

**Allegheny County Department of Human Services
Area Agency on Aging (DHS/AAA)**

Annual Public Hearing
June 16, 2022
10:00 a.m. – 12:00 p.m. (Virtual Meeting)

Council Members Present: Jessica Adams, Joseph Angelelli, Regina Andrews, Kathi Boyle, Ethel Cobb, Holly Dick), Lycia Neumann, Michelle Pepitone, Laura Poskin, Daphne Retter (Rep. Dan Frankel),

Council Members Absent: Amrita Chhetri, Eunice Nelson, Lisa Story, Carrie Stott

DHS/AAA Staff Present: Matt Beall, Administrative Officer; Carolyn Galvin, Division Chief; Dr. Shannah Gilliam, Administrator; Caroline Gilmore, Administrative Officer; Kim Hall, Assistant Administrator; Brendan Hanley, Division Chief; Rainna Bernesser, Division Chief

LAURA POSKIN: Good morning. My name is Laura Poskin. I am a 39-year-old white woman with dark brown hair and I'm wearing a blue dress today. I'm chair of the Allegheny County DHS Area Agency on Aging Advisory Council. In my day job I serve as executive director of Age-Friendly Greater Pittsburgh, which is working to make our region more inclusive and respectful of all ages. We are part of the World Health Organization Network of Age Friendly Communities.

On behalf of the Advisory Council, I would like to welcome and thank you for taking the time today to attend this public hearing. We made the decision to meet virtually given that we are still very much in the midst of a global pandemic. According to the CDC, Allegheny County is currently at a medium community level as of yesterday. It was high as of yesterday and last week the health department reported 2,616 new infections as of June 5, an estimated 73 percent of our neighbors ages five and older. Of those age 12 and older who are eligible for a booster, 56 percent have received one. That's important for all of us on this call today to consider. Only about 16 percent of older adults in Pennsylvania have

received their second booster. We must continue to be cautious and prevent community spread.

Today's hearing, as Matt so graciously said, is presented with closed captioning as well as live American Sign Language interpreting to increase accessibility. Thank you, Heather. Thank you, Nick. (acknowledging interpreters) Additionally, I will ask that all speakers introduce themselves with a brief description of their physical appearance as I did to increase accessibility for any blind or low-vision individuals who are on the call today.

The Advisory Council to AAA is an appointed group of citizen volunteers who advocate for older adults in Allegheny County and assist AAA's administration with policy formulation and review, including the development and execution of the agency's plans. At today's hearing, we will provide an update on the Area Agency on Aging in addition to reviewing AAA's 22/23 budget prospectus.

I would like to extend a special welcome to two of our newest members of the Advisory Council. Joe Angelelli, who is with us today, is a senior advisor of age friendly health and wellbeing for UPMC's Center for Social Impact, and he's a resident of Ben Avon. Amrita Chettri, a community health worker at Squirrel Hill Health Center and a nursing student at CCAC. Amrita is a resident of Baldwin.

Holly Dick, who is also with us today, chairs our nominations committee. If you or someone you know is interested in serving on the Advisory Council, please contact Holly through Matt Beall, our administrative officer to senior administration. Matt's contact info is on the last page of your email handout.

The Advisory Council hosts a public hearing each year to receive your comments on the annual budget prospectus in accordance with the current four-year plan. The public hearing is also an opportunity for us to listen to any comments you may have on gaining services in general throughout Allegheny County. Copies of the budget prospectus are available online through AlleghenyCounty.US.

All registered attendees for today's hearing have received an email containing a copy of the budget prospectus that includes a summary of AAA program activity during the past fiscal year as well as contact information for submitting written testimony after the meeting. We are going to accept written remarks from

anyone who wishes to give testimony until Thursday, June 23. Originally, we had said Monday, June 20. That's listed in all the materials, but we're excited to extend that date.

Next, I'll provide remarks on several parts of the AAA. Our new director, Dr. Shannah Tharp -Gilliam, joined the Area Agency on Aging on February 28. Dr. G comes to AAA from a background as a nonprofit leader, researcher and innovator, with deep experience at the community level. Formerly the Director of Research and Evaluation for the Homewood Children's Village, Dr. G spearheaded efforts that elevated equity issues. She activated resources such as bringing COVID-19 vaccine to elders and participation with multiple regional organizations, including Age Friendly Greater Pittsburgh United Way of Southwestern Pennsylvania and University of Pittsburgh. Dr. G, we're so pleased to have you as an advocate for our region and are very grateful.

In March of this year, began partnering with community pharmacies to provide COVID vaccinations to homebound older adults in need. Through this partnership, the AAA is providing the pharmacies with financial support to deliver vaccinations. To identify individuals, the AAA has utilized its Seniorline and care management providers to help identify vaccine recipients. This initiative will continue throughout the remainder of June.

Moving on to Assessment, the Aging Well Assessment network, of which Allegheny County AAA is a member, continued to perform the essential duty of assessing the level of care needs for older adults. This year the team completed 8,500 assessments and was able to successfully uphold its 99 percent compliance rate within assessment completion time frames.

For In-Home services, the pandemic initiated an ongoing staffing crisis in many sectors of the economy. In-home services remain severely impacted by this crisis with many of our 17 personal care and home support providers maintaining only 50 to 60 percent of their normal staffing levels throughout the bulk of this year, I'm going to say that again: *maintaining only 50 to 60 percent of their normal staffing levels*. Due to the workforce shortage, service utilization is down approximately 38 percent and approximately 550 individuals have been placed on waiting lists for services. AAA has implemented multiple initiatives to offset this

crisis, including a 4.5 percent rate increase for services this fiscal year with a second 5.5 percent rate increase to follow next month in the new fiscal year. As the situation progresses, the AAA continues to strategize on ways to support the provider network and restore staffing levels to pre-pandemic norms (there was already a staffing crisis before the pandemic).

For nutrition services, in response to increasing market costs, AAA implemented a 4.5 percent rate increase for food providers and another increase that realigned home-delivered meals management funds. DHS is exploring options for a redesign of nutrition services, including congregate and home-delivered meals across several program offices. AAA is involved in this process. In recent months, a consultant enlisted for this project toured nutrition food providers, attended a senior center and engaged both provider staff and individuals in community discussions. In the coming weeks, the consultant will be making recommendations on next steps. Senior centers resumed hot meals on May 2. Home delivered meals remain frozen until providers regain sufficient operational capacity to return to hot meals as well.

Over the last year, AAA has increased staffing in our Older Adult Protective Services program by 26 investigators and five supervisors to better manage increasing volume. The program is projected to receive over 6,000 reports of need in the year to come. Thanks to funding by DHS, AAA aims to have 52 investigators, about double the number that we have now. Older Adult Protective Services investigates reports of elder abuse including physical, emotional, sexual, financial, self-neglect and abandonment, the most common being self-neglect. I think it's always important to kind of pause and remember what Older Adult Protective Services does.

During the pandemic, the Ombudsman program became the first in the state to conduct program training virtually as well as the first to train a new volunteer Ombudsman. Virtual field staff returned to in-facility visits in June of 2021. However, they have modulated between in-person and telephone visits since, and this will continue in accordance with state safety standards related to the area's positivity rate.

The annual Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program is once again available to eligible residents. Eligible individuals may receive one set of checks worth \$24 to

be spent at participating farmers markets. Distribution of vouchers will be returning to the normal process this year of in-person distribution managed by local area senior centers. The anticipated kickoff date is Thursday, June 23. That's also the date your written testimony can be submitted. Checks will be distributed until September 30 and must be used by the end of November.

The number of active consumers in the Options Care Management Program is 4,871. Due to this historic staffing crisis in home services, approximately 550 individuals are on a wait list for services. Care managers returned to face-to-face visits in September of 2021. Numerous consumers were able to finally visit with their case manager in person for the first time in over a year.

The Seniorline had over 43,000 calls this year with 4,100 contacts per month. The five most frequent call topics are in-home services, nutrition, public benefits, housing and utilities and protective services.

Senior Centers began the reopening process in July of 2021 with limited programming offered alongside grab-and-go meal service. By this July, the entire Senior Center network will be fully operational again. Older adults are gradually returning to the centers. Attendance is steadily increasing but has not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels. One positive, lasting effect of the pandemic is that more virtual programming now remains available to the senior center network consumers in addition to in-person activities and events moving forward.

It is now my pleasure to introduce Dr. Shannah Tharp-Gilliam, our AAA Administrator. Prior to her hire here, Dr. Gilliam was a nonprofit leader for over a decade in Homewood where she experienced the challenges and the satisfaction nonprofits face in their work to develop strategic, innovative, and effective solutions. In addition to her senior leadership roles throughout her 20-year career, she's developed and led community-driven advocacy initiatives focused on equipping residents to engage with policymakers for racial, economic, and social justice.

Dr. Gilliam: Thanks, Laura. So good morning! My name is Dr. Shannah Tharp-Gilliam. I am a middle aged African American woman with dark hair, dark eyes and glasses. As you may know, I am in my sixteenth week as the

administrator of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging.

Today's seniors have been through a lot. They've survived polio and COVID-19. They've witnessed the dawn of commercial television, the internet and digital money. They've danced the swing with the Andrews Sisters and got funky with Sister Sledge.

Alternatively, the next generation of seniors, myself included, will have spent most of our lives in a world where technology is everywhere, even inside our bodies. And fortunes can be won or lost within minutes in crypto trading or online scans. But regardless of the decade, plenty of seniors will have to struggle to make ends meet during their prime working years and too many will find themselves in need of public help.

Our role as the public agency focused on older adults is to ensure that residents over 60 are safe, well and have provision for basic needs. My vision is that seniors thrive in Allegheny County. To that end, this year the Area Agency on Aging will focus on shoring up core services and expanding our offering with innovative and evidence-based programming that moves us forward to meet the demands of the next 10 to 20 years. Specifically, we will focus on providing high-quality services and expanding partnerships that promote the vision of wellness for older adults.

For example, our community-based Care Transitions program was just one of ten programs across the country recognized for high performance. Last year AAA's Care Transitions expanded its contract with Highmark Wholecare, adding a new assessment tool to improve outcomes through better understanding of the contributors to members' health. Sometimes these are referred to as "social determinants" of health. Planning is underway for Care Transitions to expand to new hospitals in the coming year.

The AAA is actively meeting with nonprofits, university partners and other agencies to identify even more partnership opportunities. We will also take advantage of the Department of Human Services data capacity to improve protection and service. Last year, AAA collaborated with the University of Auckland in New Zealand to build a statistical tool that we hope can help to

predict when seniors are at increased risk for abuse. As of today, this tool is being tested in our Protective Services program.

Our final focus is on increasing outreach to bring even more consumers and volunteers into the AAA service family. Our goal is to reach those who have not yet had the opportunity but have either the need for our services or heart for healing and help.

And this is just the beginning. The leadership staff at AAA have great plans for this year and we hope that you will join us. Thank you.

Laura Poskin: Thank you Dr. G. We've now arrived at the public testimony segment of the hearing, and we'll hear testimony from those who preregistered to speak today. Each of the speakers will be limited to three minutes. Any unregistered individuals may also submit written remarks by emailing, mailing, or faxing them to Matt Beall, administrative officer to senior administration (as noted on the last page of your email handout). And again, that's until Thursday, June 23 (next week). At this time, I would like to ask those who registered to comment to come forward virtually, as you're called, and Matt is going to help us call those names.

Matt Beall: I'm just going to call our two folks in the order that they registered. So first up, we have Jackie Day.

Jackie Day: Hello, my name is Jackie Day and I'm a care manager for LifeSpan. I am a middle-aged white woman, long white hair, brown eyes and glasses. I'd like to thank you for allowing me to speak today. There are two topics I'd like to touch on: one is Residential Resources. As you may know, this is the only contracting company from which we as care managers must draw upon for home modification estimates. When I first started three years ago there were two. During my three years I've acquired enough estimates from Residential Resources to question certain jobs. I raised this topic because without an environment of healthy competition, you do not have a free market; what you have is a monopoly. For instance, I recently received an estimate from StairBusters for a stair glide. That estimate came in at \$5200. I opted to get another estimate from Your Independent Mobility, which came in more than \$2000 less. The first

estimate may have been approved were there no other options to choose from, but we are thus saving the county over \$2,000 in just one purchase. Additionally, care managers are not required to submit more than one estimate while caregivers in the Caregiver Support Program, for instance, are required to submit two estimates for home modifications or assistive devices, so I question why we only have one contracting company.

The second point is the transition from Options to CHC (Community Health Choices). This is a much more complex issue to summarize in less than two minutes but it's very important and has everything to do with how human beings are treated versus saving money. I will cite an anecdotal case for a small taste of what occurs in this transition process. A consumer of mine was confined to a wheelchair but sharp as a tack and couldn't imagine leaving her home and her dog behind to go to a nursing facility. While in Options at the county level she was receiving incontinence supplies, home delivered meals and eight hours of personal care through her Class worker. Plus, we had her bathroom modified to accommodate the electric wheelchair. I know how much she needed the additional help the county could provide, so I went along with the CHC process. When I say went along, I mean, in my mind, because I've had other consumers lost in the abyss of new services during the transition process and was leery and worried for her. In this case, she and I agreed to communicate every step of the way. As soon as Options ended on April 22 and CHC began April 23, all her services and supplies ceased. The Service Coordination Department at UPMC/CHC division didn't even schedule her initial assessment until May 10. After learning this, I was able to get her home-delivered meals restarted, funded by the county. About two weeks later, UPMC did pick up her home-delivered meals, but no services or supplies. After multiple calls to her service coordinator, I was finally able to speak with her supervisor who was reportedly unaware. She educated me. This is all hearsay, but she told me that prior to Waiver's involvement, the county used to continue paying for a consumer, consumer services and supplies until the ball was passed to the state funding pool. In short, consumers are being neglected and no one is being held accountable. I call for immediate action to be taken to prevent this from continuing to happen to our most vulnerable consumers. I thank you for the time.

Matt Beall: We have one more registered speaker for today. Jennifer Blatz.

Jennifer Blatz: Good morning and thank you so much for this opportunity to speak on behalf of the Greater Pittsburgh Digital Inclusion Alliance (GPDIA). My name is Jennifer Blatz and I am a 50 year old white woman with brown hair and I'm wearing a black and white dress, which I now realize looks like a test pattern on a virtual call. Probably won't wear this one again. I am here in my role as administrative coordinator for the GPDIA, but my day jobs include partnerships and business development for Computer Reach based in Wilksburg, which provides refurbished computers and digital literacy training to those in need. And I'm also manager of senior programming and advocacy here at the Persad Center in Lawrenceville where I'm sitting right now. And I also serve on the Board of Directors for SWPPA. It's very nice to see some of my fellow board members here today.

For the past year, together with more than 20 nonprofit organizations and agencies, I've had the privilege of beginning to knit together a growing coalition of entities who are spearheading digital equity access and inclusion projects. And as you know, these efforts are vital to the growth and prosperity of our region. With the news that historic generation-altering amounts of resources were being made available to states to expand high speed Internet access and digital literacy support in the wake of the global pandemic, the GPDIA began to take shape. A coalition of the willing is what we like to call it, and we've been guided by a lot of good advice and support from the national Digital Inclusion Alliance. Today we have an all-volunteer steering committee of 20 participating organizations. And I see a few people joining us today are also on our steering committee. So hello, friends. I'll include the list of organizations in my written remarks for the record and suffice it to say it's a great and growing list. We meet every month virtually to network to share strategy ideas and to develop partnerships that are already beginning to bear some fruit. I would also mention that several staff from the Allegheny County Department of Human Services were actively involved in the early stages of our alliance formation and we're currently seeking a representative from DHS to serve on the alliance. So, if anybody wanted to make a recommendation of one of your colleagues, I would be all ears for that. And the GPDIA is first and foremost, hoping to work closely with many other community-based organizations in our region. So, we're all rowing in one general direction in the pursuit of broader digital access and inclusion for everyone. Next, we want to amplify the voices of our friends and neighbors in this discussion as their stories

are crucial to informing the work of decision makers who will eventually steer very significant federal resources in our direction. And finally, we believe that everyone, especially older adults, should have access to low-cost, high-speed Internet in their home and affordable device and digital literacy training and other supports. As one of our great partners, the Reverend Paul White, likes to say, it doesn't do anyone any good if you give them a new Buick and it's sitting in the driveway, but you don't give them the keys or put any gas in the tank and teach them how to drive it. So, we feel that all those elements are critically important to real digital inclusion in the coming months. We hope to launch an informational email listserv, social media channels, and a more robust website, including lists of free or very low-cost opportunities to learn more about connectivity, devices, digital literacy and tech support. On June 3, we held our very first public event at the JCC with a moderated panel of older adults, our lived experience experts, and they shared their experience with technology, the good, the bad and the ugly. We hope to host another public event in the early fall where voices of community members are again front and center and we're currently forming work groups and we would love to have you join us. Our website is GPDIA.org and if you're interested in joining our efforts in any way, I would be happy to connect with you. Thank you again so much to Laura and Dr. G for having me today and offering us this time and I'm happy to answer any questions.

Laura Poskin: Thank you so much, Jen, and thank you so much. Jackie. Really appreciate you coming and giving your public testimony today again. I really want to welcome people to send us written testimony until next Thursday. This will be part of the public record, so please do that. Could be a paragraph, could be more than that. But please do send it to us by next Thursday.

I want to thank you for attending today's public hearing. The remarks of those who have spoken will be summarized and added to the proceedings of this hearing. As a final reminder, the 22/23 Budget prospectus may be viewed on the Allegheny County Department of Human Services website. A paper copy of the budget prospectus is also available by calling or e-mailing Matt Beall from AAA. His contact information is also on the last page of the handout.

This hearing is now adjourned. Thank you again for your attendance and your participation and we hope to see you many times before our next annual hearing. Thanks.

Gilliam, Shannah: Thank you everyone for coming. And thank you and thank you for your testimonies as well.