



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.

CASA SAN JOSÉ

Casa San José is a nonprofit organization located in the Beechview neighborhood. It serves Latino immigrants throughout southwestern Pennsylvania, including Allegheny County. To date, the organization has worked with approximately 1,000 and it continues to grow.

Since 2013, Casa San José has been focused on the Latino community's integration and self-sufficiency, but now that includes survival as well. The main needs they have been filling during the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine are food, housing, education for children, Spanish-language resources about the pandemic and their legal rights, connections to Spanish-speaking health professionals and clinics, and securing bond funds to release detainees enduring long waits for immigration trials in unsafe and infected prisons.

Since the local quarantine began in March, Casa San José has been on the ground, assisting families and distributing resources. While continuing to support its ongoing mission of engaging fully with the community to educate and advocate for the rights of immigrants, the center has:

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

- Distributed cash subsidies to families who have lost their jobs and cannot receive federal assistance. Through very generous donors and foundations, they have supported 322 families, and hope to increase that number to 500.
- Collected, received and delivered thousands of restaurant meals and boxes filled with produce, groceries and necessary daily supplies.
- Helped hundreds of families apply for rental assistance and housing subsidies.
- Worked with hundreds of school-age children at home to help them get classroom packets, internet access, online tutors and school lunches.
- Continuously posted reliable and accurate Spanish language bulletins, tips, notices and webinars on social media and online covering the coronavirus and other survival needs.
- Partnered with UPMC to host a Facebook Live information session on COVID-19, in Spanish, which reached nearly 3,000 viewers.
- Brought resource agencies to the center's food distribution site, to explain about COVID-19, rental assistance, immigrants' rights and the U.S. Census.
- Connected families to volunteer attorneys for free legal clinics and to help with DACA renewals, work permits, court accompaniments, ICE check-ins and documents. This action has resulted in the release of four immigrants from ICE detention, through the Fondo Solidario de Pittsburgh bond fund.
- Responded at any time of day or night to telephone requests for information and emergency assistance.
- Worked with dozens of donors, volunteers, community members and partner organizations, including 412 Food Rescue, the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food bank and Dr. Mark Baratz's Double Play Initiative.
- Launched a free virtual summer camp in June.

BEVERLY'S BIRTHDAYS

In 2011, Megan Yunn was teaching the word "accustomed" to an 11-year-old girl named Beverly in an afterschool program. "What are you accustomed to eating at a birthday party?" she asked.

The girl's reply shocked her: "I've never had a birthday party."

"I felt embarrassed," Yunn recalled. "It had never crossed my mind that there might be children out there not having a very happy birthday."

Yunn decided to do something about that problem. Nine years later, the nonprofit she founded in 2012, Beverly's Birthdays, works with 90 child-serving agencies to recognize the birthdays of 30,000 children each year, from one-year-olds to teenagers. In 2019, the organization held 1,800 parties, most

of them at family centers and residential facilities. "It's our way of validating to children that they are important," Yunn says bluntly.

In mid-March, Yunn knew that COVID-19 would interrupt normal birthday party programming for a while, so she asked her agency contacts, "What is the best way that we can spread cheer?" The responses were consistent: focus on babies and their families.

Yunn knew from personal experience that baby formula was a common area of need. Two of her four children, when young, needed a special formula that cost \$32 a can. Each one went through about 10 cans a month, and insurance didn't cover it.

What she didn't know was that local food banks



Photo courtesy of Beverly's Birthdays

“

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don’t supply formula. And when the WIC program temporarily stopped taking applications early in the pandemic, the threat to newly unemployed families with babies became even greater.

“An entire demographic was being left out,” Yunn said. “Imagine being a mother in crisis who doesn’t know how she will feed her child.” So to fill the gap, this modest-sized agency of nine staff became DHS’s infant supply storage closet.

As of early June, Beverly’s Birthdays had secured and distributed \$120,000 of formula, diapers, baby wipes, snack packs, hygiene items and baby food.

They did it through sheer effort—promoting a crowdfunding program, making arrangements to buy items at cost from Giant Eagle, scheduling pickups by 93 agencies, turning their small office into a warehouse with boxes stacked to the ceiling, and renting two portable units for extra storage space.

Instead of slowing down because the pandemic was making normal parties impossible, Yunn’s staff is working harder than ever – showing up at 6:00 a.m. to manage inventory and schedule pickups on top of holding virtual birthday parties. “I have the best staff,” Yunn stated. “They are extremely committed to the mission of letting families and children know that they matter.”

Because of their reputation as experts in celebration, Beverly’s Birthdays was also asked to spread cheer to graduating seniors in the child welfare system. They responded by preparing individualized graduation cakes and gifts for 91 youth.

It’s been quite a performance in giving back for a nonprofit whose main product—birthday parties—could easily be viewed as expendable in hard times.

“I will never forget when [now-retired DHS administrator] Walter Smith gave us our first contract. He said, ‘I think it’s time we sprinkled a little glitter on DHS,’” commented Yunn. Beverly’s Birthdays has more than repaid the favor by spreading joy all over Allegheny County in the midst of crisis.

NORTH HILLS COMMUNITY OUTREACH

North Hills Community Outreach (NHCO) is an interfaith organization dedicated to increasing the self-sufficiency of people in crisis, hardship and poverty. This agency's work is rooted in President Johnson's War on Poverty and Community Action work: changing people's lives, embodying hope and improving communities.

Prior to the local COVID-19 outbreak, all services were delivered face-to-face. Staff would provide a one-on-one orientation to the services available, determine the best-fit services and then work with the client on a plan for achieving their goals and reaching economic security.

That changed rapidly when the pandemic hit and in-person meetings were no longer possible. Particularly hard hit were the agency's intensive case management services, which had to be completely rethought as a remote interaction. Clients now use their phones to take photos of documents to send to workers, virtual meetings are being conducted, and the agency is using Google Voice numbers so that staff can use personal devices for connecting with clients but still protect their privacy. From March 1st through May 31st, NHCO served over 1,000 families, almost 20% of

whom were new clients.

The pandemic also provided an opportunity for NHCO to revisit the use of videos, which previously had been used only intermittently to market services and supports. The agency produced a video to remind their communities that although the NHCO offices were closed, the staff were still working to support existing and new clients' needs. Since that video was posted, it has been viewed over 500 times and shared another dozen times, reaching countless more individuals.

The agency continues to look for ways to innovate and reach out to the community, however and whenever they can. As Carolyn Pschirer, Director of Services says, "We are in a business of helping people, and when people aren't coming in, that means we can't work the way we are used to.

[We] continue to adapt, continue to depend on technology." However, she also points out that social media and technology platforms are only relevant for the people who can access them. And reaching individuals in need who do not have the technology and devices continues to be a challenge, one that NHCO is determined to overcome.

THE CHILDREN'S INSTITUTE

Handling the sudden end to regular school days has been hard for students everywhere. There were extra challenges for The Children's Institute, whose Day School serves students with disabilities from 60 school districts throughout Western Pennsylvania.

"When we needed to shut down in-person

operations due to Gov. Wolf's statewide order, we heard from parents who were terrified about how their children would be supported," said Dr. Wendy Pardee, president and CEO of The Children's Institute. "But we have seen successes across every facet of our work, including areas where we never fathomed that we would be able to use technology."



Providing educational instruction and doing speech, occupational and physical therapies remotely certainly requires extra creativity, but it has also opened up new opportunities. “Our team members have been delivering more tailored instruction because they have a greater appreciation for the home environment—things like what the steps look like or how high the microwave is in their home kitchen,” Pardee explained. “So they have been making the appropriate modifications to adjust their teaching to each student.”

Pardee told of one 15-year-old student with a wheelchair who has responded in unexpected ways to in-home education. “Learning through technology has really ignited this student’s interest,” she said. “He has exceeded his IEP [Individualized Education Plan] goals, can operate his wheelchair better than ever, and is showing a great desire for independence. He’s actually zooming away from

his parents when they walk together—and they have been blown away by seeing his skills improve.”

The Children’s Institute’s prom is typically a deeply valued event because the students enjoy an experience like any other high school students. Normally, students and staff decorate the school building in accord with the prom theme; one year, for example, the hallways were turned into fields reminiscent of *The Wizard of Oz*, complete with a full-scale tin man, cowardly lion and scarecrow.

That couldn’t happen this year, but team members were determined to provide an equivalent experience, so the whole prom went virtual. The students dressed up in their prom attire and decorated their Zoom backgrounds to match the “Under the Sea” theme, enjoyed live music and socialized as a group for the first time in two months.

The Children’s Institute team also took the time to individualize “Graduation On-the-Go,” traveling across Western Pennsylvania to each of the 18 graduating seniors’ homes with personalized diplomas, special T-shirts, a recorded version of “Pomp and Circumstance,” and activities specific to that student’s interests.

“It was a moment of joy for everyone,” Pardee said. “Our team members bond deeply with our students, so giving our seniors a proper farewell, rather than having less than we would have in any other year, was really important. I am very proud of the amazing experiences our team has created.”

THE OASIS PROJECT

Staff at The Oasis Project, the community and development division of Bible Center Church, knew the pandemic would create a new set of needs for the families and children they serve in Homewood. They were, however, unsure of what those needs would be.

In early March, staff of The Maker's Clubhouse, The Oasis Project's STEAM-focused educational program for school-aged youth, began making weekly wellness calls. By speaking to the families of the 114 program participants, staff learned there were major concerns around food insecurity and remote learning. This information guided The Oasis Project's COVID-19 response.

The Oasis Project's first goal was to find ways they could help combat food insecurity. One of the challenges faced by families was the inability to get to food distribution sites because of a lack of transportation. To meet the needs of those families, Bible Center Church and Homewood Children's Village began a partnership with the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank to become a food distribution center. Nearly 30,000 meals have been distributed to date.

Beyond the partnership with the Food Bank, Bible Center Church has provided almost 17,000 pounds

of produce to the community through a partnership with Monteverde's Produce and the American Heart Association. They have also partnered with the Western Pennsylvania Diaper Bank to distribute more than 20,000 diapers.

Supporting children with home learning was another priority in The Oasis Project's coronavirus response. The Maker's Clubhouse staff began offering tutoring through the Zoom platform to help students complete the instructional packets distributed by the Pittsburgh Public School District. Additionally, staff created videos of science experiments and engineering design challenges that used common household items and would be easy for students to replicate.

The Clubhouse continues to share resources on its website, including a calendar of daily science activities by grade and links to other educational resources by subject. Launch of their in-person summer camp, Green, STEAM & Play, is planned for the end of June.

Although the pandemic may have changed The Oasis Project's daily operations and created new challenges, the organization continues to live up to its name by offering relief during difficult times.