

Allegheny Link now making Home Visiting referrals

The [Allegheny Link](#) is now the county's source for referrals and information about home visiting programs, after more than a year's work by stakeholders and personnel at the county Department of Human Services (DHS) and Health Department to raise the profile and use of the programs.

Already a resource for housing and homeless services and disability programs, the Allegheny Link, 1-866-730-2368, is also the number to call for referral to the county's home visiting programs. These programs provide knowledgeable specialists to work with parents and prospective parents about a plethora of issues impacting child development prenatally up to age 6, including health and lifestyle issues, developmental screenings and curriculum, and more.

"Our county's home visiting community now has one clear and strong voice," said Kimberly Eckel, senior adviser in the office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation (DARE) who leads DHS's participation in the Home Visiting Initiative.

The initiative, with \$500,000 in grants from the Heinz Endowments and Hillman Family Fund, got underway in mid-2014 as a stakeholders' group began examining ways to help home visiting programs reach parents and children in a more coordinated, efficient way. Stakeholders sought a single point of contact for referrals and the Allegheny Link, as a longstanding resource with trained specialists, was a natural fit.

The coordinated referral system will accomplish several objectives. Among them, program slots that had gone unused because people were not finding them can now be filled; programs will no longer have to use their own limited resources for outreach; families in need may receive intervention more quickly that can improve their welfare; and resources may be found for unaddressed issues discovered by trained Allegheny Link specialists as they gather information to make referrals.

Besides DHS and Health Department representatives, the stakeholders' group includes Healthy Start; Office of Child Development at the University of Pittsburgh; Alliance for Infants and Toddlers; Council of Three Rivers American Indian Center; Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh of UPMC; Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh; YMCA of Greater Pittsburgh; Focus on Renewal; The Kingsley Association; Providence Connections; South Hills Interfaith Ministries; Primary Care Health Services; and Family Resources.

The group's work has also included consulting with the county's medical community. Kim and Health Department staff met with pediatric and gynecology practitioners during the research and development phase of the project to discuss the benefits of home visiting programs and to understand the needs of these key partners. Dr. Karen Hacker, Director of the Health Department, will be leading the implementation of outreach to the medical community this summer.

For the Allegheny Link referral process, DHS internet technology contractor Deloitte designed a web portal that is used by home visiting program personnel to update their program's availability and to pick up referrals. Allegheny Link service coordinators have new software functionality that can allow them to direct families to programs for which they are eligible. Allegheny Link staff can access information on



Allegheny Link

See accompanying article, "Allegheny Link expands to reflect increased role in helping county residents."

program availability and program characteristics so they can help parents make well-informed selections.

Although the Allegheny Link is the primary source for home visiting, programs also can continue to enroll participants. Further, in the near future, automatic referrals will be made through the Office of Children, Youth and Families.

Home visiting programs participating in the initiative are Family Support Centers' Parents as Teachers; Early Head Start; home-based Head Start; Healthy Start; Nurse Family Partnership; Healthy Families America; Title V nurses; First Steps; and Reach Out to Families. Participation in home visiting program is voluntary.

Following a competitive bidding process, marketing firm Blender Inc. has been selected by the Health Department to develop a public relations campaign to promote the Allegheny Link to Home Visiting.

[The view from a home visiting provider](#)

Sarah Warner, Director of Information Systems for the federal Healthy Start program, based in Homewood, participated in the Home Visiting Initiative. Three days into the Allegheny Link beginning its role with the project, eight referrals had been made to Healthy Start, whose paraprofessionals and social workers focus on supporting pregnant women, their partners and children up to age 2.

Healthy Start administrators always had the desire to promote home visiting, especially in the medical community, but doing so would have meant taking time and money away from people in need. So Sarah was eager to join the stakeholders group early on and is embracing the Allegheny Link's use for coordinated referrals. "Through it, we are able to reach a different population than we usually would. It's a huge help to us," she said.

Being involved in the planning process in itself was beneficial and will continue to be so, Sarah added. "We've learned a lot about each other and how home visiting works in the county and having that open line of communication."