



DHS News

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Five questions with Heather Lynn Fisher

Heather is manager of the Director's Action Line in the Office of Community Relations (OCR). She can be reached at Heather.Fisher@alleghenycounty.us or 412-350-3975.

1. What was your path to Allegheny County/DHS?

A staff member from what was then the Children and Youth Services (CYS) Training Department came to speak at one of my classes when I was attending CCAC and majoring in psychology. She discussed the role of CYS and the path to becoming a CYS caseworker, including completing an internship. I transferred to Carlow College's (now Carlow University's) social work program with the goal of completing my internship at CYS then obtaining employment as a caseworker, which is exactly what I did.

I worked in various social service positions while completing my college courses, including at a nursing home and as a residential advisor then weekend supervisor for ARC Allegheny (now ACHIEVA). I wanted to work with children in some capacity and, after hearing how CYS provided services to children and their families, felt that could be a good fit. I started my internship at the North Regional Office in 2000, was hired as a caseworker 2 in May 2001 and have been with DHS since. I transferred to the Director's Action Line (DAL) as a program specialist in 2006, became the first DAL supervisor in 2016 and was promoted to DAL manager in 2018.

2. Tell us a bit about the work you do.

The DAL provides a platform for DHS consumers and the community to resolve questions and concerns, as well as obtain information. We help facilitate communication between consumers, DHS staff and provider agency staff. Besides direct contact from DHS consumers, we receive requests and concerns through various other sources such as the County Information Center, local (and not so local) elected officials, PA DHS Western Regional Office, judges, attorneys, school personnel, researchers, and college students attending schools located throughout the country. DAL staff attend meetings such as teaming or treatment team meetings at the request of the consumer or DHS staff to assist with assuring the consumer's questions or concerns are appropriately discussed and addressed. DAL staff have contacts within various offices and agencies who may not contract with DHS but still provide human services. DAL reaches out to these contacts when receiving questions or concerns and attempts to assist with either reaching a resolution or making a connection for further follow up directly between the consumer and the agency involved.

3. How does your work help to support DHS's mission and goals?

The DAL supports the accessibility component of DHS's mission. DAL can be contacted by phone, e-mail, walk-in and SMS text. Monday through Friday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., consumers contacting the DAL get a live voice, alleviating the frustrations of leaving voicemails.

Although our staff is small in number, we are diverse not only culturally but also in our professional experiences, and we provide individualized responses to each consumer, regardless of whether the same question or concern has been brought to us before by other consumers. The DAL provides an integrated approach to our communications by including all the DHS program offices providing services to a consumer on requests/complaints being processed through our office. We maintain contact with DHS program offices to remain updated on their individual policies, procedures, and standards of practice. DAL staff also attend trainings offered within DHS or through the community, provider agencies, or local universities to support our work in providing services to the county's vulnerable populations.

4. What most excites you about your work?

The DAL staff have the ability to provide consumers with supportive listening on the consumer's schedule, something other direct service staff are not always able to do. We can listen to a consumer share their history at length, even if we have heard them share the same information previously, and sometimes that makes all the difference. A call that may start off as escalated could end with a very basic, easy-to-answer question. Also, I enjoy the opportunity to provide information, resources or a response to a concern that helps to shape a positive, supportive relationship between DHS and the consumers we serve.

5. What is most important thing DHS staff should know about your role?

I think the common perception of the DAL is we are contacted solely by consumers or the community, which is not the case. We also support DHS program offices and staff in various ways. CYF staff who have concerns around the quality of services given by DHS's contracted providers can reach out to DAL to process a non-compliance report.

DAL has been identified as the conduit for individuals who wish to opt-out of the Hello, Baby program. We also assist consumers with accessing their records through Access My Info.

The DAL provides valuable feedback to DHS about client experiences and perceptions. Also, I am able to provide quantitative and qualitative data to program offices to help identify any trends as well as barriers to or needs for services.