



Community Feedback #2

On Fighting for Racial Justice, Supporting Allegheny County Residents During COVID-19, and Communicating with Our Immigrant and International Community

This report is part of an ongoing series in which the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is gathering and analyzing community input through the online platform [Neighborland](#). This set of topics includes questions about advancing racial justice, understanding the complex needs of our community during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and suggestions for ways to disseminate information to immigrants and internationals in Allegheny County. This feedback will be used to improve future programming and communication for Allegheny County families and support our efforts to becoming a more effective and anti-racist organization.

This report summarizes community responses to four questions:

- How can we more actively support the fight against racism and injustice?
- What kind of support is most helpful to you during this difficult time?
- Are you worried about someone you care about?
- What's the best way to get the word out about COVID-19 to your community?

In response to these four questions, we received 105 answers and comments over the course of one month.



Allegheny County Department of Human Services asked:

How can we support the fight against racism?

County residents posted 49 answers and comments

A review of all responses showed ideas related to internally facing DHS practices, policies regarding the police departments, oversight on potentially misusing data, and education initiatives.



Responding to disparate racial representation in DHS services



“Can we begin examining the racial disproportionality in child protective services case decisions, holding people accountable [and] taking action steps to eliminate further oppression to African American families?”

Many respondents highlighted the disparate outcomes between Black families and White families involved with DHS’s services. Residents described how they felt that Child Welfare treated Black children differently than White children, specifically that Black children involved in Child Welfare cases were removed from home at higher rates. Another respondent questioned the greater obstacles that Black fathers face when trying to gain custody over their children while another noted how difficult it is for Black foster families to adopt children. A community member attributed these outcomes to a lack of diversity in Child Welfare writing that “administration, supervisor, caseworkers have different risk thresholds depending on a family’s race.” The responder wrote that lack of diversity manifests in “disproportionate reports [of] abuse and neglect” and that these “cases are more likely to be substantiated at the investigation level than for White, non-Hispanic families.”

One DHS provider highlighted how difficult it was to find a Black therapist for her clients.

Finally, some community members had impressions that DHS adopts an uncritical approach to using data. One respondent said that “[Child Welfare] has failed to account for relying on data derived from a biased society” and “has in turn ended up in reinforcing and recreating society’s biases, instead of pushing against them.” In terms of crafting solutions, one resident suggested that DHS could partner with the University of Pittsburgh’s School of Social Work “to recruit more [B]lack clinicians,” create “opportunities for life-long learning so that professionals have the opportunity for intelligent discussions around systemic racism,” and cultivate opportunities for “Black professionals to move up within the system.”



Holding police accountable



“We ask our police officers to do too much. They are not social workers, drug/alcohol counselors, crisis intervention specialists, mediators or therapists and they should not be used to do the roles of those jobs.... We would be better served from redirecting funding from the police to DHS and other agencies that are better equipped to handle those situations.”

Respondents also wanted to see DHS try to do something about abuse and harm from the police department. Nearly half of all responses were related to police, including the lack of diversity in police forces and law enforcement policies that perpetuate violence and unaccountability. One response said that there is a “total disconnect with the local residents” because predominantly White police officers patrol predominantly Black neighborhoods. Another resident cited a settlement between the City of Pittsburgh and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) that found discriminatory hiring practices in the police department. Another extended this lack of diversity to the judicial system, claiming that a “bench that reflects society is pivotal to fostering public confidence.” Beyond diversity, residents shared reservations of concepts like police immunity and the ability of departments to investigate themselves; they were sharply critical and skeptical of the ability of a police department to address its own potential misconduct.



Addressing racism in schools

Some residents asked DHS to work with schools to fight racism. This included a suggestion for a “5 and 10-year plan to address the segregation in our school systems based on poverty and race,” so that reactive services can become preventive services.



Reflecting on internal DHS practices



“Our department directly serves the public....It’s essential that we are much more cognizant of any racial bias we may inadvertently harbor....We need robust training on the issue of racial bias and structural racism and how it impacts our clients and our work with clients.”

Fifteen respondents noted that DHS could do more within the organization to better fight racism and systemic inequities. Many noted a need for more “robust training related to racial bias, institutionalized racism [and] racial inequity” across the agency. Several responses also lamented the lack of diversity in DHS staff, specifically in senior levels of leadership and in services.

To respond to these needs, people suggested expanding the Office of Equity and Inclusion and integrating standards of employee retention and team diversity in evaluations of senior leaders. One person who said she was a DHS employee suggested the organization find an easier way for staff “to share their feedback on a regular basis” as “frontline staff are not typically asked for input.”



Technology for telehealth visits and working from home

Residents conveyed resounding praise for the ability to use technology to receive telehealth and work from home because they offer more flexibility and safety amidst stressful times. For example, one resident said “it helps very much to be able to work remote and not worry about exposure to COVID-19. We have consistent supervisory support and meetings on TEAMS which are helpful, especially for those who reside alone.” Another community member explained how telehealth has made “mental health services... accessible and affordable.”



Clear communication around COVID-19

“**What’s most important is keeping updated information regarding COVID-19 flowing. People want to know information in layman’s terms.**”

Many indicated how important it was to clearly communicate COVID-19 related information and resources. One community member explained that receiving “regular, updated information regarding Covid-19” is important. Overall, respondents suggested the county disseminate information in a more streamlined way. A resident noted that “one source of information” that brought together “local and statewide efforts” would be helpful because they are finding it “hard to keep up with it all.”

Allegheny County
Department of
Human Services
asked:

Are you worried about someone you care about?

County residents posted 14 answers and comments



Seniors are particularly vulnerable



“I worry about my mother. She lives with us and is definitely vulnerable with a multitude of health conditions. If she were to contract the virus, I do not believe she would survive it.”

Residents are worried about how vulnerable seniors are, echoing the answers to a Neighborland question posed in June. One person described that they are worried about “People who are struggling with social isolation, especially the elderly who may have limited ability to use/access social media.”



Remote work is helping to keep people safe, but there are fears around returning

A few residents noted that working from home helped mitigate their worries about people who are not taking the virus seriously. For example, one person worries about her family’s health if she must return to work because she knows some of her coworkers “believe the virus to be overblown and will not follow precautions, exposing me and my family to risk.”



Widespread and accessible communication is needed to encourage precautions

Some responses suggest that local government lead information campaigns to help normalize the public taking precautions. A resident, also worried about the public not taking the virus seriously enough, suggested that it would help if “the county executive and mayor” facilitate “radio ads and get on TV wearing masks.”

Finally, residents are concerned about people who are immigrants or who are international who are not receiving consistent, accessible information. One community member said she was “very concerned about my husband, who is a restaurant owner and is also an immigrant” and that the only available solutions are “more loans....not a sustainable option.”

Allegheny County Department of Human Services asked:

What's the best way to get the word out?

County residents posted **27** answers and comments



Use informal, localized channels to reach specific audiences



“Websites like Nextdoor and community groups like our [Facebook] groups are great for disseminating information.... I would also put up billboards... in both English and Spanish.”

To share information more effectively, residents emphasized using social media and electronic communication like Facebook, Twitter, Nextdoor and email. A number of participants noted Facebook as a useful platform and the same percentage noted either Twitter, Nextdoor or email. Overall, the responses suggest that the more informal and localized the communication channel, the more likely it would reach individuals. One person noted how important it is to have information in multiple languages: “anything and everything that can help — but it has to be in their language, not just English.”



Partner with community organizations to spread the word



“Casa San Jose is doing an excellent job with spreading the word about many current community issues and providing assistance for individual and families’ basic needs....They are an incredible resource that is outstanding at reaching the most vulnerable members of the Latinx community.”

Residents also endorsed local community organizations like Casa San Jose as great sources for information and support because they are already embedded in the community. Schools, libraries and grocery stores were also noted as high-traffic centers that would be effective sharers of information. One respondent suggested a borough representative or community leader who could serve as an information hub.