



## 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.

### SOUTH HILLS INTERFAITH MOVEMENT (SHIM)

In late March, an extended family of eight members—two grandparents, two parents and four children—fled the New York City area to escape the spreading pandemic and moved in with a related family of five in the South Hills.

It seemed like a good idea—except that those coming to southwestern Pennsylvania didn't realize that some of them were already infected.

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**It was still early in the crisis, and the family urgently needed PPE and hand sanitizer—items not available in any store at that time—along with food.**

A few days later, some of the 13 family members now living together in a three-bedroom house were starting to show symptoms while others were still going to the grocery store to get food—an action that could have transmitted the virus widely.

The Allegheny County Health Department referred the case to DHS, which asked South Hills Interfaith Movement (SHIM) to help. It was still early in the crisis, and the family urgently needed PPE and hand sanitizer—items not available in any store at that time—along with food.

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**More stories about staff and providers making a difference during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found [here.](#)**

SHIM immigrant services coordinator Michelle King sprang into action to coordinate a host of services. She got cleaning supplies and PPE from Pittsburgh Cares and coordinated food supplies through SHIM's food pantry and backpacks with extra supplies provided by SEND Relief Network. Within one day of the referral, King dropped off a package on the sidewalk, calling the family from the car to let them know of the delivery.

The following week, the family split up into two residences to reduce the risk of virus transmission to other family members. King got them bedding for their second residence and utility bill assistance from the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Council, along with mortgage and rental assistance from the United Way Emergency Basic Needs fund. She also referred them for unemployment assistance and guided them through applying for other public benefits—all over the phone to avoid direct contact, while being mindful of the English-language limitations of an immigrant family.

“Both grandparents ended up in the hospital at different points,” King explained. “Since there

weren't enough tests available at the time, we had to assume everyone was COVID-positive and encouraged them to remain as separate as possible.

King and her supervisor, Courtney Macurak, agree that the family might have saved their lives by coming to Pittsburgh, especially because the grandmother was able to get specialized medical attention here that she might not have been able to access had she stayed in New York.

Doing complex casework over the phone takes creativity. King uses a combination of cell phone pictures and texting to help families complete applications for resources such as unemployment. When necessary, an interpreter is brought in to assist.

King and Macurak were expecting a long-term case, but their rapid response paid great dividends. When SHIM took a second round of food to the family in late April, everyone was healthy and the household head who had come from New York already had a job in Pittsburgh. “They've been very resourceful,” Macurak commented. “They just needed help getting through the crisis.”

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## PFQ-CITIZEN CARE

Since February 2020, Citizen Care Inc., which supports people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, had been preparing for the spread of the coronavirus in Allegheny County. Yet nobody could have been fully prepared for the discovery in early April that all four residents of one Citizen Care site were infected.

“We had been planning for more than five weeks, but found we needed to change our plans immediately and offer increased support to staff,” said Margaret Rothenberger, CEO of Partners for Quality, of which Citizen Care is a subsidiary. “It was a very challenging time.”

The organization implemented an all-out effort

to obtain a sufficient supply of masks and other protective equipment for all residential staff and persons supported. Employees working directly with clients were offered special hazard pay. Hotel rooms were reserved so that staff with potential exposure could shelter in place temporarily, thus keeping their families back home safe.

Partners for Quality's human resources department reinvented itself as a concierge service, answering staff's daily questions on anything virus-related and also providing additional information about community resources—from finding food banks or childcare to what to do about possible symptoms.

All four of the infected residents—who apparently

caught coronavirus from a temporary agency employee who was asymptomatic but later tested positive—were hospitalized and unfortunately, two of them didn't survive the virus. But the organization's special efforts generated some positive outcomes. Across the Citizen Care system of residences, staff kept working through the crisis, providing much-needed care and positive social interaction.

When the two surviving residents got back home and completed their 14 days of quarantine, Rothenberger showed up personally for a staff celebration. Amidst the pandemic, everyone came together to honor the two men who recovered and the two who didn't, as well as the extraordinary commitment of dedicated employees on the front lines.

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## INDEPENDENCE PROFESSIONALS, LLC

Debbie Brinkley, CEO of Independence Professionals, LLC (IPLLC), openly admits that “overwhelmed” was the first reaction she and her staff had when learning about the challenges and limitations they would face during the COVID-19 crisis. However, very quickly IPLLC staff banded together to find ways that they could adapt to continue helping the people they serve.

For clients who live alone and lack natural supports that meant continuing face-to-face services with extra precautions. But, for other clients, staff had to be a little more creative.

IPLLC staff worked remotely to help clients set up technology that would allow them to continue their education uninterrupted or to stay in touch with family and friends. Services like Facebook Messenger, Facetime, Google Hangouts, Microsoft Teams, YouTube and Zoom became ways that staff could communicate with clients and lead engaging activities that included games, virtual dances and educational classes. Staff even used FaceTime to help with communication and understanding between a client who was preparing to give birth and her doctor.

Overall, Debbie is most proud of how quickly her staff has adjusted to changing times.

“IPLCC employees are very adaptable and have learned how to meet client needs in ways that they never would have thought possible prior to the pandemic,” said Debbie. “Finding ways to deliver services remotely has been a godsend for our individuals and their families.”

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## FAMILYLINKS

Prior to the pandemic, a Familylinks client was pulled out of his life sharing home at the behest of his legal guardian, despite the client's success in that setting. Even though the client had nowhere to go, his guardian had him removed by local sheriffs late on a Friday evening. Barb Davis, one of Familylinks' supports coordinators, stepped in and was able to find a respite provider to take him that same evening. However, because the client receives services through a community living waiver that would not support an extended respite stay, Barb needed to quickly find him a new life share family.

To further complicate matters, the COVID-19 pandemic hit shortly after the client moved into respite,



making it more difficult to find an appropriate life share provider. And the client's guardian had very specific requirements about the living situation and expected to meet the family and tour the home. By conducting virtual meetings and introductions – and a drive-by of the new home with the guardian in a separate car – Barb was able to surmount all of these challenges and find the client a great life share family that met with the guardian's approval.

Thanks to Barb's quick response and extra efforts, the client is moving into his new home this month.

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## HUGH LANE WELLNESS FOUNDATION

Since its founding in 2017, the **Hugh Lane Wellness Foundation** (“Hugh Lane”) has worked to improve the health of the LGBTQIA+ and HIV communities in western PA through training and consultation, providing access to holistic wellness services, and supporting LGBTQIA+ youth and their caregivers, particularly those involved in the child welfare system. Things were moving along well, according to Hugh Lane's first executive director, Sarah Rosso. And then COVID-19 hit. Seemingly without missing a beat, Hugh Lane pivoted to become an organization that does whatever needs to be done – virtually and otherwise – to support LGBTQIA+ youth and their caregivers.

Rosso and their small staff are passionate about supporting LGBTQIA+ youth and families, particularly during this time when they face disproportionate risk due to lack of access to equitable healthcare, health disparities that put them at higher risk for complications from the virus, isolation and being quarantined in spaces that are not safe. This passion is evidenced by their response to the pandemic.

They quickly mobilized to respond to every person

who reached out for support or more tangible resources, even reaching out to a local group, **Sewing for Angels**, that made 140 masks for DHS. Today, in addition to virtual individual and group support for youth and caregivers, they've added virtual social events, a grocery delivery service (including gift cards for those who prefer to do their own shopping), a cell phone payment plan for those in danger of losing their cell phone service, a small technology library to allow everyone to access their virtual services, and a pet food bank. And the staff is reaching out beyond their child welfare focus to support any provider, individual or caregiver in need of their services.

While some youth are excited that group activities and support are being offered virtually – particularly those who struggle with anxiety and social issues – for many the health and safety measures required by COVID-19 have exacerbated their problems. Hugh Lane has witnessed a spike in mental health needs, especially among youth who are living in environments that are not affirming. More than one youth has reported feeling that they would prefer getting the coronavirus to the isolation and judgment they are experiencing at home.



To address these needs, Hugh Lane is offering one-to-one coaching and group support, as well as individual consultation and group classes with their caregivers designed to educate and help them build/improve relationships with their young LGBTQIA+ charges. These efforts have made a difference. According to one parent, “I can’t tell you how grateful I am to Hugh Lane and this group class. I happened to mention to my son that I was going to be participating in the group so that I’d be more prepared to support LGBTQ+ youth in our home in the future, and right then and there, he came out to me. Every week I learn something new and get answers to my questions so that I’m better able to support my child. It has made our relationship stronger.”

