



DHS News

Newsletter of the Allegheny County
Department of Human Services



October 2020

COVID-19 and OCS: A Q&A with Emily Bengel, Remy Harris and John Litz

Emily Bengel (EB), family strengthening program coordinator; Remy Harris (RH), program supervisor for Homeless Services and Supports Coordination (HSSC); and John Litz (JL), planner, took a few moments to discuss their teams' responses to the pandemic. These three staff members represent just a few of the programs and services offered by OCS.

What was the most challenging issue your office faced when responding to COVID-19?

EB: Adjusting to online platforms was a challenge. Family Center staff are well-equipped to provide face-to-face home visits and group events, so transitioning to a virtual format for all activities was a challenge to which staff still are adjusting and trying to find ways to keep families engaged.

There was a shortage of diapers and formula early on. Through a partnership with Beverly's Birthdays, Family Centers received a weekly supply of diapers, pull-ups, formula, and baby food to help fill this gap. The centers were added to the County's food access map to help connect the public to this resource.

Many families were (and still are) in need of food. Family Centers have an ongoing partnership with 412 Food Rescue, through which they have been able to provide families with produce, dairy, and meat. We are also partnering with Eat'n Park and the United Way through December. Eat'n Park is making bulk meals, and FCs are picking up the meals and distributing them to families every week.

RH: One of the biggest challenges we faced was making sure families were receiving adequate support while social distancing and sheltering in place.

JL: COVID-19 caused self-sufficiency service providers to shut down offices and the delivery of in-person services abruptly. This limited the accessibility of providers to community members and forced providers to quickly pivot and develop a plan for how to continue to deliver essential services while following public health guidelines to minimize the spread of COVID-19.

What lessons did your office learn from its COVID-19 response?

EB: There was a trend in increased engagement using virtual platforms vs. in-person. Some families seemed to find it easier to attend events and home visits using an online platform in their own home. We're still looking into trends, but one promising finding is that virtual visits may be particularly effective as a method to initially engage families experiencing opioid use/substance use disorder.

We've learned that diapers and formula are a basic need and that there were gaps in families being able to access these resources.

JL: The work OCS does with self-sufficiency providers is based on a true partnership. We shared COVID-19 information including new resources and supports with providers and worked with providers to ensure the communities they serve are able to continue to receive services based more on virtual service delivery model.

How will the lessons you learned help your office to better serve Allegheny County residents in the future?

EB: We think there will be benefits to continuing virtual access to certain programs as a way to reach families who otherwise might not engage.

To address the need for diapers, Family Centers are continuing to provide diapers to the community in partnership with the Diaper Bank. This resource is especially critical since centers have recently committed to serving even more new parents through Hello Baby.

JL: The impact of COVID-19 taught us lessons about how to transition from in-person to virtual services in order to continue to provide a safety net for families who are struggling to meet basic needs.

What aspect of your office's response makes you most proud?

EB: Staff at centers didn't miss a beat and immediately shifted to porch drop-offs, virtual home visits, creating activity packets for children, delivering meals and books, etc. Staff at centers were willing to make themselves available to their families and meet them where they are and have done their best to ease some of the hardships their families may be facing right now.

RH: HSSC has continued to safely provide both remote and in-person supportive services for dozens of families currently served by the five family emergency shelters along with many recently housed families in the community. The HSSC team has been a constant point of contact to help families attain stable housing as well as serving as a linkage to much needed community-based resources.

HSSC also became instrumental in assisting with school enrollment and ensuring adequate access to required technology and devices for remote learning. We are doing the following to support families who have students enrolled in schools operating on a hybrid or fully remote status:

- Facilitating forums for family emergency shelter staff to troubleshoot concerns and provide relevant, timely resources and solutions to encourage appropriate learning environments for students in shelter.
- Navigating new registration and enrollment processes with families; assisting families with securing electronic devices and learning materials from several schools.
- Introducing and assisting with referrals to Community Learning Hubs for families in need of safe childcare during school hours (especially critical for families who may lose employment if they must supervise remote schooling).
- Assisting with providing tablets to all family emergency shelters and the family isolation and quarantine space for families to use for schooling or other virtual appointments.
- Assisting with providing hotspots (with one year of pre-paid service) to families in emergency shelter, ensuring that families can have internet access in shelters and upon moving to stable permanent housing.
- Providing school supplies and clothing items for children in shelter and in the community.

JL: Our tax assistance program had to cancel appointments beginning mid-March and had to figure out how to work with persons virtually. This was very challenging and took time to execute. As a member of the United Way-sponsored free tax coalition, we worked very hard with other members to transition to a virtual and drop-off tax assistance model. As a result, we resumed providing tax assistance services mid-June through the extended tax filing deadline of mid-July. Through gaining this experience, we are better prepared for providing tax assistance services in the 20-21 tax filing season. Our tax assistance program also pivoted quickly and used our knowledge of the federal economic stimulus payments to educate and support the homeless services system so that people experiencing homelessness could apply for and receive these payments.