

While there are those who, because of extraordinary personal challenges will need some assistance their whole lives, the majority of people desire and are able to attain self-sufficiency even if they need to take advantage of social programs for a short time. Recognizing this, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) views most of the programs and initiatives we oversee as vehicles to aid people to achieve their own self-sufficiency.

One such example, the aptly-named Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Self-Sufficiency Initiative overseen by the Office of Community Services, helps meet the needs of individuals and promotes community success through assisting people in finding the education, transportation or psychological support that they need to find a job and better their financial situation. The Initiative is funded through the Community Services Block Grant, which provides federal support for programs to alleviate the causes of poverty. OCS receives about \$1.1 million in block grants yearly, part of which goes toward self-sufficiency programming. The Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development administers the grants.

Helping people find their way is one of our Department's most important goals. By focusing on people's capabilities, not their deficits, and supporting them to define and plan for their needs, we can create solid routes to independence. **For more information on the CSBG Self-Sufficiency Initiative, call the OCS at 412-350-6611.**


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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Community Services Block Grant Self-Sufficiency Initiative



Ida

Ida was ill. She suffered from sarcoidosis, and had to have her spleen removed because of her condition. Then she developed cancer. She also got laid off from her job and her income dwindled to \$360 per month. Her rent was \$375 a month. She turned to public assistance to get by.

After treatment, Ida became well enough to return to work and wanted to go back to her old job.

She knew it posed new challenges and so she would need to improve her office skills to complete the computer-generated paperwork increasingly required of her.

At a job fair in Braddock, Ida learned about Community College of Allegheny County's Modern Office Systems Training (MOST) program,

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which is part of the county Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Community Service (OCS) Community Services Block Grant (CSBG) Self-Sufficiency Initiative. Ida signed up. MOST personnel were extremely helpful, she said. “They gave me the skills I needed, and they helped me with interviewing skills. I hadn’t looked for a job since the ’80s,” said Ida, laughing at how much job searches have changed in 25 years. “They helped me when I didn’t have anything.”

Ida is an example of how the CSBG Self-Sufficiency Initiative helps people get back on their feet. It is open to people with an income of 125% of federal poverty guidelines or less, based on household size.

CSBG Self-Sufficiency providers include the Allegheny Valley Association of Churches; Community College of Allegheny County’s Modern Office Systems Training (MOST) program; the Center Avenue (Pitcairn) United Methodist Church Circles program; Human Services Center Corporation; Rainbow Kitchen Community Services; and North Hills Community Outreach.

Participants must have employment or education as goals. A plan of service, driven by the participant, is drawn up between him or her and the provider agency, serving as a fluid document of steps toward those goals. Assessments are conducted along the way. The service plan is a goal-driven document, not a time-driven one, since one participant might be self-sufficient in six months, while another might require a year or more.

The program uses the Results Oriented Management and Accountability (ROMA) system, a best-practices approach guided by six principles: helping low-income people become more self-sufficient; improving the conditions in which low-income people live; supporting low-income people in having a stake in their community; developing partnerships among supporters and providers of services; increasing agency capacity to achieve results; and helping low-income people, especially vulnerable populations, achieve their potential by strengthening family and other support systems.

Ida now does not receive any public assistance and has a full-time job that offers benefits. The people who helped Ida re-train were so impressed by her determination to succeed that they nominated her for a Self-Sufficiency Award, given yearly by the state Community Action Association of Pennsylvania.

“I don’t like to give up. It’s my personal determination. I’ve always been like that. No, I do not want to be on assistance,” Ida said. ■■■

Erin

Divorced from an abusive husband, Erin faced circumstances that would cause most people to despair. Erin moved to Allegheny County from Venango County and arrived with very little. “My car got me here but it wasn’t long before it broke down,” she said. She also got evicted from housing and had no job or food.

Doing her own research, Erin found the Allegheny Valley Association

of Churches (AVAC) and signed up for its Supportive Services program, part of the CSBG Self-Sufficiency Initiative. The program required her to pursue employment, including developing skills, and address barriers to self-sufficiency. Erin was eager. “I was in a really bad situation,” she said. “I was at AVAC nearly every day, just searching. I wouldn’t give up. I’m a go-getter. I’m that type of person. I have to get my situation right.”

At AVAC, a Supportive Services Case Manager helped Erin sign up for the council’s food bank and the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) to help her immediately. Then she was connected to Career Link to update her resume and search for a job.

Erin ended up working two jobs, walking from one to the other. Eventually, she was able to purchase a car at a low price from the North Hills Community Outreach (NHCO) Community Auto program.

Erin finally landed a better-paying job in food service at an industrial employer and worked her way up to manager. “I have benefits now,” she said. “I work at least 40 hours a week. I’m getting my food safety certification. I have a house. It’s a cozy one-bedroom that works for me. I have my own phone. I’m doing really good now.”

Erin praised the AVAC Supportive Services program for boosting her. “My experience at AVAC was awesome – so many things they’ve done for me. They supported me emotionally. Any time I felt like I was having a bad day, they were there to say, ‘You’ve come a long way. You can do this. What do you need today?’”