

# Allegheny County Department of Human Services

## 2026 Strategic Initiatives

Our strategic initiatives for 2026 reflect both what we've learned from the community and where we believe we can make the greatest impact -- making services easier to access, preventing crises before they escalate, and strengthening how we deliver support. Together, these efforts are designed to create a more responsive, connected, and effective human services system that helps all residents thrive.

### Goal 1: Access

Ensure Allegheny County residents can easily *access* human services they need to achieve stability and well-being and provide *rapid response* to resolve crises when they occur.

#### 1a. Help families get every public benefit they are eligible for.

Many individuals and families are facing tight budgets and have to make difficult choices about how to stretch their resources, but programs like Medicaid and SNAP are available to help residents stay healthy and stable. While the state is responsible for administering these public benefits, not DHS, DHS can still play a role by working to make sure eligible people do not lose these benefits because of paperwork or rule changes. We will also partner with workforce programs to help people meet new work requirements and support those most affected by recent policy changes.

#### 1b. Make it easier to access housing.

We will create one clear and simple entry point for all DHS housing programs so individuals can access support through a single "front door" that connects them to the right resources and prioritizes those with the most complex needs. We will also expand housing options for people with needs that fall outside the scope of traditional programs, including those with co-occurring mental health and substance use needs, individuals who require 24/7 support, and people with criminal histories. For people living unsheltered, we will strengthen rapid response efforts to help them come indoors quickly and begin the transition to stable housing.

#### 1c. Connect children and families who are screened out from child welfare to community-based services that could help.

DHS's Office of Children, Youth and Families receives more than 5,000 referrals each year and reviews each one to determine whether an investigation is warranted. While some families are assessed as low risk and screened out of further involvement, they may still benefit from support, such as mental health or substance use services. Moving forward, our child welfare intake team will offer families who are screened out a direct and timely referral to community-based services so they can connect to support right away rather than being sent elsewhere to navigate services on their own.

**1d. Make it easier for people and families with intellectual disabilities and autism to get support.**

Families and caregivers of people with intellectual disabilities and autism have shared that navigating services and systems can be overwhelming. As a result, we are streamlining our processes to make it easier for families to find support more quickly and with less stress. We will also partner with Duquesne University to launch a law clinic focused on serving individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism, strengthening the legal system’s understanding of intellectual disabilities, improving access to appropriate legal support, and working to reduce negative legal outcomes.

## **Goal 2: Prevention and Diversion**

*Prevent* the need for intensive supports and *divert* away from involuntary systems by resolving crises and proactively supporting individuals and families with services that promote well-being and stability.

**2a. Make sure people in crisis are met with the right responder at the right time.**

When someone is in crisis, they should be met quickly by someone trained to respond to what they’re experiencing, no matter where they are in the county. Connecting people to the right responder can help avoid unnecessary arrests, incarceration, and added trauma. In recent years, ACDHS has expanded mobile crisis and similar teams, which now work alongside 911 and other first responders in more than 40 municipalities. ACDHS's crisis response efforts also includes our partnership the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline, a free and confidential support for people in crisis, including mental health struggles, emotional distress, and alcohol or drug use concerns. In 2026, we will take a closer look at how all of our crisis response efforts are working, including who they are reaching, what is most effective, and where we can better align and strengthen services to improve outcomes for people in crisis.

**2b. Improve our continuum of supports to strengthen and preserve families.**

In child welfare, family preservation refers to community-based supports designed to help families address safety concerns, strengthen parenting skills, and stabilize after crises so children can remain safely with their caregivers rather than entering foster care. DHS will improve and expand its family preservation services by introducing a new evidence-based case management model, increasing service capacity, clarifying provider performance expectations, and developing sustainable natural supports by formally partnering with kin. We are also strengthening our policies and procedures to better support families when parents are detained or deported, with a focus on ensuring child safety, preserving family connections, and minimizing unnecessary system involvement.

**2c. Strengthen protective services for vulnerable groups.**

DHS is strengthening protective services functions so we can respond more effectively to safety concerns and better serve vulnerable residents. For older adults, DHS will hire 55 Civil Service staff and launch a new Older Adults Protective Services system in compliance with state requirements. For children, youth, and families, DHS is piloting a field screening unit to conduct more targeted, early assessments of referrals, especially in cases that are not clearly low-risk or high-risk. This

approach can help families avoid more intensive investigations when they are not needed and improve staff capacity by diverting cases away from high-intensity investigations where appropriate.

### **Goal 3: Operational Excellence**

Strengthen service quality, client experience, equity, and fiscal stewardship through data-driven decision making, operational excellence and continuous improvement.

#### **3a. Redesigning substance use treatment around sustained engagement and continuity of care.**

Many people seeking treatment for substance use have long-term, recurring needs, but today's system is built around short-term, disconnected services that can be difficult to navigate. As a result, people can lose connection to care and cycle through crisis services, increasing the risk of overdose and other health issues. We will create a more connected and continuous path to recovery by strengthening residential treatment, expanding recovery housing, increasing outreach to reconnect people to care, and better linking services across the system. As reliance on crisis services decreases, we will reinvest those resources to further strengthen the continuum of care.

#### **3b. Modernize the DHS contracting process to improve speed and transparency.**

DHS has been engaged in a multi-year contracting modernization project focused on reducing administrative burden for providers. In 2026, we will implement a new software platform and process improvements to address provider concerns about the length of time it takes to execute a contract and receive payment. DHS will also provide technical assistance and support to community-based organizations that want to do business with DHS.

#### **3c. Help front-line staff spend more time with clients.**

We are equipping frontline staff with voice-to-text and summarizing tools so they can reduce time spent on paperwork and better reflect what was discussed with clients. This allows staff to focus more time on listening, problem-solving, and building relationships, improving the overall client experience. Supervisors can use this information for quality improvement efforts and to improve overall client experience. We are also providing this information to clients themselves, helping improve case worker/client alignment and clarity on action items. By using large language models responsibly, we can work more efficiently, respond more quickly, and deliver better outcomes for the community.