



On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

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](#).

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CENTER OF LIFE

How do you create a sense of normalcy for children when the world is anything but normal? This was one of the challenges Center of Life, a community-empowerment organization in Hazelwood, faced over the summer. Staff knew summer programming would provide security for the youth they served, but they also realized that there was no way they could deliver programming the same way they had in the past – too many children in one space was too high of a risk. So, Center of Life decided to try something new: pop-up events.

Over three weeks, Center of Life hosted several sessions of pop-up summer programming that allowed youth ages four through 18 to spend time with friends and participate in engaging activities – all while remaining safe. Youth spent a few hours moving among various activity stations that included science enrichment, arts and crafts, video games and music enrichment. To limit the chance of exposure to COVID-19,

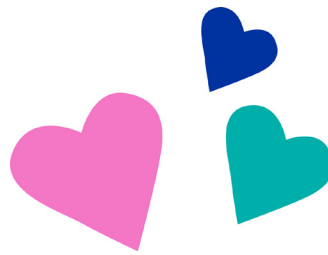
youth were screened each day and activities were spaced out around the Spartan Center parking lot to encourage physical distancing.

Moving forward, Center of Life has made plans to provide virtual afterschool programming. They are also working with the Pittsburgh Public School District to find ways that they can continue to support youth. Although the next few months are still filled with uncertainty, Center of Life will continue to be flexible to make sure that the youth and families they serve have access to the resources and supports they need. accomplishments during the pandemic, when even the smallest activity became complicated and complex.

CRIBS FOR KIDS

The last time the Pittsburgh-based **Cribs for Kids** staff was together in one room was on March 12th. There was a nervous energy in the air as they celebrated their 15th Annual Women of Achievement Awards at the Omni William Penn Hotel. The news of the pandemic was breaking as they honored 25 of Pittsburgh's most prominent female leaders. They said goodbye that evening, assuming they might be in store for a two-week office shutdown. They had no way of knowing that they would still be separated and that one of their own, Barbara Clemons, would succumb to the virus a little over one month later.

As Director of Product Development, Barb was responsible for laying out the blueprint for the growth of the organization. Not only was she instrumental in the design of the organization's infant safe sleep products; she also worked with Asian markets to oversee the production and domestic importing of those products. Her primary responsibility, fulfilling orders to Cribs for Kids' partners throughout the country, was what Barb loved to do. She wasn't satisfied until she was sure she had secured the best available shipping rate and that the shipments left her warehouse in pristine condition. In addition to these responsibilities, Barb was a founder of *ette cetera!*, a for-profit subsidiary of Cribs for Kids formed to sell safe sleep products to the general public, with 100% of the proceeds



used to fulfill Cribs for Kids' mission. As president of this subsidiary, Barb was planning a launch of *ette cetera!* in May of 2020.

Shouldering the loss of Barb and the shock of the pandemic, and under the guidance of Founder and Executive Director Judy Bannon, the staff has been able to quickly adapt to working from home and continue to grow the organization. With a grant from the **Jefferson Regional Foundation** and the guidance of Cribs for Kids Board Member Luci Casile, a business banker from Key Bank, the agency is experiencing a surge of growth through the crisis. Luci worked tirelessly to assure that there would be no interruption in the organization's mission by helping Cribs for Kids process a Key Bank Payroll Protection Program (PPP) loan. Luci, a 2017 Cribs for Kids Women of Achievement awardee, has been instrumental in the survival and growth of the organization for the last 20 years. Judy has been so impressed by Luci's work that she wrote about her in her book, **"Five Ladies and a Forklift."**

The Jefferson Regional Foundation grant has allowed Cribs for Kids to launch a new program. **The At Home Program** provides on-line safe sleep education and enables the shipping of Cribettes directly to the homes of partner-referred families in

place of distribution at in-person events. This work has become even more essential as families all over the nation bear the financial burden of job loss and a devastated economy. In June, the staff realized Barb's dream and launched the online baby products

store, *ette cetera!*, with the tagline Shop to Save Lives. Products ship with infant safe sleep education included, and 100% of the profits support Cribs for Kids' mission of helping every baby sleep safer.

DHS FREE TAX PREPERATION

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is in its 10th year providing free tax preparation services as a member of the Free Tax Preparation Coalition. During the 2019-2020 tax season (extended through July 15th due to the COVID-19 pandemic), the free tax preparation program completed a total of 190 tax returns. Because of the pandemic, many of the tax returns were prepared using alternate methods, including drop-off, virtual and facilitated self-assistance models.

As in years past, tax prep volunteers and staff partnered with community organizations and DHS program staff to reach out to underserved communities and populations, including the international and refugee population (in partnership with Acculturation for Justice, Access and Peace Outreach - AJAPO), individuals experiencing homelessness and housing challenges, and senior taxpayers. The tax preparation program worked with DHS's Housing and Homelessness Services to help 364 clients request COVID-19-related Economic Impact Payments (part of the CARES Act). Although these payments were automatic for those who had filed an income tax return, many individuals and families experiencing homelessness are not required to file a tax return due to low income and therefore needed to request the payment on the IRS website. Requesting a payment can be challenging if an individual does not have a permanent address to mail the check, a bank account for direct deposit or access to technology. One volunteer assisted a man who had just moved into an apartment but who was unable to furnish the apartment or purchase necessary household

items due to lack of income. When he received his Economic Impact Payment, he was overwhelmed with emotion. It made the difference between a place to reside and a home.

A family of seven, in the U.S. for only four years, had a household income of \$19,000. Paying taxes is an important step in achieving their goal of citizenship. The family received a combined federal refund of over \$9,000 (Earned Income Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit) and a state refund of \$600. They intend to use their refund to pay for rent, to purchase a car for the mother to transport the children and a computer for school, and to create a savings account for future needs. DHS referred them to free financial coaching at the Center for Financial Empowerment to help them get started on their road to financial stability.

The program also filed 2019 taxes for a 20-year-old single mom earning an annual income of \$9,420. The mother is raising a one-year-old child and is expecting a second child later this year. Last year, she used a tax preparer who charged hundreds of dollars in fees, and she didn't receive the Earned Income Credit. This year, she received a federal refund of \$4,800 as well as a \$300 state tax refund. She intends to use her refund to rent and furnish a home for herself and her children.

These are just a few examples of the impact a program like this can have on the lives of individuals and families. Together, the 13 IRS-certified volunteers were responsible for returning \$376,540 in federal refunds and \$160,633 in earned income tax credits to low-income families.

ADELPHOI

While residents of Adelphoi's Loyalhanna House in Latrobe are practicing social distancing, it hasn't dampened their spirits or their productivity.

For the past week, youth have been spending their free time using Adelphoi's 3D printers to make mask buckles for front-line employees who are assisting in the Coronavirus epidemic. Mask buckles are adjustable plastic pieces that fit onto surgical and face masks, providing much needed relief from the constant pull and pain of the elastic on the mask wearer's ears and cartilage.



Adelphoi students learned the skills to develop the mask buckles as part of the Career Exploration Maker Space and Mobile Lab on Adelphoi's main campus in Latrobe. The Career Exploration Maker Space & Mobile Lab consists of stations designed to provide introductory instruction in high-demand vocational areas. Besides 3D printing, the program includes stations in Residential Wiring, Pipe Cutting/Fitting, Refrigeration, Mechanisms, Virtual Welding, AC/DC Circuitry, Programmable Logic Controllers, Auto-Brake Trainer, Laser Engraving, Programmable Logic Controls and HVAC.

Youth are placed at Adelphoi's residential programs, including Loyalhanna House, through Juvenile Probation and child welfare referrals. Adelphoi provides both therapeutic services and educational programming to students in a structured home environment. Students participate in the Career Lab



at the end of their school day at Adelphoi's Charter School.

"Making the mask buckles here is teaching me and the other kids how to help others in the community and letting us use the 3D printers and materials for something we haven't used them for before," said Gage, an Adelphoi resident and Career Readiness student.

Students are donating the mask buckles to local hospitals and adult care facilities including Brookdale Latrobe, Barnes Place, Loyalhanna Care Center, and both Excela Latrobe and Westmoreland Hospitals.

Adelphoi's Career Exploration Maker Space and Mobile Lab helps to prepare students for the world of work and allows them to achieve their highest potential by offering career exploration in various trades and instruction in employability skills. Through the development of academic, vocational and soft skills, Adelphoi students prepare to re-enter their communities with increased self-esteem and a better knowledge of their own abilities and aptitudes.

Supervisor of Career Readiness Programs Kerry Ozmelek said "Having the students utilize the 3D printers to make the mask buckles shows them how what they have learned in our Career Readiness classes can be applied to real-world problems. I have noticed that the students have been developing their problem-solving skills while using the printers - tweaking the design, making multi-colored buckles and trouble-shooting the printers. I am hopeful that in the future the technology will foster creativity by giving the students the opportunity to become creators, designers and inventors."

BIBLE CENTER CHURCH AND HOMEWOOD CHILDREN'S VILLAGE

Getting food to those in need has been a huge part of the human services community's response to COVID-19. And the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank is at the epicenter of that response. But there's only so much that the Food Bank can do on its own - it depends on its partner organizations to increase its reach. Its partnership with Bible Center Church in Homewood and the Homewood Children's Village is a good example of how the Food Bank expands its reach into communities. Beginning in mid-April, these two organizations joined forces to deliver meals to families in Homewood. By the end of July, together they'd served 54,229 meals (11,350 to children, compared to their typical number of 300 kids at any given time) and distributed 18,172 diapers and more than 8,000 wipes (these are items that can often be difficult for families to obtain or afford). In addition to the meals, they are continuing distribution of produce and dairy boxes, along with school supplies, cleaning supplies and other household items.

The partnership between these two organizations is not new. According to Steve Davis, director of business and ministry operations at Bible Center Church, and Walter Lewis, president and CEO of Homewood Children's Village, they have been working together to serve neighborhood youth since the Homewood Children's Village was founded in 2008. Both are well known and trusted throughout the community and responsive to emerging needs such as those identified during the coronavirus epidemic. For example, Homewood Children's Village operated a virtual summer camp for 140 children, and Bible Center Church is setting up a learning hub for about 50 Pittsburgh Public School students who are not returning to school for at least the first semester of the upcoming school year and whose parents are not in a position to stay home during the day to support their virtual education. At the hub, the children will tune in to the remote learning and will complete their schoolwork with the help of academic coaches.

When COVID-19 hit, the two organizations were well-situated to join forces to address food insecurity. Homewood Children's Village has food

delivery experience (including designing the most efficient routes) from providing food for children and their households since 2013, while Bible Center Church's Oasis Transportation Company has vehicles that typically would be used to transport children to and from school and that, during the pandemic, were sitting idle. The two organizations received transportation grants from the United Way and a grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation that allowed Bible Center Church to purchase a commercial refrigerator, freezer and milk cooler to aid in the expansion of the food distribution operation. They also received a joint award from the Hillman Foundation to support the combined food distribution and other efforts to support Homewood residents during the pandemic. The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank delivers food to Bible Center Church where it's packaged and delivered three times/week by staff and volunteers from both organizations. Not only have these two organizations helped the community by increasing their food delivery; they've also helped their staffs by reassigning to food delivery those staff members who otherwise would have been furloughed. Staff, particularly those with pre-existing conditions of their own or with a household member at risk, were given the option to shift to food delivery or other non-direct service work. And both organizations have hired additional staff who they hope to keep on payroll when the pandemic eases.

No one knows how long the pandemic will continue or what other needs might emerge. Without the regular income from providing school transportation - and with distancing requirements meaning that they can transport only about a third of the number that ordinarily would fit into the vehicles - Bible Center Church might have to rethink the focus of its Oasis Transportation business, and both organizations need to balance the critical needs of the pandemic with their ongoing operations and staff. But with flexible and responsive organizations like Homewood Children's Village and Bible Center Church, the youth of Homewood will continue to receive the supports they need.