

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

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This statement is in response to the Associated Press (AP) article, “An algorithm that screens for child neglect raises concerns”, published on April 29, 2022.

Since implementing the Allegheny Family Screening Tool (AFST) in 2016, the County has maintained a commitment to opening our doors and our data to outside groups. This has included allowing reporters access to all levels of agency staff to promote transparency and accountability. Likewise, we have approved all qualified requests to access County data, reflecting our belief that it is good governance to make information available for research and analysis.

We knew that by releasing data, the work that would emerge would be inconsistent and even critical at times. Not surprisingly, many requests have been from students and academics seeking novel, non-public source of data from which to publish papers and launch their careers. Likewise, we knew that this work would attract advocacy journalism. When we agreed to weeks of calls and email exchanges with a team of reporters working on an AP series called “Tracked”, we understood that it would be critical. We support our community’s right to hear opposing views of our work and engaged with the AP to provide them data and detailed knowledge of our child welfare operations.

We stand by our efforts to be transparent and accountable. We will continue to seek disconfirming views and criticism as opportunities to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and their families. Because we are accountable to the residents of Allegheny County, it is also our responsibility to respond when we believe those criticisms are incorrect, particularly on matters of fact. Below, we clarify several points we hope will be helpful.

1. The AFST was not designed, nor has there ever been a discussion of using it, to autonomously make hotline screening decisions.

The AFST allows Allegheny to deliver structured data and a standardized assessment of risk to our hotline screeners so that our workforce can spend more time diving into the contextual details (e.g., information communicated by the reporting party, narrative history available in text fields). The policy is for screeners to use the AFST score as one piece of information, and to weigh all the other information that is not included in the AFST such as the specific allegation, reporter, call narrative, and the screener’s assessment of risk and safety to determine the appropriate screening response. A hypothetical screening environment in which the AFST would operate on its own, including how that would have affected racial disparities, is not a policy-relevant counterfactual.

2. Current evidence suggests that the implementation of the AFST, coupled with associated policies, has reduced racial disparities in screening decisions as well as case openings and removals to foster care.

Currently, there is no evidence based on our own analysis nor those of other research groups we are aware of that the AFST has exacerbated racial disparities. The research thus far, including Stanford interim evaluation and unpublished ongoing research studying the causal effects of the tool on racial disparities in child welfare, indicates the AFST reduced disparities.

3. The AFST is not used in family court or removal decisions.

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The AFST is only used at hotline call screening. If a report is screened-in for investigation, even the investigating worker does not see or know the AFST score.

4. The AFST does not determine any calls to require mandatory screen in.

It is important to note that the only referrals in Allegheny County that are mandatorily required to be screened in for investigation are those that relate to Child Protective Services (CPS) allegations of abuse or severe neglect, and this is a requirement of the State. The AFST's input does not and has never led to any truly mandatory actions. Supervisors have had absolute override discretion over all protocols that have ever been utilized by the AFST.

5. The AFST is designed to complement and augment the decisions that workers and supervisors make.

The objective of the AFST is to complement the assessment that call screening staff are required to make. The AFST was designed not to replace the worker, but rather to provide additional data that supplements other data they receive to help them screen referrals. In the absence of the AFST, call screening staff would lack information on "long arc risk"—that is, those factors that suggests low or high likelihood of future chronic involvement in child welfare.

6. The County explored the technical glitch and determined it to have a minimal impact on screen-in decisions. Moreover, it has been open about the error and researchers have used it to better understand aspects of practice.

A deployment glitch meant that a subset of scores were slightly deflated for the first 2 years that the AFST was implemented. For 95% of calls where there was a misestimation, the score presented to the hotline screener was lower than estimated by the model. The County has been open about this dynamic and researchers have already published their findings (see De-Arteaga, M., Fogliato, R., and Chouldechova, A., "A Case for Humans-in-the-Loop: Decisions in the Presence of Erroneous Algorithmic Scores," 2020).

7. There is no basis for claiming that the County's screen-in rate is "unreasonably high".

The County's screen-in rate of approximately 50% (inclusive of both child protective services and general protective service referrals) is in-line with similar statistics among other counties or states. We are unaware of any empirical basis for the assertion that the share of referrals that are screened-in for investigation in Allegheny County is inappropriately high or low.

8. The County does not consider the money spent on AFST a poor use of funds. Investing in new technology and tools like the AFST drives progress for our operations.

Investing in new technology and ideas allows us to explore whether these investments are improving our child welfare operations relative to the status quo. The article estimates that we have spent over \$1 million creating and maintaining the AFST. This investment reflects 0.017% of our overall expenditures from 2016-2021. This is a small cost for improving the data available to call screeners who otherwise have imperfect and limited information.

We remain committed to using the best tools available to protect children and challenging ourselves to improve our operations through feedback and analysis. There will always remain critical voices, which we will continue to welcome in new collaborations as we seek opportunities to improve outcomes for our clients.