Community Feedback

on Helping Allegheny County Residents During COVID-19 and Beyond

Input from community members is vital to the work that Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) does. Understanding the perspectives of people in our community is especially important now as the repercussions from COVID-19 continue to affect people in innumerable ways.

One way that DHS is learning about the community's needs is by posing questions on a public online feedback platform called Neighborland. DHS is reviewing and summarizing the answers we receive for each question and analyzing the text for common themes as described in the following pages. Feedback will be used to inform our programming as we support residents affected by COVID-19 and plan for the future.

Allegheny County Department of Human Services asked:

How can we make the system better?

County residents posted **320** answers and comments

MAIN AREAS OF FEEDBACK INCLUDED:

Benefits of remote services

Both providers and clients had positive comments about the benefits of remote services, requesting that a **hybrid model incorporating remote care and physical contact** be considered, especially with behavioral health services and families active with child welfare.

Access to personal protective equipment (PPE) and testing

In addition to increasing safety from COVID-19 through remote services and social distancing, making sure that workers and clients had access to PPE and testing was a frequent refrain.

The need for technology and addressing the digital divide

Residents gave an array of recommendations around technology and addressing the digital divide. Many responses noted that **education on how to use technology** was crucial, especially for seniors who could benefit from "instructions for virtually paying bills and accessing resources." Several residents noted that many families share a single device and rely on a tenuous internet signal. One innovative response to this problem was to establish a **"community-owned Wi-Fi network or a series of free Wi-Fi hot spots throughout the county."**

MOST FREQUENT THEMES IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: HOW CAN WE MAKE THE SYSTEM BETTER?

Remote Services	27%
Service Accessibility	23%
Safety from COVID-19	22%
Service/Role Adaptation	21%
Resource Information	20%
Communications & Outreach	19%
Technology Access/Knowledge	19%
Planning/Preparation	17%
Integration/Collaboration	14%
Parenting/Caregiver Support	14%
Financial Support	13%
Community Support	12%
Children/Youth Services	12%
Mental Health	11%
Inclusionary Planning	11%

Accessibility of services

While technology is necessary for remote services, making sure that other services were accessible to all (especially seniors, children and other vulnerable groups) was also important to respondents. One person suggested that **food banks relocate to areas more proximate to bus lines and openly advertise handicap accessibility**. For drive-up services, one resident explained how there should be ways for those without vehicles to also benefit. **Offering transportation to seniors** was another repeated concern: residents emphasized that seniors with critical care needs and who are high risk currently have no viable means of transportation to receive care.

Centralized location for services

Residents emphasized that DHS programs are too de-centralized and the current way to access services is confusing and cumbersome. One resident wrote that a **"one-stop shop for human services"** would be helpful; this was affirmed by a suggestion to have **"a broad range of services located in one building."**

> **"Having a broad range of services located in one building would be beneficial to the people we serve and can potentially serve."**
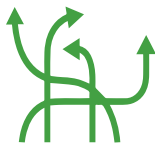
System flexibility

A desire for system change and flexibility was a top theme — people wanted services and roles to have the ability to transform to better fit current needs.

Information sharing

There were many respondents who wanted easily accessible, up-to-date information on available services and other important resources. Respondents also felt that the system could improve through better communication and outreach, using a variety of methods to engage and inform the community.

For instance, three respondents suggested a **borough representative who could share relevant updates with their immediate community.** At the same time, respondents affirmed the use of mailers and phone calls to inform those who do not have internet or technology access. Residents also suggested **utilizing libraries, public schools, and community centers as hubs for information**.

> **"Maybe having a point of contact in each borough/region/school district might help with disseminating information for individual areas. With so many resource updates, it gets hard to keep up."**

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

Additional feedback focused on providing additional supports to parents and caregivers, giving greater financial assistance to clients and providers, being more responsive to community needs, increasing services to children and youth, and prioritizing mental health services for all in this difficult time. Suggestions for improvements within DHS included planning for future crises by learning from this crisis, bringing all stakeholders to the table to work on system changes, and improving the system through greater integration.

We are grateful to the County residents who offered insightful feedback around the future of the human services system. As we reviewed and summarized the comments, we collected actionable and creative suggestions, some of which are listed below:

- Community-owned Wi-Fi network or a series of free Wi-Fi hot spots throughout the county
- Continue allowing/offering telehealth
- Ability to report all types of abuse via text message
- More training programs with financial stipends, transportation assistance, and direct job referrals and placements into career positions
- Create DHS-coordinated COVID-19 testing

What matters most?

Allegheny County Department of Human Services asked:

County residents posted **249** answers and comments

MAIN AREAS OF FEEDBACK INCLUDED:

Accessibility of basic needs

Most important to respondents was making sure that services were accessible to better ensure basic needs (food, health, housing, employment) were met, especially for seniors and other vulnerable groups.

> **"I'm elderly and...need food: home delivery of groceries, places to pick up food from food banks [since I am] a senior and...don't have a car."**

MOST FREQUENT THEMES IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: WHAT MATTERS MOST?

Service Accessibility	32%
Financial Support	31%
Safety from COVID-19	30%
Children/Youth Services	22%
Parenting/Caregiver Support	21%
Mental Health	20%
Remote Services	20%
Physical Health Services	18%
Food Resources	17%
Technology Access/ Knowledge	16%
Educational Supports	16%
Service/Role Adaptation	15%
Resource Information	15%
Provider Support	14%
Employment	14%

Financial support

Suggestions included direct payments to individuals and families suffering from a loss of employment and **increased department and provider funding** that would also indirectly help those residents. Feedback also noted ensuring that DHS staff were receiving **sustainable wages** that reflected the importance of their work.

Health and safety of employees and community members

Properly protecting employees and ensuring that other community members were able to stay safe from the virus was another common theme. The need to **change processes and provide information on best practices** were frequent suggestions, but many comments simply stated the need to prioritize safety.

Mental health of children and caregivers

Children and youth services and parenting/caregiver support were other top themes, along with **continuing remote services, particularly for mental health**. Respondents stated that mental health will be a "public health crisis within the crisis" as children who are out of school are missing out on crucial socializing and parents "are being asked to do the impossible." The importance of technology access for families and additional educational supports was highlighted, particularly as parents act as both as provisional teachers and active employees.

> **"Support for our school systems is essential. Mental health will most certainly be the next pandemic. Every child will be affected by missing weeks of education. Parents are being asked to do the impossible."**

Adapting services and staff roles to meet current needs

Reviewing the system for effectiveness and efficiency was suggested, along with **deploying staff and resources where they were most needed**.
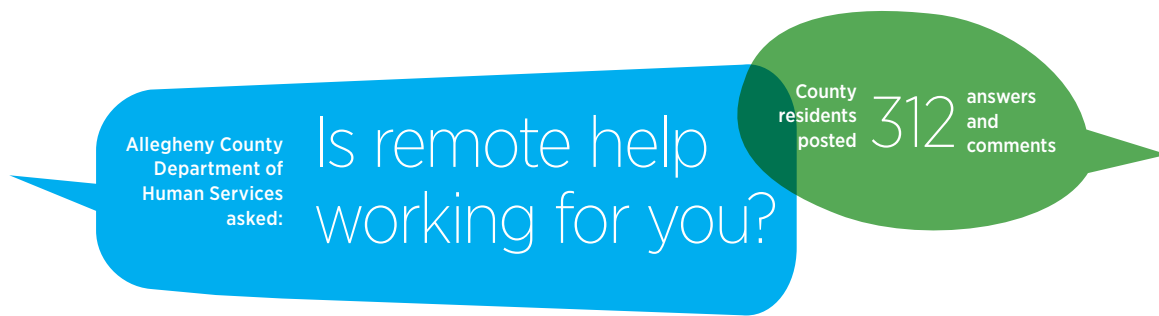
Streamlined services with easy enrollment

Respondents also requested system improvements so that **DHS's services are offered in one streamlined, user-friendly location with an easy enrollment process**. Residents asked how they could "get help in one place" and one noted the unnecessary programs they were asked to enroll into when all they needed was "one service and [I'm] on my way."

We are grateful to the County residents who offered insights into what matters most to them. As we reviewed and summarized the comments, we collected actionable and creative suggestions, some of which are listed below:

- Home delivery of groceries and front-of-the line access at food banks for seniors

- More casual drop-in/drop-out services

- Partner with a Wi-Fi provider to bring service to those in need and contract with Goodwill, Computer Reach, Best Buy, etc. to promote laptop donations and free distribution

- Daycare services for essential workers

- Simplify access to DHS services through "one-stop shop" locations

Allegheny County Department of Human Services asked:

Is remote help working for you?

County residents posted 312 **answers and comments**

MAIN AREAS OF FEEDBACK INCLUDED:

Positive experience with working remotely

Respondents were extremely positive about remote work, with DHS employees and providers noting an overall increase in productivity and happiness from working at home. Quality of life improvements like decreased commute time, more time with family, and easy communication with team members were highlighted.

Employees who are not community-facing suggested a new norm, where **remote work is the week's majority default**. One employee highlighted that they "have more control over my schedule, more flexibility, less distractions, no expenses/time for commuting."

While most responses were positive, some felt that remote work "cause[d] an imbalance between work and home" where they felt micro-managed by their employers and others noted how increased hours of screen time have had a detrimental effect on their mental health.

## Accessibility of services due to remote offerings

Positive responses confirmed what DHS has seen firsthand about remote services: the ability to make DHS programs more accessible while recognizing the areas where face-to-face interaction is necessary.

Certain services like teletherapy and case coordination have seen tremendous success due to the **decrease of transportation barriers**. A mother with a child with intellectual disabilities noted that, "we've been able to participate in therapy more consistently now than ever before! We have our medical appointments in the comfort of our home, no two-hour bus ride just to see

MOST FREQUENT THEMES IN RESPONSE TO THE QUESTION: IS REMOTE HELP WORKING FOR YOU?

Theme	%
Remote Work Positive	48%
Technology Access/ Knowledge	36%
Remote Services Positive	32%
Parenting/Caregiver Support	23%
Safety from COVID-19	22%
Communications & Outreach	21%
Service Accessibility	20%
Service/Role Adaptation	20%
Connection Challenges	18%
Productivity	17%
Quality of Life	16%
TeleHealth	16%
Children/Youth Services	13%
Transportation	12%
Mental Health	10%

the doctor…" Another mother connected her son with remote support and noted that this was preferable for him, because it "wasn't as stressful as meeting someone face to face." This sense of digital courage is repeated by a service provider who "found that clients who struggle to communicate in person are communicating more in this remote working scenario." Many providers commented on the improved show rates and **requested that the ability to bill for telehealth and other remote services continue**.

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> **"We've been able to participate in therapy more consistently now than ever before… I hope some things stick around because doors have been opened …despite all the restrictions in place."**
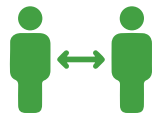
Challenges of remote services

While there was strong support for both remote work and remote services, nearly a fifth of the responses noted the additional connection challenges with these models. In addition to **missing direct contact with other people**, there was an acknowledgment that certain services simply do not translate to remote work as a long-term solution, particularly when assessing safety within homes.

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> **"We need to make sure EVERYONE has access to [remote options]…My 71-year-old mother has no idea how to text or use a computer. If it wasn't for me helping, she would be stuck. There are so many others like this that we can't let them fall through the cracks."**

Technology challenges of remote services

Over a third of the responses were related to the technology that made remote work and services possible. The digital divide was acknowledged, both related to access and education. Providers and residents alike noted that telehealth and remote support was good for those who had fast internet and their own devices, but it was a strain for families who have tenuous Wi-Fi signals and shared (or no) computers. One woman noted that she was able to help her 71-year-old mother access services through her phone but worries that others without immediate family members to help may "fall through the cracks."

ADDITIONAL FEEDBACK

Other major themes included providing help to parents and caregivers who were dealing with an unprecedented live/work situation; continuing to ensure safety from COVID-19 through distancing, testing and PPE; and increasing communication and outreach to all, especially the most vulnerable and isolated. Increasing access to services and making sure that services and staff roles could adapt to better fit current needs were also important to respondents.

We are grateful to the County residents who offered insights into how remote services are working for them. As we reviewed and summarized the comments, we collected actionable and creative suggestions, some of which are listed below:

- Access to free/low-cost internet and unlimited data and minutes for phone service

- Increased promotion/partnership with local businesses

- Communication through a variety of methods, not just via website or email

- Customized technology support and usage guidance for seniors

- Continued support of telehealth and telework as it reduces transportation barriers

- For providers, additional guidance for HIPAA compliance and assessing client safety while distanced