

During the 2018 point-in-time homeless count, nearly 800 individuals in Allegheny County were identified as homeless. The challenges faced by this population are many, but what happens when there are young children involved and efforts to find stable housing must be balanced with ensuring that children are connected to schools and other services?

To meet the needs of this vulnerable population, DHS began offering homeless services and supports coordination (HSSC) in 2013. Coordinators meet with families in local shelters to offer assistance in a variety of areas, including housing, basic needs, employment, child development screening and education. The coordinators' support continues throughout the process – from shelter to permanent housing – to ensure the transition is as smooth as possible for the entire family.

In the last year, four homeless services and supports coordinators served 240 families. Here are the experiences of two parents who, with the support of HSSC, found stability, opportunity, and self-sufficiency.



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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Homeless Services and Supports Coordination



Erika

A moment can change everything. For Erika, one of those life-changing moments came as a call from her sister.

At the time, Erika was living in Texas with her sons. She had recently gone through a breakup, and everything in her town reminded her of the partner she had lost.

“My sister, JoAnn, knew I was hurting, and told me to move up to Pennsylvania to try something new. She said I could stay with her until I got a job,” Erika said. “We had

the conversation on Sunday, and on Tuesday my boys and I were on the way.”

After three days of driving, they finally arrived, ready for the fresh start they were promised. However, things weren't quite what they expected.

“JoAnn told me that we could use the basement as a big apartment, but when I walked in, I saw there was no heat or air. I was like ‘What did I get me and my kids into?’”

Erika CONTINUED ON BACK

Erika CONTINUED:

Despite the challenging living situation, Erika made the best of things. She enrolled her children in school and began a job at a daycare. Things seemed to be looking up – until Easter Sunday when Erika was confronted with devastating news: They were no longer welcome JoAnn's home and needed to move out within the next week.

Through contacts at her job, Erika was referred to the Allegheny Link who found space for her family in a shelter. There she met Remy, a DHS homeless services and supports coordinator.

Remy taught Erika about different housing programs around the County, their requirements, and how to get on the wait lists. Most importantly, Remy provided Erika with much needed emotional support.

"I was struggling with the rules at the shelter and didn't think I could make it for much longer, but Remy always kept me seeing the future so I wouldn't act impulsively. She kept me on track."

Just a few months later, Erika's hard work – with Remy's support – paid off: Erika and her boys moved into a three-bedroom, three-bathroom housing rental.

Now, Erika's life is completely different than it was this time last year. She is working full-time, and slowly making increasing payments on her rent until her Housing Choice voucher kicks in.

"It's been hard. It's only been a year and a half since the night my ex-boyfriend didn't come home, but it seems like it has been five years. I am so proud of how independent I am becoming, and I never would have gotten this far without people like Remy to show me the way."

Alicia

Alicia was 13 the first time she drank and did pills.

"My home life wasn't good. My mom and I always had problems. The only time we got along was when we were partying, so I grew up pretty fast."

The trouble at home came to a head when Alicia was 15.

"We were fighting and I left to go to the mall with a friend. When I came back, all my stuff was on the lawn. I was 15 years old and had to find somewhere to live."

Over the next several years, Alicia bounced around from house to house, using various substances and relying on men to support her life – and her habit. She made several attempts to get clean, but kept falling into her old ways.

"No matter what was happening in my life, I always wanted the drugs more."

But, there was one incident that made Alicia want to change: After a horrific assault, she found herself pregnant.

"I didn't know if the baby was my husband's or from the assault, but I knew I was going to be a mother to him. I remembered I had warrants and something clicked. I somehow got money to get to Pennsylvania, and I turned myself in. I knew it was the only way I was going to get clean."

After spending a few months in jail and six months in rehab, Alicia went to a shelter where she met Kristen, her homeless services and supports coordinator.

"When she introduced herself as a 'caseworker,' I wanted to shut the door in her face. I was afraid she was going to take this beautiful baby away from me. Eventually, I saw that she wasn't there for anything but to help."

Alicia and Kristen worked shoulder to shoulder, attending housing meetings, going to court, and finding ways that Alicia could begin a new life.

"She has been there for me like a family member. I would get a letter in the mail and freak out and she would say 'Calm down, Alicia. We'll take care of this.' And it always worked out. She was my rock."

Now, Alicia's life has been completely transformed. She recently moved into an apartment with her son and began an online beauty company. She plans to study to become a drug and alcohol counselor, and, one day, open a recovery house.

"It's one of the worst feelings in the world to have no one to call, no one who cares. When I was struggling, Kristen became my surrogate family. She showed me how great life could be. I cherish this new life that I built for myself, and I can't thank her enough for her support."