarding safety of the structures, themselves...thankfully, the state and our region recognize that it is critical to help older adults stay in their current homes by paying for updates, remediation, or adaptive remodeling to enhance residents' safety. State funding in the new budget will increase in these areas. DHS is part of a network of partners, including contractors, developers, homeowners and landlords, that will increase the safety among hundreds of homes for older adults and people with disabilities; and keep more older adults in-place, safely.

Q: *Seniors are being bumped out of their apartments because the houses they are living in are being sold and rents are increasing beyond what the seniors can afford. Many senior housing options have long waiting lists. Seniors are not able to pack and move their items on the small Social Security checks they are receiving. How will these issues be addressed?*

A: There are some limits to what our funding can do, but many of these seniors are eligible for our services and should call the SeniorLine at 412-350-5460 so that we can connect them as best we can.

Provider and Community Engagement/Support

Q: *We've heard you say a lot about finding the right providers. What progress is being made to engage smaller, community-based providers?*

A: During the pandemic, smaller community-based providers were key to meeting community needs. This created a new relationship with those providers, one we are determined to support. With a new deputy director in our Office of Administration, we are assessing our contracts and procurement processes to make them easier to navigate. We are doing intentional engagement with communities prior to issuing a solicitation and paying community members for their experience to help us review those proposals coming in. In addition, we are issuing an open call annually, where anyone can bring ideas forward. We hope this encourages community-based organizations to come forward and engage in discussions about what is most important and helpful.

Q: *What are the opportunities for DHS to lead more best practice training across the human services system?*

A: To date, we have mostly focused on supporting the implementation of evidence-based programs throughout the community. We have a bigger role to play, including training and assistance for the provider network to adopt these strategies.

Staffing Issues

Q: *How is DHS supporting staff retention and recruitment?*

A: We are lucky to have a staff of committed and excellent professionals who do this work out of their belief in its importance. This work, while meaningful and rewarding, is incredibly difficult; staff are asked to give so much. This makes it particularly frustrating when we can't compete on pay or flexibility because of current structural issues at the state and local levels. As a first step, we are working to fix our internal infrastructure. It is our hope that external efforts will follow.

Q: *What can DHS do to help Pennsylvania to provide an adequate pool of qualified individuals to provide in-home care for people with disabilities and the elderly to enable them to remain in their homes?*

A: Aging Services is working with higher education such as Pittsburgh Technical College and CCAC to develop multiple pathways to enter geriatric health-serving careers. But ultimately, State and Federal support for those training to enter these fields is needed. For example, student loan cancellation for those committing to work in in-home care for a certain number of years would likely go a long way to making these jobs more attractive for early career individuals or even those changing careers. Additionally, funding mechanisms to subsidize salaries for agencies that provide in-home services, earmarked for staffing and wage increases, would also be an approach from the State or Federal levels that would be impactful.

Transportation

Q: *What is DHS doing to make transportation more affordable for DHS clients?*

A: We hear you loud and clear that transportation is a huge need. People need to get to work, school and treatment, so we've made it a priority to find ways to help reduce the cost of transportation. Currently, we're focusing on two strategies:

- We are working with Pittsburgh Regional Transit (formerly known as Port Authority Transit) to discount fares for SNAP recipients. We're starting out by doing this for one year (with a study) to show how affordable public transportation increases access to critical services and employment. If successful, we intend to make a long-term funding commitment to fare discounting to support low-income riders.
- DHS runs the Medical Assistance Transportation Program (MATP), which provides free transportation to and from non-emergency medical appointments for people on Medical Assistance. This program serves up to 20,000 people each year.

Violence and Crisis Support

Q: *What is DHS's violence prevention strategy?*

A: DHS is working with key stakeholders in Allegheny County and the City of Pittsburgh to coordinate and strengthen existing violence prevention efforts (e.g., Cure Violence, Becoming a Man, Ready) and create new evidence-based approaches that address unmet needs, particularly in the communities most affected by violence. For more information about these strategies, see [Violence Prevention reports](#) at www.analytics.alleghenycounty.us and [DHS's Crisis and Response Strategy](#) at www.alleghenycounty.us/humanservices.

Q: *It feels like community violence is increasing. How is DHS responding to that?*

A: There is not money that comes to DHS from state or federal sources for violence prevention. But these are our families and communities, so we will be making that investment. There are two solicitations this year and we are working closely with the city on this. We will be working with community partners to see if we can help with prevention. It's not just about funding but operationally how can you prevent future violence and deaths.

Q: *What types of calls does 2-1-1 handle? 9-8-8?*

A: 2-1-1 is the number to call for most human service needs. They provide referrals to every type of service. If the need is complex or more critical, the caller will be forwarded to DHS. 9-8-8 is the number to call for behavioral health crisis services.

Q: *Are there efforts to shorten resolve's response time?*

A: Yes, absolutely. We've invested a lot of time and resources into helping them reach the necessary capacity. Like many organizations currently, they struggle with staffing issues. The launch of 9-8-8 has also stretched their resources. We're hopeful that they will be able to meet the challenge.

Workforce Development

Q: *How does DHS see itself influencing workforce development for TANF and other public benefit recipients?*

A: The City and County run a unified workforce program, Partner4Work (P4W), and we depend on them for good policy and workforce development.

To help demystify the confusing area of public benefits (which DHS does not administer), we built a tool that can show how income changes affect public benefits.

Q: *What measures are in place to ensure accountability with Partner4Work?*

A: We are interested both in P4W's program outcomes and its financial stability. The program does a good job of collecting data and we work closely together to ensure accountability.

Youth

Q: *I would like to see more safe, drop-in centers for transition-aged youth that have transportation and other services.*

A: We helped develop and support the 412 Youth Zone downtown for youth, ages 16 through 23, who are transitioning out of foster care or experiencing homelessness. The 412 Youth Zone provides transportation support and staff who go into the community to meet youth where they are. 412 Youth Zone staff also help youth get IDs and driver's education, work with them to develop life skills, and help them navigate the myriad systems they need to access for housing, education, legal aid, basic needs and parenting supports. A medical clinic run by Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh and recording studio are available on-site.

We also just concluded a solicitation to increase our investments in out-of-school time programs focused on teens. We are partnering with several community-based partners that provide a variety of programming from drop-in centers to more specialized experiences for young people. Once all contracts are executed, a list of programs funded by DHS will be available on our website.

Finally, Gwen's Girls is launching a pre-arrest diversion initiative that seeks to connect youth, ages 10 through 21, to meaningful community-based programs as an alternative to more punitive measures.