



On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

FRONTLINE STORIES IN THIS ISSUE:

**Justice Related
Services 1**

**AIU's Family
and Community
Education
Services 2**

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](#).

JUSTICE RELATED SERVICES

Justice Related Services (JRS) works with the Allegheny County Jail, District Courts, and behavioral health and other community providers to support adults with mental illness, mental illness and co-occurring substance use disorder, or a dual diagnosis of mental illness and intellectual disability, who are involved in the criminal justice system. Services are provided during and following Court proceedings and incarceration to promote successful transition back into the community and to decrease the likelihood of recidivism. This is accomplished through assessment, development of a treatment plan, and providing access to treatment, supports and recovery programs. During the pandemic, JRS has continued to plan, coordinate

and facilitate release of individuals incarcerated in the Allegheny County Jail, Torrance State Hospital or the State prison system. The following scenarios illustrate staff accomplishments during the pandemic, when even the smallest activity became complicated and complex.

Joseph Lapcevic, a staff member of Justice Related Services - Diversion, assisted an individual transitioning from Torrance Forensic State Hospital to a Community Residential Rehabilitation (CRR) group home for adults with mental illness. Joe transported this woman from the hospital in Blairsville to the CRR in Allegheny County. He successfully connected her to language

interpretation, treatment and medical services in the community, supported her during the transition to the CRR, helped her get her charges reduced to a summary charge, and made sure she had appropriate clothing and personal hygiene items.

Early in the pandemic, before regular processes were put into place, Chloe Taylor, a County support specialist for Justice Related Services, helped to plan and facilitate an individual's release from jail to a community program. She ensured his safe transfer to the program by coordinating with the Courts, Jail, Probation Office, the individual and his family, while quelling his concerns and those of the provider and his family. On the day of his release, Chloe went to the Jail and transported him directly to the program to make sure he complied with the Court order (while making sure he got necessary clothing and food).

Since his release from the Jail, he has enrolled in behavioral health treatment and has been doing well. He is currently focusing on complying with his probation requirements and is attending family sessions to attempt to reconcile with his wife.

JRS clients continue to make progress despite the challenges of COVID-19. For example, one client achieved all necessary treatment requirements for her probation and is now living independently on her own. She has found work, has successfully completed her probation supervision and is in the process of reunifying with her children.

Another client released from incarceration during the pandemic has been thriving in the community. He has been active in his treatment, has been caring for his infant daughter and has been actively searching for work – applying for 27 jobs in one day! He continues to remain motivated in his recovery and is excited about making a new start.

AIU'S FAMILY AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION SERVICES

Essential workers have been described as “superheroes” during the COVID-19 pandemic, and for good reason. The staff at the Allegheny Intermediate Unit's Family and Community Education Services (FACES) program can be more like ninjas.

How so? Oftentimes, their work is seen only after it has been done. For many families there is a knock at the door and when they go to answer, nobody is there. Instead, a box of fresh fruit or a bag of books from the local library are the only traces left behind.

Homestead resident Anthony MacOliver and his 2-year-old daughter, Kamillah Faith, have experienced it firsthand. Kamillah even recognizes the bag and knows what's inside – her favorite books, filled with shapes, colors, touch-and-feel pages and pop-ups. Inside each book is a whole new world where her imagination can take off, even while quarantined in her home.

“She knows that bag,” Mr. MacOliver said with a chuckle. “I love the fact that she was able to keep the program going with the library. Although my daughter is two, she has an affinity for books. She likes a book more than a doll. That's just how she is. I was adamant in getting her into that kind of program.”

The MacOliver family is just one of many who continue engaging with the Steel Valley Family Center that is based in Homestead. The center is part of the FACES program, which has numerous locations throughout the County. Each location provides home-based services, parent support groups, fun parent/child activities, relationship building and mentoring. When the pandemic struck, it took creativity and quick thinking to translate those meaningful personal experiences into a digital platform or no-touch delivery of services.

“As we all know, the last few months have been very difficult and challenging for everyone,” said Steel Valley Family Center Director Holly Cherpak. “Being able to adapt to the changes has certainly been a true test for all of us.”

Ashley Kirkland is the president of the parent council at the Steel Valley Family Center. She, too, enjoys the fresh fruit and



Photo courtesy of AIU

help me. I was trying on my own, but she had connections. They are just awesome.”

For the dedicated staff, lending a helping hand to families wherever they are or getting them where they need to be is just another day at the (virtual) office.

vegetable drop-offs on her front porch and also continues to benefit from parent gatherings that now take place via video conferencing. When she is not working as a home care provider, Mrs. Kirkland, along with her husband and two sons, has been hunkering down at home during the pandemic. Doing the socially responsible thing does not mean she can't be social. Those video calls are a welcome return to how life was just a few months ago, while also addressing the current challenges for families.

“It makes me feel normal,” explained Mrs. Kirkland. “I need that interaction with the other parents. They family center has been there to help us.”

For others, staying put is not an option. Katheryn Hanley, a West Mifflin resident, and her family have outgrown their current living situation. She has three children ages 9, 2 and 1. They need her attention at home, especially during quarantine, and that has made it difficult to look for a new residence. Luckily, the family center staff was there for her and Valerie Strosser assisted.

“I’m now in the process of moving,” said Ms. Hanley. “I’m glad she was there to