

## **OF AND FOR THE COMMUNITY:**

*How Community Engagement and Communication Helped to Shape the Allegheny County Department of Human Services*

In January of 1997, as part of a larger effort to modernize county operations, the Allegheny County Commissioners established an umbrella human services department that combined four former departments: Children and Youth Services, Mental Health/Mental Retardation/Drug & Alcohol/Homeless & Hunger Programs, Aging, and Federal Programs. The new Department of Human Services (DHS) was created to streamline functions and improve service delivery in a cost-effective way.

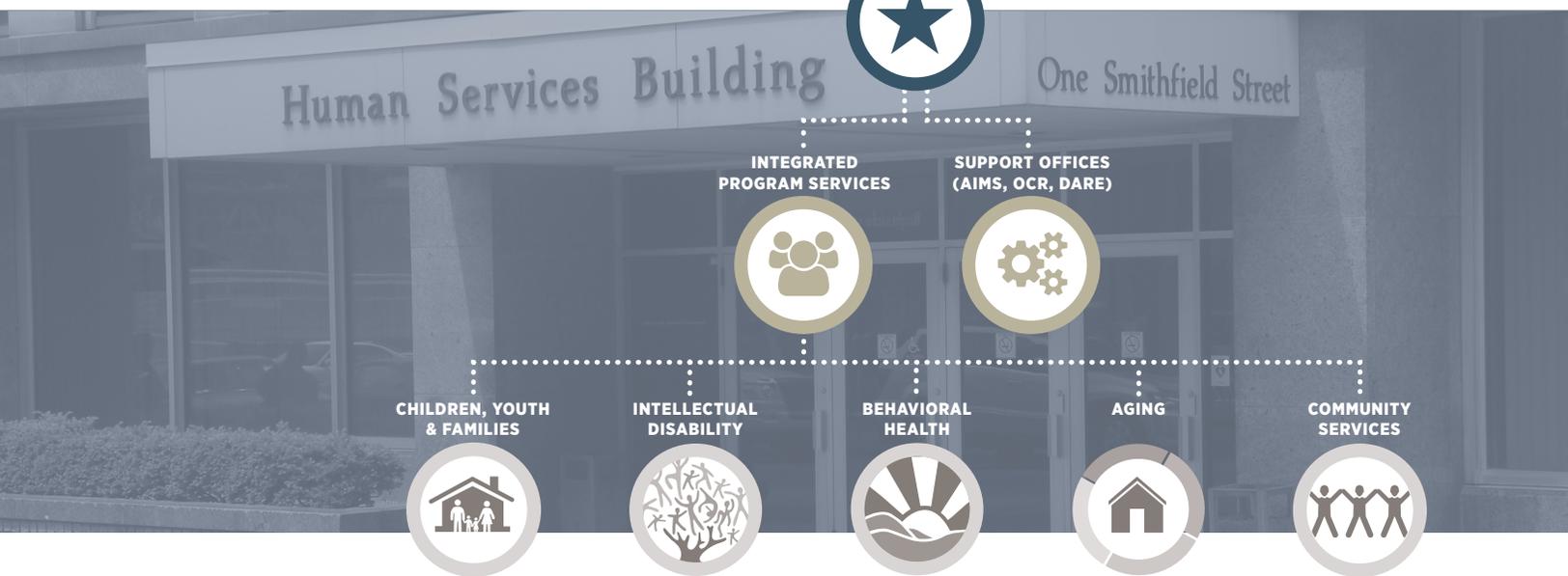


Chosen to head the new department was Marc Cherna, a child welfare reformer from New Jersey who had been hired a year earlier, through a national search process, to fix the county’s troubled child welfare system. In the short year since his arrival in Allegheny County, Cherna had improved the operation and reputation of the county’s child welfare office so significantly that the Commissioners asked him to apply his successful strategies to operationalizing the new DHS.

DHS is a sought-after partner on both the local and the national scenes...

**THE ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

Today, DHS is Allegheny County’s largest department. Under Cherna’s direction, it consists of five program offices reporting to the Executive Deputy Director of Integrated Program Services, and three support offices (Office of Administrative and Information Services [AIMS]; Office of Community Relations [OCR]; and Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation [DARE]) that are administratively, programmatically and technologically integrated. As a result of a deliberate and ambitious integration and innovation effort, program quality, effectiveness and efficiency have improved, as have accessibility and accountability. DHS is a sought-after partner on both the local and the national scenes, has received millions of dollars in government and private grants, and has won numerous awards and national recognition for its cutting-edge integration strategies, programmatic and technological innovations, and successful community engagement efforts. Providing a wide array of direct services to about 20 percent of the Allegheny County population, DHS continues to strive for excellence and to challenge itself to improve outcomes in areas ranging from data-sharing practices to increasing opportunities for independence, self-sufficiency and permanency for a range of vulnerable populations.



But in early 1997, the picture was very different. Integrating four autonomous departments into a streamlined whole was a monumental task. The departments were geographically dispersed and structured in very different ways, with separate funding streams and regulatory oversight. In addition to redundant administrative, technological and fiscal functions, each had a director, a vision, a “culture,” and its own relationship with and reputation in the community. With the exception of the newly revamped child welfare office, they operated in a vacuum without key partnerships. None had a designated communications staff responsible for informing the community about its activities and strategically engaging stakeholders in its work. Most significantly, perhaps, they had operated independently for decades without recognizing that, together, they represented a human services system with the potential to be much larger than the sum of its parts.



**STAKEHOLDERS**

- Advocates
- Allied Professionals
- Corporations and the Business Community
- Civic Organizations
- Community and Clients/Consumers
- Courts and Criminal Justice System
- Elected Officials and Government Entities
- Foundations
- Nonprofit Community
- Religious Community
- School Districts
- Staff
- Universities

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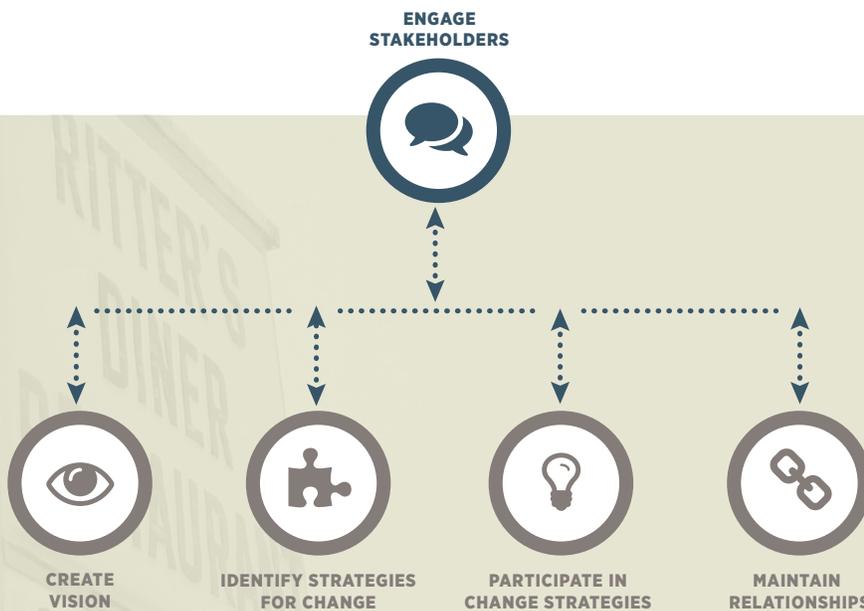
This lack of cohesion had a number of implications. Anyone requiring services from more than one system faced an impenetrable maze of confusing or conflicting information, varying eligibility criteria and disorganized communication among the systems. “Siloed” planning and service delivery made it difficult to envision a connected and coordinated human services system. But in Cherna’s mind, and in the minds of some of the region’s more forward-thinking and innovative stakeholders, an integrated approach was the only way to strengthen services and improve access, accessibility and quality. The prospect was daunting. Not only did Cherna have to create a common organizational culture and structure, he had to streamline staffing patterns, equalize pay and benefits, coordinate dozens of locations throughout the county, and align practices. And he had to accomplish this in an environment of budgetary constraints and shrinking resources. Nevertheless, determined to establish a customer service–focused department with a climate of accessibility, inclusiveness, trust, transparency and accountability, Cherna moved forward to put a vision — and a plan for realizing that vision — into place.

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Cherna’s commitment to transparency and accountability is directly related to his belief that DHS works for and is responsible to taxpayers and constituents, who have the right to demand and receive fiscally responsible excellence. That belief is what spurred his efforts to engage as many stakeholders as possible in identifying and solving challenges facing the newly created department. Cherna knew that DHS would be most successful if it was truly a part of the community, and he set about to make that happen.

**DEVELOPING A VISION FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES**

Having established a measure of credibility during his year as child welfare director, Cherna focused on broadening and expanding already-developed relationships and engaging additional stakeholders at every level of the community. His agenda was straightforward: He wanted to assess perceptions and expectations of the newly formed department. He sought to gather the best, most creative ideas from as broad a cross section of stakeholders as possible. He met with as many people and groups as he could, brought in experts and held town meetings. Staff were also hard at work, developing a plan to best meet the needs of current and future clients/consumers. The information gathered was synthesized into a new vision and a blueprint for carrying it out.



Since his arrival in Allegheny County, Cherna has made it a priority to spend time in the community, visiting provider agencies, attending community events and meeting with as many people as he can. That routine continues to this day. Early mornings often find him at Ritter’s, a local diner that attracts everyone from the county’s homeless population to the heads of the region’s most influential foundations. Ritter’s is a popular breakfast meeting spot and, without a doubt, many system-changing conversations have begun over its bottomless cups of coffee.



CREATE  
VISION

*To create an accessible, culturally competent, integrated and comprehensive human services system that ensures individually tailored, seamless and holistic services to Allegheny County residents, in particular, the County's most vulnerable populations.*

The new vision was enthusiastically embraced by both public- and private-sector leaders, who volunteered unprecedented levels of support and encouragement to turn the blueprint into reality. An Oversight Committee, made up of leaders from the business, academic and public sectors and chaired by the late Dr. John Murray (community leader and former president of Duquesne University), served as a sounding board and provided guidance throughout the planning and early implementation process.

The broad-based support and involvement that contributed to the creation of DHS was impressive and unprecedented. The roles played by the business and philanthropic communities — described below — exemplify the ways in which community support enabled DHS to implement the new vision.



IDENTIFY STRATEGIES  
FOR CHANGE

### **Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce**

At the recommendation of Jim Roddey, a community leader who would become the first county executive under the new government structure, Cherna approached the **Greater Pittsburgh Chamber of Commerce** — with its history of providing private-sector assistance to public agencies — to assist in addressing the logistical challenges of implementing the vision. The Chamber called upon its member organizations, the local academic community and the foundation community for assistance. With Karen Wolk Feinstein, president of the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, as chair, the Chamber established task forces that devoted more than 5,000 pro bono hours to addressing organizational change, human resources, physical relocation and information systems.

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They not only identified solutions to these large issues; many also helped to implement the solutions. DHS benefited greatly from the specific assistance and from the relationships that developed, many of which became ongoing. Almost 20 years later, they and other partners have served on advisory boards, offered work experiences to DHS clients and supported projects that benefit DHS clients (both financially and through employee volunteer and donations programs). Corporate partners have been an invaluable asset to DHS. Examples of their (and their staffs') generosity include Reed Smith LLP's 20-year legacy of pro bono adoptions; Highmark's ongoing printing of "A Parent's Handbook"; and Holiday Project support from CentiMark, PNC and UPMC. University relationships also continue to provide invaluable resources to DHS and, in turn, DHS has supported these universities by providing internships, case competition opportunities for graduate students, data and program support for student projects, and data-sharing for research activities.



**PARTICIPATE IN  
CHANGE STRATEGIES**

Since its establishment, HSIF’s member foundations have contributed more than \$12 million for projects that were not possible with public-sector dollars.

**Human Services Integration Fund**

Pittsburgh’s foundation community provided some of the best, most innovative thinking and helped to turn the new vision into reality. In addition to participating on the Chamber of Commerce task forces, foundation leaders had spent significant time with Cherna, discussing the strategies for change and the barriers to implementing those strategies. They understood that carrying out the plan would require innovative and out-of-the-box solutions, and that implementing those solutions would be next to impossible within the constraints of categorical government funding. In a move unheard of in most places — but typical of Allegheny County’s highly cohesive philanthropic community — they envisioned and created the **Human Services Integration Fund (HSIF)**, a flexible funding stream that allowed Cherna to foster integration and support innovation in ways that were not possible with public-sector dollars.

With the support of HSIF, DHS has been able to access technical assistance and identify best practice solutions for issues as far-reaching as physical relocation, conflicting fiscal systems, disconnected technology systems, overlapping programs, and different human resource and payroll structures. The list of HSIF-funded innovations includes countless programmatic and analytic projects, creative staff development and management efforts, and establishment of problem-solving courts and the Allegheny County Jail Collaborative. Many of these innovations were possible thanks to one of the most groundbreaking HSIF-funded projects, the building of a data warehouse that continues to expand DHS’s monitoring and analytic capacity, fuel data-sharing partnerships that have become a national model, and provide a significant resource for the community and its providers, academic institutions and researchers. HSIF continues to drive innovation and program excellence; since its establishment, HSIF’s member foundations have contributed more than \$12 million for these projects.



**MAINTAIN  
RELATIONSHIPS**

**COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT**

Early on, a sense of urgency generated an “all-hands-on-deck” attitude and a sense of purpose and camaraderie. But once the strategy was in place, the challenge was how to maintain the enthusiasm of stakeholders and transition these important relationships into long-term partnerships. The fact that so many of these relationships are flourishing, almost 20 years later, can be attributed to effective communication strategies, a deliberate focus — by Cherna and other DHS leadership — on nurturing key relationships, and a concerted effort to acknowledge and recognize the value of these partners and to demonstrate — through reciprocity and other mechanisms — that DHS also brings value to the partnerships.

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**THE OFFICE OF COMMUNITY RELATIONS**

Karen Blumen, an attorney, communications professional and longtime civic leader in Pittsburgh’s South Hills communities, had been brought on to support Cherna’s child welfare reform efforts and had created an Office of Community Relations (OCR). Cherna now tapped her to expand the office’s successful formula of community engagement and communication across all of DHS. Blumen shepherded the fledgling office from its child welfare beginnings to what it is today — the hub of DHS’s communication, community education and engagement activities.

From the beginning, OCR’s vision was more comprehensive than just media relations. As a key component of a larger effort to improve transparency, accountability and accessibility, the office was organized to optimize communications with both internal and external audiences.



**THE BENEFITS OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY**

Through a variety of formal and informal communication strategies, **clients and residents** learn about available services, how to easily access the help that they need and how to address concerns. Effective communication strategies educate **service providers** so that they understand and support the reasons for DHS’s vision, philosophy and strategies, and feel part of the decision-making and implementation process. They also inform the **media**, which in turn educate the community about DHS’s work and broader human services issues. **Taxpayers, government agencies and private funders** need timely and ongoing information in order to recognize the ways in which DHS is

responding to emerging needs as well as related cost and service benefits. DHS works hard to keep **businesses and civic organizations** informed and aware of the importance of their involvement, input and support. By educating them about the unmet needs of county residents, DHS has provided them with an understanding of the limitations of government funding and an outlet for their charitable giving. **Academic institutions and research organizations** appreciate access to information and data and relationships that add value to their missions. **Universities**, in particular, benefit from opportunities for their students.

So what exactly does a comprehensive engagement and communications strategy look like? In DHS’s case, it includes activities as diverse as designing a consistent image for communicating DHS’s vision, philosophy and practices to providing opportunities for one-on-one conversations with clients/consumers to make sure that they are getting what they need. But that’s just the tip of the iceberg. Social media, educational and training videos, and a foster parent recruitment campaign are recent additions to the strategy, and it will continue to evolve in response to new technology and emerging needs. Below is an overview of the various components that make up DHS’s strategy.

**Marketing and Information Dissemination** strategies maintain up-to-date communication with large groups of stakeholders, the general public and tailored audiences.

- Publications and Informational Material
- Legislative Updates
- Response and Engagement Media
- Newsletters and Email Announcements
- Rights Publications (e.g., “A Parent’s Handbook”)
- Public Awareness Campaigns
- Public Hearings and Community Forums
- Research and Reports
- Social Media and Videos
- Staff and Provider Communiqués
- Website

**Transparency**

Implicit in all of DHS’s communication and engagement strategies is a commitment to transparency and accountability. This commitment manifests itself in many ways, but perhaps nowhere as clearly as in the department’s research and publication agenda. DHS regularly evaluates its programs and services, and makes reports of these evaluations publicly available through a variety of distribution strategies, including posting them on its website and

publicizing their availability through email and social media. These reports do more than just communicate good news about DHS’s services; they also identify challenges and recommend changes warranted by the evaluation results. This strategy, says Cherna, lets the community know that “we don’t have all the answers and we don’t always do things right, but we want to get better and we want your help to do so.”

**Engaging Constituencies in Service Planning, Implementation and Monitoring**

keeps DHS focused on the needs and perspectives of Allegheny County residents and other stakeholders.

- Public Hearings and Community Forums
- Advisory Boards
- Collaborative Initiatives
- Data-Sharing Partnerships
- Parent Involvement in Evaluation
- Client Feedback Mechanisms

“We don’t have all the answers and we don’t always do things right, but we want to get better and we want your help to do so.”



**Feedback Mechanisms** allow for two-way communication that increases transparency while supporting quality improvement and accountability.



- Director's Action Line
- Quality Improvement Team

- Client Engagement Unit
- Consumer Surveys

**Director's Action Line: Creating a Climate of Transparency and Accountability**

When Cherna took over Allegheny County's child welfare agency in 1996, he was faced with an environment in which there was no mechanism for clients to access information or express concerns or complaints about their caseworker or service plan. Powerless to complain about questionable treatment or to question decisions that dramatically affected their lives, they were understandably resentful and suspicious of the agency and its representatives. With a reputation for being adversarial and secretive, the child welfare agency lacked community buy-in and support.

In an effort to be available and responsive to clients and the community, and to improve the agency's credibility, the

Director's Action Line began operation on September 9, 1996. Expanding on a project developed in New Jersey, the hotline invited the public to register concerns about services and caseworkers.

The impact was immediate. By opening itself to questioning and criticism, and by responding in an open and transparent way, the Director's Action Line made a significant difference in community perception of the child welfare agency. Before long, the Director's Action Line became an important information and referral source, with those calls far exceeding those for which it was originally established.

The Director's Action Line has since expanded to cover all of DHS and now fields more than 14,000 inquiries annually.

**Professional Development**

**Opportunities** for students and clients/ consumers provide creative insights about service delivery and system-wide issues, address workforce issues and support existing partnerships in academia and business.

- Case Competition
- Internships
- Parent Interviewers
- Parent Involvement in Evaluation
- Parent Support Partners
- Scholars and Fellows in Local Government
- Student Internships
- Youth Support Partners (young adults, previously involved in human services, who provide peer support to young clients)



**Generating Alternative Sources of Support to Provide Life-Enhancing Extras**

Together, these activities build good will, educate the public about the needs of the people being served, raise donations and raise about \$1.5 million a year in goods and services for DHS clients, primarily children.

- Holiday Project
- Music Festival Fund
- Project Prom
- SummerBooks



**Allegheny County Music Festival**

The Allegheny County Music Festival Fund was established in 2000 by Max Baer, Administrative Judge of Family Court, and DHS Director Marc Cherna to aid children and youth receiving services from DHS or the Juvenile Section of the Family Division of the Court of Common Pleas. The fund creates a resource that pays for life-enriching opportunities and items that are not otherwise available through traditional government funding, such as laptop computers for college students, museum memberships for families, fees and equipment necessary for children and youth to participate in sports and cultural programs, and bus passes that allow students to attend after-school programs.

The Music Festival Fund is totally dependent upon the generosity of county residents. For the first eight years, it was replenished

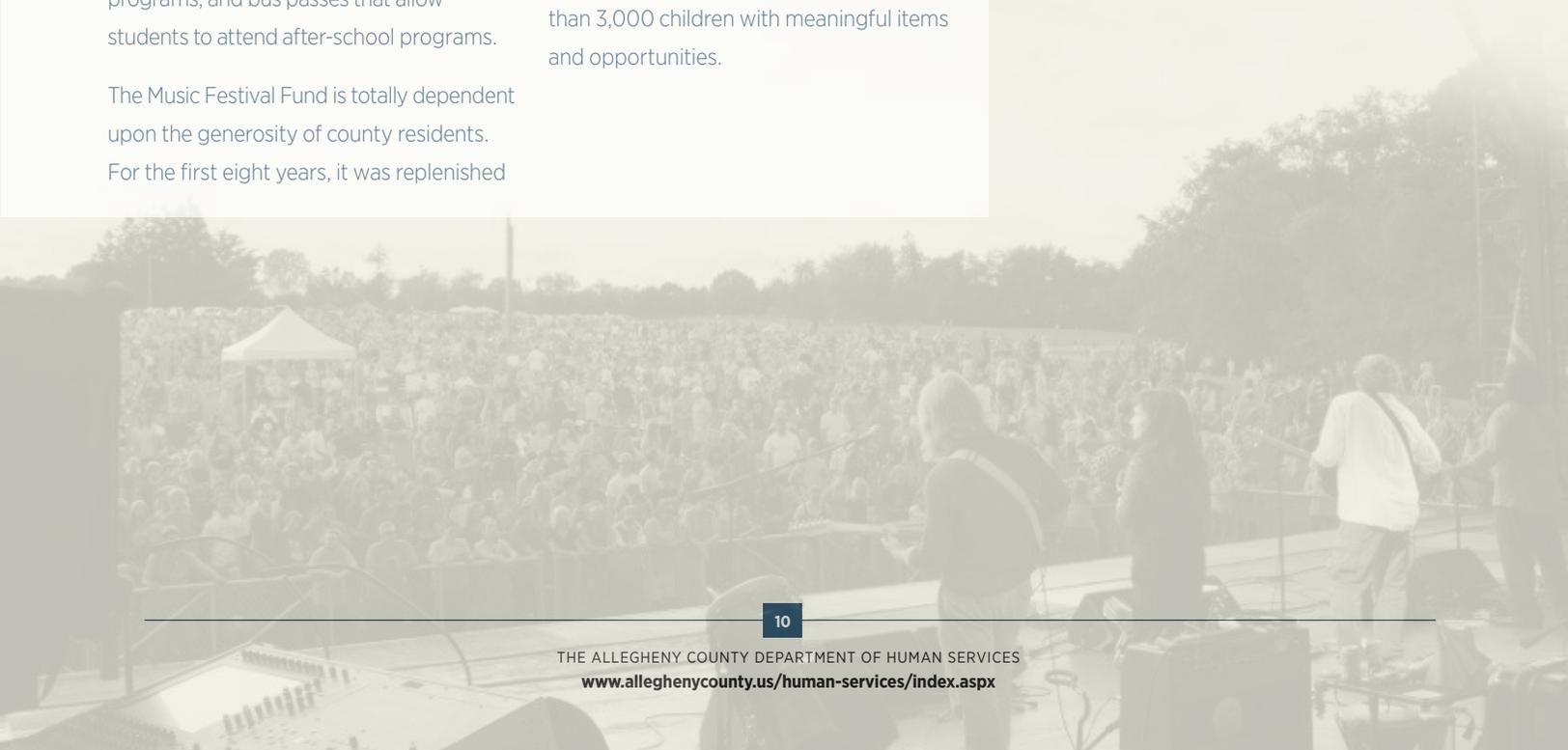
using proceeds from a single music concert, the Allegheny County Music Festival, hosted by Allegheny County at Hartwood Acres Park. One of a generally free series of summer outdoor concerts, this special event suggests a donation per vehicle. Proceeds from a 50/50 raffle are also added to the Fund. In 2008, an additional fundraiser was added, necessitated by the popularity of the Fund among providers and children. Candidates' Comedy Night features candidates for national, state and local political offices taking the stage to perform for the gathered contributors.

Since its inception, the Fund has raised over \$700,000 and has provided more than 3,000 children with meaningful items and opportunities.

**Technology and Telephone Hotlines**

provide personalized support, referral and information.

- SeniorLine information and assistance call center
- Information, Referral and Emergency Services (IRES) support line
- The Allegheny Link resource and referral line for seniors, people with disability, and people experiencing or at risk of homelessness



## MOVING FORWARD

In just a little less than a year, DHS will be celebrating its 20th anniversary. Twenty years ago, when we began this journey of integrating, innovating and striving to build a robust system structured to support the residents of Allegheny County, we couldn't have imagined where it would take us. And even as we look back on the progress we've made, we are on the cusp of another wave of integration and innovation. The recent implementation of our new practice model, Conferencing and Teaming, is changing the dynamics between consumers and professionals and empowering consumers in a new and exciting way. Our use of cutting-edge technology and data-driven decision-making is providing previously unimagined ways to assess, predict and prevent risk. We are accelerating the provision of technical assistance to various stakeholders to ensure that they have access to the same innovative tools and strategies. In this way, we see the entire human services system — DHS, providers and other stakeholders — moving forward together to partner with and provide high-quality and relevant services to Allegheny County's most vulnerable residents.

— *Marc Cherna*

