



# On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

## FRONTLINE STORIES IN THIS ISSUE:

**Gwen's Girls** 1

**Family Care  
Connection Centers  
of Children's  
Hospital** 2

**Holy Family  
Institute** 3

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



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](mailto:evelyn.whitehill@alleghenycounty.us).**

## GWEN'S GIRLS

Like many nonprofits across the Commonwealth and the country, Gwen's Girls is working to meet the needs of those hit hard by the COVID-19 crisis. Its prevention, intervention and advocacy services are needed now more than ever. The inequities that girls and families face daily are magnified as a result of this pandemic. Necessities such as food, shelter and safety are an ongoing need even at the best of times. Now, families are even more vulnerable as the pandemic unfolds.

When the crisis hit, Gwen's Girls developed and

implemented a COVID-19 intervention plan. Staff contacted more than 100 families to assess their needs for food, essential toiletries, childcare, transportation, academic support and technology. Additionally, Gwen's Girls supported children who were not enrolled in the program but faced food insecurity. The agency is committed to the belief that we are ONE Pittsburgh and will survive this global pandemic together.

### Service

Gwen's Girls is serving families in a double crisis—

COVID-19 and anti-Black violence—by delivering food and essential items. Each week, the team provides hundreds of families, including both participants and their neighbors, with the supplies they need to get through this tough time. With the help of partners such as the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank, the agency is able to help combat food insecurity and conduct well visits. Through a partnership with the American Heart Association and the Farmers to Families program - Monteverde's Inc., they've also been able to distribute fresh fruit and vegetables (80 boxes per week) to families.



### **Sanctuary**

Gwen's Girls' interactions with the community follows the Sanctuary® model, a blueprint for clinical and organizational change which, at its

core, promotes safety and recovery from adversity through the active creation of a trauma-informed community. As part of this model, all girls and staff developed safety plans. Safety plans include things one can do when feeling stressed, anxious or overwhelmed, including ways to recognize emotions and focus on the present.

### **Support**

To prevent COVID-19 and summer learning loss, Gwen's Girls is supporting participants' education by offering academic support coaches. The agency hired community members, educators, college students and professionals to provide virtual individual and group tutoring sessions. Recognizing this learning loss has the potential to negatively impact all youth in our community, they are offering this FREE opportunity to ANY student in grades k-12 in Allegheny County. Priority has been given to current Gwen's Girls participants, youth/families involved in Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA)-affiliated programs, youth involved in out-of-school-time programs, and youth in congregate and foster care. The academic coaches cover all core subjects as well as early childhood reading and math, intensive academic support for students with IEPs, and post-secondary support with SAT/ACT prep and college application assistance. They also support the learning needs of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. This initiative will continue through the summer and the 2020-21 school year.

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## **FAMILY CARE CONNECTION CENTERS OF CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL**

Family Care Connection (FCC) Centers of Children's Hospital provide vital services to children and families through a network of community-based centers. Many of their in-person services like child development activities and parenting education were affected by the COVID-19 outbreak, but FCC took the challenge in stride, utilizing creative methods to support families in this unprecedented time.

FCC has dropped off food, formula, diapers, learning activities, COVID-19 updates and voting information

- delivered by a friendly (masked) face - to hundreds of local families. Other community partners even got involved in the effort. Partnering with FCC, local favorite Eat'n Park took meals to families who couldn't leave their homes, delivering more than 2,000 meals between April and May.

In cases where in-person help isn't possible, technology has become an important part of reaching families. For example, a behavioral therapist sends out daily emails to promote routines, chores and behavior support for parents who are home with children. Parents can also call or email the therapist with questions or when they need individualized support. Individual centers have set up new Facebook pages and are providing early childhood resources and parent-child classes online. And some uses of technology are just for fun — one of the centers hosted a virtual dance party for children and families.



A final shout out goes to the FCC children who graduated kindergarten in spite of the pandemic. While a community celebration wasn't possible, they had a virtual event to celebrate their big accomplishment.

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## HOLY FAMILY INSTITUTE

Holy Family Institute (HFI) has been providing “help, healing and hope to children and families throughout Western Pennsylvania” for more than 100 years. However, even with their long history, HFI - like many organizations - found themselves in a state of uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic.

HFI realized the best way to continue to support their clients was to shift to telehealth whenever possible. Over the last few months, HFI staff has used technology to assist with applications for benefits, housing, student aid and unemployment; help clients make safety plans and complete the Protection from Abuse (PFA) order process; support clients in maintaining their sobriety; and offer guidance to parents who were facing additional stress from spending more time at home and serving as their child's teacher.

While technology has played a major role in how HFI is delivering services during the pandemic, in-person services remain critical for many of their clients. One such client is a 19-year-old woman who gave birth earlier this year. The client had been

struggling to properly feed the baby and was not changing the baby on a regular basis. On top of this, the client was depressed.

HFI continued to do face-to-face visits during the stay-at-home order, working with both the client and her caseworker. Now, the client is beginning to demonstrate parenting skills and is working better with providers. She is also opening up more about her situation and her concerns.

Despite the many challenges faced during the pandemic, HFI has not missed a beat. They continue to adapt to find the best way to support and guide the individuals and families they serve.