



## On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

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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](#).**

## JEWISH FAMILY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

For over 80 years, Jewish Family and Community Services (JFCS) has provided a safety net for individuals and families in the greater Pittsburgh community, offering services and programs for every stage of life and supporting its neighbors through life's changes and challenges. Services offered help families overcome food insecurity, immigrants become citizens, professionals find new jobs, seniors remain independent, refugees settle into their new homes, and community members find healing from trauma and bereavement.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, JFCS staff have continued working at full capacity and adjusted

critical functions to meet the needs of clients and the community.

The Immigrant Workforce Program (IWP) is a JFCS program provided in partnership with Literacy Pittsburgh and All for All, designed to provide a cohort of foreign-born job seekers with necessary skills to navigate the American workforce while also developing their English language skills. Two weeks into the program's start, Pittsburgh faced widespread shutdowns due to COVID-19, which meant the cohort could no longer meet in person. The staff of JFCS and Literacy Pittsburgh worked to set up a virtual meeting space and online curriculum

so that the IWP participants could continue to learn and meet.

The team transitioned to Zoom meetings, leveraging technology tools like Google Drive and Quizlet to provide a meaningful experience and adding twice-weekly breakout sessions to the small group work experience. The participants adapted quickly and seamlessly, and the program continued virtually. As the weeks progressed, relationships began to develop among the participants. Although the program was designed to create connections between participants in a live setting, the depth and breadth of these Zoom-enabled relationships seemed remarkable.

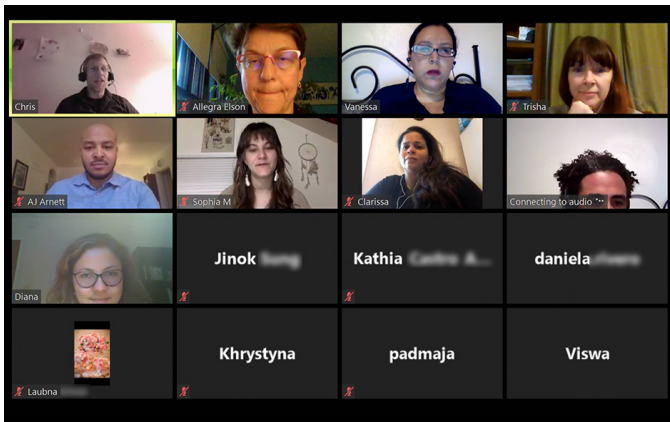


Photo courtesy of Jewish Family and Community Services

Attendance was high, and group members began arranging their own English conversation groups and practice groups for interviewing skills. The participants started to open up to each other, and the tone of the group discussions changed. They shared stories and anecdotes even as they shared the common experience of isolation amidst the pandemic. They often laughed together at the idioms that a team member shared and began using them. Children and pets were regular guests. Zoom provided windows into the homes and the lives of participants and the teams alike.

Participants looked forward to each session and appreciated the ability to gather twice a week when it was impossible for them to leave their homes. The last session was very emotional, and there were more than a few damp eyes as people shared stories and jokes and made plans to stay in contact with one another. While IWP provided the skills necessary for career success to its participants, during this pandemic it also provided everyone with a much-needed community.

IWP is just one of many programs that JFCS has adapted to follow stay-at-home and social distancing guidelines. Here are just some of the ways JFCS has adapted services:

- Moved counseling and support groups to telephone and online platforms and created new support groups open to the public during this time
- AgeWell Pittsburgh has reached over 360 seniors through telephone and virtual communication, ensuring they are connected to the resources they need at this time.
- JFCS Refugee & Immigrant services worked with the County to train 22 community members about health practices for COVID-19 to communicate important information to the community.
- The Refugee & Immigrant Services team has also worked to make sure refugee families have adequate access to technology for information, education and communication.
- The JFCS Career Development Center has moved services online, providing virtual workshops and events to help job seekers.
- Career counselors helped 144 individuals apply for unemployment compensation.
- The JFCS Squirrel Hill Food Pantry has remained open five days a week, now serving clients with pre-bagged items and delivery services for homebound individuals.

## RHD ALLIES

RHD Allies provides peer support services for adults with co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders who are also involved with the criminal justice system. When the pandemic and the resulting stay-at-home order made normal in-person interactions almost impossible, RHD's certified peer specialists (CPS) had to find new methods to continue supporting program participants through challenging times.

Each day, the CPSs would contact participants by phone or through video conferencing apps such as FaceTime or Zoom. This provided an opportunity to not only catch up with the participants, but also to find out about any needs they may have.

Like many other organizations, one of the largest concerns faced by RHD participants was food insecurity. To help those individuals, a group of CPSs traveled to food distribution locations to pick up food and deliver the items directly to the participants.

Other participants found themselves struggling emotionally with lockdowns and the inability to spend time with their loved ones. The creative CPSs came up with fun ways to add a little excitement to the day, whether by dropping off care packages or challenging participants in an online game.

The CPSs were also available to help with health and safety needs. In one instance, a CPS helped a participant to escape an abusive spouse. The CPS first connected the participant with community resources to locate housing. Once appropriate housing was found, the CPS drove a moving truck (paid for by RHD) to the participant's home – while physically distancing – so she could pack up her belongings and move to a safer location. Another CPS used RHD's daily phone calls as an opportunity to continue reaching out to a participant who had been opposed to entering a treatment facility for a substance use disorder. When the participant reached the point where she was ready to enter treatment, the CPS arranged for transportation and found an appropriate facility for her.

No matter what happens with the pandemic over the coming months, RHD's certified peer specialists will continue to adapt to make sure that "human" is always the most important part of "human services."

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## EVERY CHILD, INC.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in the spring of 2020, staff of Every Child, Inc. knew that they needed to find a way to support foster (resource) families caring for children who were staying at home and not going to school. Utilizing technology and good old-fashioned ingenuity to enhance and continue services during this time, the foster care teams implemented a variety of virtual supports. Sessions designed to help children work through barriers to permanency are being held via Zoom across multiple homes so that siblings can interact and receive the benefits of the service together. These sessions, called child prep, also involve helping children create a life book that details their life up to now and helps them look forward to the future. Some caseworkers are putting together child prep craft packets, dropping them off and then meeting with the children online to do the projects together.

One foster family has used virtual visits to help establish a better relationship with the child's birth mother, who, before the pandemic, had not been in contact. As she has come to accept the need for help with her child, virtual visits have allowed the foster and birth families to have discussions about maintaining the relationship and keeping lines of communication open. They've worked together to change visitation days so that the birth parent can visit on holidays and even on the child's birthday. The caseworker believes this wouldn't have happened without virtual visits.

Foster care caseworkers each chose families for whom they created Easter magic. They filled and hid Easter eggs in the foster families' front yards so that the children could wake up to find them and experience some joy during this difficult time.

For Mother's Day and Father's Day, children in foster care (and their foster siblings) were given the opportunity to make gifts for both their foster and birth parents. The gifts were then sent to the birth families. The children and all the parents loved it!