

## Allegheny Link expands to reflect increased role in helping county residents

The Allegheny Link's offices in the Human Service Building offer a visual clue to the change the program has undergone in the past few years.

Once housed mostly in two interior offices in the Human Services Building (HSB), Downtown, the Allegheny Link in December 2015 expanded to a space that facilitates teamwork and collaboration. There, Allegheny Link service coordinators have specially designed software that allows them to efficiently answer a total of about 130 calls a day. The calls from county residents, human service providers and others touch on everything from services for people who are homeless to resources for new parents.

The room bustles, not only because of call volume but because, by design, coordinators also are making links among themselves in their daily quest to find solutions to consumers' questions.

"They bounce ideas and resources off each other. It's so much better to take a minute and talk to each other face-to-face, rather than to email," said Andrea Bustos, Allegheny Link Program Manager, in describing a benefit of the new space.

The Allegheny Link also has a fresh logo to highlight the change in its name. Previously known as the Allegheny Link to Aging and Disability Resources, the Allegheny Link is part of the Department of Human Services (DHS) Office of Community Relations (OCR). The link retains its function as an Aging and Disability Resource Center.



**Above**, the Allegheny Link moved in December to new space in the Human Services Building (HSB), Downtown. The new setup allows intake specialists to consult on calls more easily. **Left**, the Allegheny Link's new logo.

Pushing the modifications at the [Allegheny Link](#) have been coordination of intake and referral to two crucial support programs offered by several providers in the county.

In March 2015, the Allegheny Link became the county's information and intake source for services for residents who lack stable housing. And since January 2016, the Allegheny

Link additionally became the "front door" for those who request the maternal, infant and early childhood supports known as home visiting programs. (See the accompany article "Allegheny Link now making Home Visiting referrals.")

The Allegheny Link's evolving role has meant that its staff has grown to a minimum of 10 service coordinators assigned to answering phones, emails and walk-in inquiries; a service coordinator working in the field to assist people who are homeless who do not have regular access to a phone or email; and two supervisors, in addition to Andrea and Joseph Elliott, Manager, Specialized Integrated Services and Supports.

While the Allegheny Link has evolved since being established by the state in 2005 as a pilot program for aging and disability resources, with two staff members, its basic mission to ease access to service and supports that promote independent living remains intact.

In 2014, the Allegheny Link launched software that vastly improved the ability of staff to conduct comfortable, seamless intake conversations that explore, with the consumers' consent, a myriad of life situations for which solutions may be found and suggested.

"We prescreen for any and all programs that we are aware of. We also advocate for consumers if they have hit barriers to accessing those needed supports," Andrea said, as examples of how Allegheny Link service coordinators can assist. "We try to make sure all of their needs are met, and we take pride in being able to look outside the box and piece together multiple resources to meet a difficult need."

While it has been hard work to take on the additional roles required of the Allegheny Link, Andrea said the rewards of an expanded service have been many.

"We're reaching so many more people and more people are able to access us. They're able to take advantage of our wealth of knowledge and ability to conduct assessments for possible access to programs they might not have been aware of – transportation, food assistance, income supports. Anything we can help people access, we will."

Besides their knowledge, Allegheny Link service coordinators are trained to offer a warm and welcoming approach to those reach out for help.

## HOW TO REACH THE ALLEGHENY LINK

- ✓ By phone, 1-866-730-2368
- ✓ By TTY, 412-350-5205
- ✓ By email at [Allegheny Link](#)
- ✓ In person at the Human Services Building, One Smithfield St., Downtown Pittsburgh.

“The feedback we’ve received from clients has been really positive,” Andrea said. “When they get someone on the phone at the Link, they’re surprised at how pleasant and helpful the service coordinators are.

“Even if callers aren’t ready for some services we discuss, they know where to go when they are ready.”