



## On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County

Throughout Allegheny County's human services system, staff and providers have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with swift action and creativity. We've come together under new, difficult and often frightening conditions to support the County's most vulnerable residents. We've heard countless stories of providers that have stepped up to the challenge and we've witnessed a depth of compassion and commitment on the part of frontline staff that is humbling. **This work embodies the very best of social work and is as important to our community as that of any first responder on the frontline.**

These inspiring stories deserve to be told, and, to that end, we introduce you to a new occasional publication, *On the Frontline: Human Services in Allegheny County*, designed to showcase our frontline workers and providers who are keeping so many Allegheny County residents safe, housed, fed and supported. Each issue will feature stories of individual staff and agencies, in the trenches and making a difference. The stories will range from staff going the extra mile to ensure that a family has enough to eat to agencies that have retooled their operations to help staff and clients meet the challenges of COVID-19. The only constant will be the ways in which we all have adapted to our new, complex reality in order to serve the greater good.

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

## POWER

The early months of drug and alcohol recovery are a difficult time but could seem nearly impossible when combined with a pandemic, a hospitalized family member and uncertainty about how you will get food. These were the challenges faced by Carrie\*, a client of POWER (PA Organization for Women in Recovery).

After spending a few days out of town to visit her ill relative, Carrie returned to her rooming house to find that all her food had been stolen. To make matters worse, she had already used her SNAP benefits for the month and had no transportation to get to a food distribution event.

**She turned to her POWER  
mentor, Lachelle, for help.**



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\* Carrie is a pseudonym to protect the client's identity.

Lachelle quickly got to work. During a conversation with a coworker, Lachelle learned that it may be possible for staff to visit a food bank distribution site to pick up food for their clients. No one at POWER had attempted this before, but Lachelle knew she needed to give it a try.

A short time later, Lachelle arrived at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank. It was a distribution day and the line of cars was long. Lachelle spoke with the guard and explained the situation. She was permitted to pick up the food and dropped it off to a thrilled Carrie.

Now, she and other POWER staff continue to deliver food to clients when it is needed.

“Early recovery can be an emotional rollercoaster,” said Lachelle. “I’m glad we were able to connect Carrie and other POWER clients with the resources they need. It shows them that they are not alone and gives them hope that things will get better.”

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## A SECOND CHANCE, INC.

When A Second Chance, Inc., Allegheny County’s primary kinship care provider, heard about the need for food distribution help in Penn Hills early in the pandemic, the organization quickly redeployed staff in a creative way with enormous impact.

A Second Chance has 28 family service transportation aides who normally help to arrange and oversee visits between birth mothers, their children, and relatives serving as caregivers. Once the COVID crisis broke out, these aides weren’t arranging live visits as usual; instead they were working out of the organization’s office in East Hills. With no travel taking place, they had some free time.

And Sharon McDaniel, A Second Chance’s president and CEO, had an idea. She sent DHS leadership an e-mail asking if her staff could help in filling a food delivery gap.

Within five days, a dozen of A Second Chance’s

transportation aides were transformed into a food distribution team, taking meals provided by the United Way and Eat ‘n Park to locations across Penn Hills. Two staff members made masks for the aides, who were trained in how to make safe grab-and-go delivery visits without making direct contact.

The team delivered 1,000 meals on the first day, April 15. Soon they were up to 3,200 a day for three days a week, reaching an amazing cumulative total of 52,000 by the end of May. Transportation and logistics were supervised by A Second Chance vice president Lisa Chambers and David Brock, managing director of family and community engagement.

A Second Chance spent \$10,000 of its own funds to enhance the available food supply. And when Nutrition Inc. provided additional food in bulk form, the food distribution team started showing up earlier, functioning as an assembly line—while carefully observing social distancing protocol—to

put individual meal packages together for delivery.

Meanwhile, the other transportation aides took over the whole A Second Chance caseload, maintaining a 91% visitation rate (mostly virtual visits by Skype or Facetime).

“They made the shift seamlessly and joyfully,” McDaniel said of her reassigned staff.

“They are wonderful frontline workers. They know that there’s a need and that our work has to be different now, and they do this with such exuberance.”

Moreover, 20 staff at A Second Chance offered to become emergency caregivers if necessary for children of first responders who became ill or needed to self-isolate.

## DHS CASEWORKERS

As any caseworker will say, they often do a lot of things that don’t show up in a job description. But with their job also comes a sense of duty—to make sure that the people they are entrusted to help are getting their needs met. This epidemic has required many of our DHS caseworkers to do even more, or at least think more creatively and compassionately about how they can meet needs during these uncertain times.

### Dan Scafe

**In one of the earliest examples, Dan Scafe, a caseworker in DHS’s Mon Valley child welfare office, was assisting a mother of two who tragically lost her legs in an accident a year ago. While still adjusting to a life with a disability and now worrying about COVID-19, things got additionally complicated when one of her children unplugged their refrigerator before bed, leading to the loss of all their perishable food. Without a car, out of money and unable to access other transportation, she was panicking. While checking in on the family, Dan learned of the food situation. As this was early on in the epidemic, many of the now-established food delivery mechanisms were not yet in place. Dan sat in a car queue at the Greater Pittsburgh Community Foodbank in order to make sure the family had enough to eat, and then arranged for subsequent weekly deliveries.**

### Rhianna Diana

**Rhianna Diana, a caseworker in DHS’s South Regional child welfare office, came into work on her day off after a holiday weekend in order to file a motion to allow an infant to have an overnight visit with her mother. The foster parents were going on vacation and she knew if she didn’t try to get the mother her visit before they left, it would be several weeks before she could see her baby again.**

### Stephanie Schmidt

**Stephanie Schmidt, a caseworker from DHS’s North Regional child welfare office, is known for her ability to connect with teens. When her colleagues needed help removing some very challenging youth from their homes and transporting them to out-of-home placements, she volunteered to help and was instrumental in making the transition a smooth one.**

### CYF Transportation Unit

**Denise Brown and the child welfare transportation unit typically transport youth to home visits, doctor appointments and other activities. Since March, their duties have shifted in response to the pandemic. They have now been transporting people unable to self-quarantine to the temporary housing space set up for that purpose. They have also been delivering food, picking up supplies and filling in however they can to be useful during this unprecedented time.**