



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.

If you have – or have heard of – an inspiring story of an agency or staff person creatively adapting to meet needs amid the restrictions caused by COVID-19, please contact evelyn.whitehill@alleghenycounty.us.

FRONTLINE STORIES IN THIS ISSUE:

**Mon Valley
Initiative 1**

**Community
Human Services 2**

**Community
Human Services
Emergency Shelter 4**

**Allegheny County
Immigrants and
Internationals
Advisory Council 4**

MON VALLEY INITIATIVE

The Mon Valley Initiative (MVI) is dedicated to helping families and individuals achieve stability and economic security, primarily by focusing on supporting unemployed and under-employed clients in job preparation, job search, financial coaching and education. At any time, these services are in great demand and support the overall community by increasing residents' purchasing power and stabilizing the tax base. In today's world of the COVID-19 pandemic, quarantine and unprecedented unemployment rates, MVI's services are truly lifesaving.

When MVI leadership came together to adjust their service delivery model to continue to meet the needs of the community during the COVID-19 crisis, they immediately thought about videos and social media. Quickly producing a video with a simple and compelling message of "We're still here for you," MVI provided a comforting voice to the Mon Valley community. They posted the video on social media channels and saw the views and shares skyrocket – 12,657 people actually watched the video on Twitter and Facebook, making it the most popular MVI-created content to date!

The agency also took advantage of more foot traffic in the area, due to stay-at-home orders, and purchased new signage for the building with an aim to alert new clients that they could still reach staff by phone. Additional changes have included helping clients without computer access at home to complete more applications and forms, such as applying for benefits and following up on stimulus funds, by spending much more time on the phone.

Recently, MVI created a video version of its orientation, employment coaching and financial coaching curricula, on an invitation-only YouTube channel. This was accomplished using on-line curriculum segments available to designated Financial Opportunity Centers, with support from Neighborhood Allies and the Local Initiative

Support Corporation (LISC). The new service format will allow clients to continue to move forward in their goals and be ready for employment opportunities when pandemic restrictions are reduced.

As MVI continues to adapt to meet clients' needs, leadership is exploring how to open the offices safely. As Laura Zinski, Chief Executive Officer, stated, "We are looking at protocols and writing new regulations for business. We are not in a hurry; this is not a race we need to win. If people can access [us] online or on the phone, we do not need to put them at risk [with face-to-face interactions]." But in the meantime, the MVI team is busy continuing to support Mon Valley residents and innovating to meet the community's needs.

COMMUNITY HUMAN SERVICES

SAFE HAVEN

For nearly 50 years, Community Human Services (CHS) has provided low-income individuals and those experiencing homelessness in our region access to stable housing, quality food and community resources. The agency has operated under the belief that all people should be able to live as vibrant and integral members of their community.

When the threat of COVID-19 emerged, CHS quickly put its decades of experience to work, partnering with the County's Department of Human Services to operate Safe Haven, a hotel turned temporary isolation and quarantine facility for those at-risk of or impacted by the disease. While many of us are able to safely isolate in the comfort of our homes, individuals experiencing homelessness and those living in group (congregate) housing have a harder time separating themselves from possible contagion.

Since opening its doors, Safe Haven has accepted referrals from a number of partners, including

homeless shelters, street outreach providers, and organizations serving refugees and immigrants. It has also housed frontline staff who were exposed to COVID-19 and needed a place to stay until they could safely return to their families. While COVID-positive and at-risk individuals have come through the facility, no one currently staying at Safe Haven has tested positive.

SOUTH OAKLAND FOOD PANTRY

In addition to operating emergency shelters and other residential facilities, CHS operates a number of programs and facilities focused on access to quality food. Many of these facilities have been greatly impacted by COVID-19, as needs have increased and changes have been made to keep everyone safe. Of all its facilities, COVID-19 has had the greatest operational impact on CHS's food pantry in South Oakland.

Before the pandemic, this small, community-centered space provided an intimate environment for clients as they shopped the pantry's weekly selection of fresh food. Volunteers would assist seniors and clients with physical disabilities in carrying food to their cars. But in February, social distancing precautions changed all of that. Nearly overnight, the pantry transitioned to providing food box pickups at its front door. While staff and families missed the ways they were able to connect with one another while shopping at the pantry, the changes were important to keep everyone safe.

More broadly, CHS has used the pandemic as an opportunity to reevaluate how it serves communities and clients. COVID-19 has made it more difficult for low-income households to achieve stability; limitations on public transportation, along with lost jobs and closed schools, have made accessing and affording quality food a real challenge.

To combat rising food insecurity, the pantry began distributing three different types of food boxes: street boxes, which contain ready and easy-to-eat foods for unhoused individuals living in camps or on

the street; shelf-stable boxes, which provide non-perishable foods for individuals and families living with limited refrigeration or cooking equipment; and produce boxes that contain dairy, meat and produce. "Giving food that best fits a client's current situation allows us to make best use of the pantry's resources," said CHS.

Since February, the pantry has gone from serving over 150 households each week to over 250. Altogether, this represents more than 10,000 pounds of food each week. But additional food distributed means additional costs; the pantry is currently in need of funding to meet this new demand. For many of the 1,000 families that visit each month, the pantry is their only reliable source of fresh food.

Some help has arrived to meet the growing need, for which CHS is deeply grateful. Two Men and a Truck and Miller's Ace Hardware have both donated boxes, Operation Safety net helps sort food and distribute boxes for street outreach, Pamela's Diner in Oakland has donated eggs, and the University of Pittsburgh's food pantry has donated \$1,000 worth of food.



Photo courtesy of Community Human Services

COMMUNITY HUMAN SERVICES: EMERGENCY SHELTER

For many of Community Human Services' (CHS) team members, the threat of COVID-19 has led to increased teleworking. But that's not an option for CHS's frontline staff, who work in emergency shelters and with clients who need 24/7 care in residential facilities.

“

From there, much of our conversation shifted to measures we would take proactively to make sure we all remained safe and healthy.

The potential for exposure to COVID-19 is real. One staff member who works in CHS's Home 2020 emergency shelter was exposed to the disease, but ultimately tested negative. The staff member used his experience as an opportunity to educate residents and clients on the risks and walked them through what it was like taking the test and how a positive result might have impacted his life. This led to residents better understanding, and participating in, both the organizational precautions CHS has been taking and the precautions recommended for residents themselves.

“Every resident made it a point to tell me that they were glad that I was back,” said the staff member, “and that the test was negative. From there, much of our conversation shifted to measures we would take proactively to make sure we all remained safe and healthy. More than anything else, those conversations showed me that the working relationships that I've formed since Home 2020 [the emergency shelter] opened are valuable and meaningful to everybody involved and they are tremendously important when trying to be effective at my job.”

ALLEGHENY COUNTY IMMIGRANTS AND INTERNATIONALS ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Allegheny County Immigrants and Internationals Advisory Council (IIAC) is a diverse, representative group of immigrant leaders, service providers and other stakeholders who identify issues of concern and changes in the needs of immigrant and international communities. IIAC is supported by the Equity and Inclusion Team within the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS). When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, staff and the entire council membership had

to pivot to respond to the massive needs created by the virus and to ensure that the response was appropriate for its constituencies.

Early in the crisis, listening sessions were conducted with a number of communities with complex needs: Immigrants and Internationals, Latinx, Black, Religious and LGBTQ+. The most pressing need identified during the sessions was accurate, straightforward guidance provided in a language



and context that residents of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) communities could trust and understand. The team quickly connected with three DHS-contracted language service providers (Trustpoint One, Hearing and Deaf Service (HDS)/Pittsburgh Language Access Network (PLAN), and Language Line Solutions) to translate this guidance into the six most frequently spoken languages (Arabic, Chinese, Spanish, Nepalese, Russian and Swahili)¹. These providers stepped up immediately, working remotely and by phone to quickly respond to translation requests, often within 24 hours. Council members vetted all translated material and reached out to staff when they identified needs within their networks.

A key component of making information available to these communities – and something that was strongly encouraged during the listening sessions – was ensuring that it was being delivered in a culturally acceptable way by community leaders and representatives sanctioned by the community. The Neighborhood Resilience Project, an new IIAC partnership that emerged from the pandemic, worked with its network (including DHS, Jewish Family and Children’s Services, the University of Pittsburgh, and Carlow University) to build a team of about 100 volunteer community health deputies. More than 30 of the deputies, who are charged with spreading accurate information about COVID-19, checking on people within their community and remaining vigilant to identify signs of trauma, are internationals and immigrants. The Project continues to train new community health deputies on a weekly basis and provides ongoing support and up-to-date information to all its volunteers.

IIAC members did whatever they could to support their communities. For example, Dr. Tamare Piersaint, who represents L’Union Fait La Force and Pittsburgh’s Haitian community on the Council, reached out to her various networks (e.g., California University, Rodman Street Baptist Church, the mental health community) and developed online resources, including virtual story times for children, panel presentations and videos about mental health self-care, and training for community leaders. She also coordinated a mask-making event, sponsored by her church, to equip community members and professionals. Every Council member could share a similar story, and together, they have created a continuum of supportive services for the communities they represent. Post COVID-19, the lessons learned during the pandemic will continue to inform their work and that of DHS’s Equity and Inclusion team.

¹ Trustpoint One and Global Wordsmiths, an Advisory Council member, provided some services pro bono.



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