



## All Hands on a Remote Deck: **The Sequel**

Stories from the Allegheny County Department of Human Services' Ongoing Response to COVID-19



## A message from Erin Dalton, DHS Director

*Since the period covered by [“All Hands on a Remote Deck: The Allegheny County Department of Human Services’ Early Response to COVID-19,”](#) much has changed for the Department of Human Services (DHS) and its colleagues across the country. Some responses to the pandemic have resulted in permanent changes; others were found to be unnecessary; still others are being tweaked even now. But the theme was consistent: business as usual was no longer possible or preferable.*

*As the COVID-19 crisis dragged on and even intensified, DHS had to deal with additional emerging challenges and rapidly and effectively deploy an unprecedented inflow of federal funds designed to address those challenges.*

*This follow-up report describes some of DHS’s additional activities during the last six months of 2020. It is not exhaustive by any means, but provides a look into some of the ways the Department adjusted to the new reality.*

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## A welcome influx of federal funds

For human service agencies accustomed to straining under budget limitations, one of the most unusual aspects of the pandemic was the anticipated arrival of new money. The CARES Act of March 2020 provided \$150 billion for state and local governments, all of which had to be spent on pandemic-related costs (not items already contained in government budgets) by year end.

Shortly thereafter, the Allegheny County Manager’s Office advised county departments that it expected to receive about \$200 million of federal funds and asked for detailed proposals as to how the departments could use the money. Having already identified ways in which needs had arisen or expanded, DHS’s planning and budget staff developed a budget in 48 hours.

County Manager William McKain and County Executive Rich Fitzgerald, recognizing the tremendous human service needs in the county, awarded DHS approximately \$35 million of CARES Act funding. Among the largest line items: maintaining the Safe Haven Hotel, Allegheny County’s designated isolation and quarantine site; rental payment assistance; helping newly eligible people apply for federal benefits; and support for essential staff at child welfare provider organizations.

The preliminary plan was only the beginning. Obviously, the projected expenditures were only well-documented guesses in a highly unpredictable, fluid situation. In some areas, new emphases such as improved ventilation would emerge; in others, service demand would decline, leaving certain offices with more money than they were used to. And all spending had to be documented well enough to stand up under federal scrutiny.







Fortunately, DHS had just hired Lisa Kuzma, a retired Richard King Mellon Foundation program manager with 20 years of commercial banking experience, to start up a new Budget and Financial Analytics team. She was the perfect person to manage this massive undertaking.

“I’d had the privilege of working with DHS for 14 years as a program officer and seeing all their cutting-edge work,” Kuzma stated. “I felt I had been sitting on the

sidelines long enough and that it was time for me to get out on the field.”

Kuzma was pleased to have a detailed roadmap with which to work. “Although the projected budget had been developed very quickly, I could follow every assumption made,” She said.

To track the spending, she set up biweekly meetings with program staff and regular consultations with planning, contracting and fiscal offices. These meetings were crucial in that they helped the team to monitor spending so that unspent funds could be immediately reallocated to areas of unmet need. As a result, DHS could make rapid adjustments without overspending. For example, when fewer summer camp programs opened than expected, money was shifted to creating school-year Learning Hubs. And as it became apparent that COVID-19 infection was spreading primarily through airborne droplets rather than surfaces, funds reserved for frequent cleanings of surfaces were repurposed.

The most sensitive discussions involved compliance with U.S. Department of the Treasury guidelines for spending CRF (Coronavirus Relief Fund of the CARES Act) money. Allegheny County retained Maher Duessel, a widely respected local accounting firm, to ensure that the large influx of federal funds was dispensed and expenditures documented in a way that demonstrated appropriate investment of the dollars. “We were grateful to have assistance to make sure we used taxpayer dollars correctly,” Kuzma said.

As the end of 2020 approached, fiscal staff diligently checked in with providers who had substantial unspent funds, so that DHS could reallocate funds if necessary. “I was getting e-mails all the time about providers with concerns about spending their full allocation,” Kuzma recalled.

At the same time, DHS sought to spend its funds wisely without going over the limit. With some offices, such as drug and alcohol services, receiving other sources of emergency funding, DHS ultimately expended approximately \$39 million.

### **United Way of Southwestern PA: Addressing Hunger by Filling Gaps**

Early in the pandemic, it became evident that the food safety net on which many people depend had developed some serious holes. Kids who were used to getting breakfast and lunch at school weren’t going to school. Older adults could no longer get their lunch at senior centers. And people who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 were struggling to put food on the table. Many organizations stepped up to address these needs, but there remained a significant number of individuals and families who were facing serious hunger without access to food.

That’s where the United Way stepped in. Using available data (including from its own 2-1-1 helpline), and funding from a number of sources (including \$4.4 million of CRF money through DHS as well as additional funds through the County, foundations and individual donors), United Way:

- Identified food access gaps.
- Arranged for food preparation by local restaurants and catering businesses (Eat ‘n Park, Community Kitchen, small community restaurants)
- Worked with CMU to map out the most efficient delivery routes.

For more information about COVID-19 expenditures, see the [Allegheny County COVID-19 Data: Detailed Dashboard](#).

DHS combined its efforts to put available CRF resources to work by the December deadline with a commitment to maintaining service consistency beyond that cutoff date. “If a service was important on December 31, it was still important in January,” Kuzma asserted. “Our leadership decided that anything that should continue would continue, whether with foundation support or internal funds.”

## Reinventing the distribution process to expand reach into communities

“Our region has never gotten through an emergency without neighborhood and grassroots community-based organizations playing a big role,” said Jessica Ruffin, deputy director for the Office of Equity and Engagement. “So when CRF money became available, it felt wrong to just give the money to larger organizations.”

Given the stringent and extensive regulatory obligations and the short time frame, the logistics were a challenge. Even under normal conditions, many smaller nonprofits, especially those serving minorities, don’t get DHS money because negotiating the government contracting process is too difficult or onerous for them. And in this situation, getting new recipients into DHS’s contracting system would have taken too long.

The solution: work with a trusted partner that had an established track record of supporting community organizations with philanthropic funds. In August 2020, DHS committed almost \$2 million to The Pittsburgh Foundation for distribution to smaller agencies that couldn’t contract with DHS directly.



The Pittsburgh Foundation partnered with the [POISE Foundation](#), whose mission is help the Pittsburgh region’s African American community become self-sustaining, to inform the outreach, communication and application review process. The Pittsburgh Foundation

dedicated six staff to the project; within weeks, it developed a streamlined request for proposals and distributed information to 83 organizations in Allegheny County, selected because of their capacity to serve Black, Brown, Latinx, immigrant, refugee or LGBTQIA+ communities. Of these, 39 attended required information sessions on September 21–22 and 28 of them, with technical assistance from Pittsburgh Foundation staff, submitted applications the following week. Details about these applications, all of which were funded, are available at The Pittsburgh Foundation’s [website](#).

“It was exciting for us to build on our established partnership with DHS in this specific way, to distribute critical CRF support to these amazing smaller organizations that were on the front lines of the pandemic,” said

- Partnered with ACCESS, Oasis Transportation and other providers to set up a regional transportation network through which meals were delivered to centralized locations where they could be easily picked up.
- Developed an application process with provider agencies and a robust reporting system to ensure the appropriate use of CRF and other funds.

In all, this network delivered 1.35 million meals during the course of the pandemic.

United Way’s response went far beyond food delivery. Since the beginning of the pandemic, 2-1-1 has been the designated COVID-19 helpline for the County; the number of calls received more than doubled in 2020 (to 200,000) and is expected to go even higher in 2021. In addition to food, the delivery network provided personal protective equipment (PPE), sanitation supplies, diapers and other concrete goods. United Way was also able to assist with rent and utility payments for those who were ineligible for other programs.

Michael Yonas, vice president for public health, research and learning at The Pittsburgh Foundation.

Applicants were invited to request retroactive reimbursement for pandemic-related expenditures from March to August as well as prospective funding for October to December. “By the time we issued the grants, everyone’s budgets had shifted to COVID, so we did not want to penalize people who had already spent money,” Yonas explained.

But the offer of retrospective payments highlighted the limitations facing smaller organizations. Only about half had maintained and could present spending records to show clearly which of their expenditures from March to August were specifically COVID-related and thus eligible for CARES Act funding.

As a result, The Pittsburgh Foundation brought in **YourCFO**, an organization that provides customized financial management solutions for small businesses and nonprofits. YourCFO helped recipients set up the necessary tracking and documentation procedures; in many cases, it also provided financial management assistance and capacity-building support throughout the grant process.

“There was a lot of learning, for us and the recipients, in terms of how to structure the expense sheets,” Yonas said. “Many did not have a structured payroll system they could query to show what costs were COVID-related. It was incredibly helpful to have YourCFO on board.”

Despite the short time frame and strict documentation demands, the 31 grantees were able to spend more than 95 percent of the CRF awarded to them in ways consistent with program guidelines (pending results of the final audit).

Moreover, The Pittsburgh Foundation provided an additional \$7,500 to each grantee from its Emergency Action Fund as unrestricted operating support, to help them address emerging COVID-related needs.

“Small organizations like us wouldn’t know all the details” of how to apply for federal grants, said Lucinda Wade, executive director of Coraopolis Youth Creations, which provided learning support to youth in communities west of Pittsburgh. “Our initial request didn’t exactly hit the mark, so Jocelyn [Antenucci] from YourCFO gave us guidance on what we could request based on the criteria. We wouldn’t normally get that professional assistance. Without it, we probably would have been deterred from applying.”

“Much of the emergency service we have provided during the pandemic has been in addition to our existing framework of programming,” said Rosamaria Cristello, executive director of the Latino Community Center, “so the DHS funding was tremendously impactful. It has enabled us to deliver these services without significantly jeopardizing our organization’s financial position or our ability to provide high-quality



Youth Enrichment Services (YES) implemented a “Virtual Mentor Initiative” in partnership with Pittsburgh Public Schools, locating “invisible” students and connecting them to their schools’ online platforms. Executive Director D. Floyd Jones said YES successfully located 75% of the students on their lists and has continued this work beyond CRF funding.



responses to community needs.” Cristello said their grant supported case management services for 805 Latinx families, food baskets for over 5,000 people, and virtual learning access for nearly 200 recipients.

By working with The Pittsburgh Foundation, “we were letting a strong strategic partner do what they do better than we can do it,” Ruffin stated. “If we hadn’t gone this route, these agencies would not have gotten the money.”



*The postcard developed by United Way and Blender to promote mask wearing*

## The great mask distribution

One of DHS’s most practical uses of CRF—and a good example of creative partnerships between DHS and community partners—was its countywide mask distribution. Early in the pandemic, masks were in short supply and relatively expensive, and inconsistent messaging on their value in preventing the spread of infection complicated efforts to encourage their use.

“I don’t know why the federal government didn’t just send everyone masks,” said DHS Chief Planning Officer Kathy McCauley. But since they didn’t, DHS stepped in.

McCauley, Chief Operating Officer Scott Hemphill and Project Manager Brandi

Harrison constructed a distribution plan that combined direct mailings to DHS-served individuals at highest risk—older adults, families in the child welfare system, residents of congregate settings, people with intellectual disabilities—with bulk distribution through family centers, homelessness service providers, housing authorities and the county jail.

To get the masks, DHS relied on a local partner that had already exhibited an amazing ability to procure personal protective equipment throughout the pandemic: Global Links, which arranged an order of 289,500 washable, reusable cloth masks (at a favorable bulk cost of \$4 each) through a provider in the City of Duquesne.

To communicate the importance of wearing the masks, United Way and Blender, its advertising firm, worked with DHS to develop cards that would accompany the mailing. Blender created a colorful 4” by 6” card with a recognizably downtown Pittsburgh design and two courageous-looking people in Batman-like capes, above the slogan “Heroes wear masks.” Each package also contained a card, reminding people that they could call 2-1-1 if they needed help.

Finally, to process the mailing, DHS called on Life’s Work, which serves individuals with disabilities or other employment barriers. Life’s Work assembled about 50,000 packages, which they mailed in September 2020. Then in December, they came back for an encore. Over two weeks of tightly structured assembly-line activity, Life’s Work prepared 9,000 care packages with other essentials such as hand sanitizer, disinfectant wipes, moisturizing cream and toilet paper. The packages were sent to senior citizens confined to their homes, reaching them just before Christmas.

“This was a huge project for us and the 60 individuals who are part of our Facility Vocational Rehabilitation Program,” Timothy Parks, president and CEO of Life’s Work, said of the care package

assembly. “It brought together all our clients and virtually all our staff members—in socially distanced fashion—to get the job done. The staff and clients took great pride in their work, knowing whom the packages were going to.”



*The room where Life’s Work staff assembled thousands of packages with masks and other essentials for mailing throughout Allegheny County*

## Reaching the children for whom remote learning wasn’t going to work

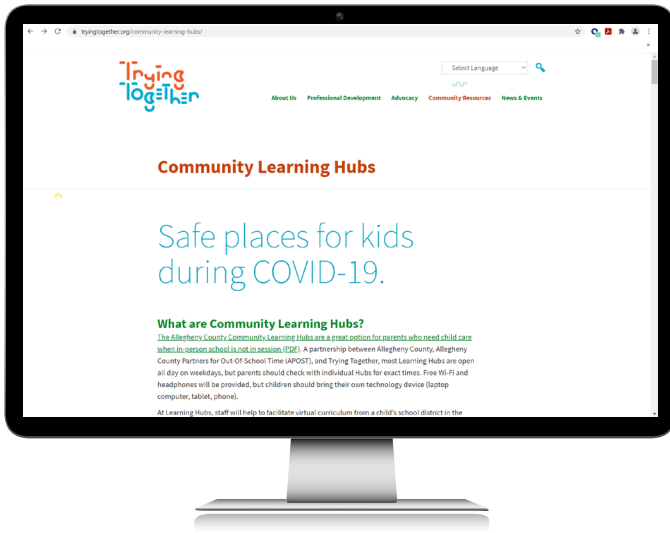
As summer 2020 neared its end and it became apparent that most K-12 schools would not reopen that fall in normal fashion, the future of thousands of children in Allegheny County became full of question marks. Schools were positioning themselves to conduct remote learning, but many children had no daytime supervision and no learning support. Some still had no laptops.

“We had to find unconventional ways to support school-age childcare,” said Amy Malen, assistant deputy director in DHS’s Office of Community Services.” The solution was to identify safe spaces where children could have a structured environment that supported their remote learning and nutritional needs.



DHS normally funds several dozen “out-of-school time” programs, which serve children before or after school and during the summer. So there was a natural constituency of providers, but they weren’t funded or equipped to serve children during school time in a pandemic.

Partnering with the United Way (which operates the coalition known as Allegheny Partners for Out-of-School Time, or APOST) and Trying Together (formerly the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children), DHS quickly put together a request for Learning Hub proposals.



The application process was streamlined, but the expectations were more prescriptive than usual: enough space for students to spread out, full adherence to safety protocols, sufficient adult supervision, and ability to keep students entertained when they weren't in a class.

“We didn’t want to set the bar at school level,” Malen said, “because this was not a replacement for school, but a place where students could connect with their school in a supportive and supervised setting.”

Besides, the logistical demands were actually greater than for a normal school, because the students at a typical Learning Hub came from many schools, all with different schedules. One

might be doing exercises in front of a computer screen with her gym class while another did math and a third was on lunch break.

The sites had to act fast to transform themselves from after-school centers to remote school sites. Some needed Internet upgrades or backup laptops; others added staff; DHS supplied 2,000 sets of headphones to successful applicants. But overall, “It was amazing that the providers could turn on a dime,” Malen said.

Where no applications came in—notably in Pittsburgh’s West End and in Highlands, a lower-income school district in northeast Allegheny County—DHS went out and recruited partners. When school opened in September, 64 Learning Hub locations were serving over 1,000 children, using about \$800,000 a month in CARES Act funds.

Mt. Ararat Community Activity Center in East Liberty, which has offered early childhood services for 30 years, was “immediately thrilled” to participate, said Executive Director Denise Head. The center offered to serve up to 100 children and ended up with average enrollment of about 75.

“Even though the students were learning virtually, they had a lot of time each day when no teacher was in front of them,” Head explained. “We wanted that time to be productive as well. So we hired retired educators, not just people to make sure the kids were logged in. We obtained additional learning materials, set up classrooms with dividers, and purchased computers and iPads in case a student forgot theirs or it wasn’t working.”

The YMCA of Greater Pittsburgh, which normally runs before- and after-school programs in 28 schools, had to scramble to find new locations since the schools weren’t open. Jessica Lausch, associate director of youth enrichment, said the YMCA first surveyed school administrators to identify areas of greatest need and then moved rapidly to secure a range of sites, from the YMCA’s own buildings to recreation centers and church basements. It opened 12 Learning Hub sites across the county in September.

“The schools appreciate the Learning Hubs too, because they have relationships with our staff and know whom to contact if a student doesn’t turn in work,” Lausch noted.



Bible Center Church in Homewood was an obvious choice because its executive pastor, Cynthia Wallace, is a retired Pittsburgh elementary school principal. Wallace successfully conducted a seven-week socially distanced summer camp for 46 children and, foreseeing the school-year needs, was already inquiring of a local foundation for learning hub support before the DHS funding materialized.

Along with academic support, Wallace cited a variety of logistical challenges that DHS support helped Bible Center overcome: daily cleanings, buying long tables to keep children distanced, a shuttle system to transport children without unsafe overcrowding on any one trip. Her only regret was capacity: Bible Center served 54 students and had a waiting list of 80 at one point.

Malen hosted biweekly meetings to help Learning Hubs deal with such issues as food delivery, COVID-19 exposure (a few sites had to close temporarily, but there were no outbreaks), and preparing for inclement weather. “Normally, sites follow their district’s schedule on bad-weather days,” she laughed, “but now we were the only ones open!”

Although CRF money ran out in December, DHS continued funding Learning Hubs into early 2021 as needed, adjusting the number of sites as schools resumed in-person education. In all, the Learning Hubs involved 43 providers, hosting 64 locations that supported students from 16 school districts. On average, 1,000 students attended the hubs each day.

## **A new pathway to recovery from substance use disorder**

The pandemic slowed down but could not stop DHS’s progress in opening a new center designed to solve the biggest problem in substance use disorder (SUD) treatment services: inadequate capacity to respond immediately when someone seeks help.

“We do not want anyone to be told we have no bed, go back on the street and overdose,” said Maisha Howze, assistant deputy director for drug and alcohol services. Especially with the opioid crisis flooding the SUD treatment system, there have been tragic instances when people were asked to wait until the next day but didn’t make it to the next day.

DHS envisioned creating a recovery center in downtown Pittsburgh that would offer certified assessment of clients’ needs; that would remove common barriers to treatment by addressing related issues such as food, childcare and transportation; that would not be biased toward whatever services (e.g., inpatient versus outpatient) the assessing entity had available; and that would include a safe place to stay overnight if no treatment option was immediately available.

DHS circulated a request for proposals to its certified SUD assessment providers and awarded a contract to Renewal, Inc. in April 2019. Renewal was already planning to relocate its corporate office to a newly purchased building on Third Avenue downtown, so creating the new center, called Pathway to Care and Recovery, became part of the renovation plan.

The pandemic brought construction to a temporary halt, delaying the project by four months. But in November 2020, Pathway opened its doors, offering a strikingly different welcome from the typical “tell the receptionist why you are here” experience.

“Right at the front door, people receive a compassionate greeting from a certified recovery specialist, who supports them through the remainder of the process,” Shelly Thayer, Renewal’s vice president for program management, explained. “The recovery specialist has personal experience with addiction, which builds credibility.”



## **PATHWAY TO CARE AND RECOVERY**

**No judgement. Just care.**

Open 24/7, Pathway provides medical and treatment assessment and coordinates services, all with sensitivity to the client's voice. "People in recovery need support so they don't give up," Thayer emphasized. "If we find a bed for them, we take them there and don't just drop them off. We know it can be quite a wait, so we stay with them until they are admitted."

In conjunction with launching Pathway, Renewal also introduced an engagement and coordination team that can be dispatched to provide support and assessment anywhere in Allegheny County, becoming a mobile entry point into treatment.

Because Pathway provides initial engagement but is not itself a treatment provider, it can collaborate rather than compete with all the region's providers. The 14 beds at Pathway are to be used only if the assessment determines a need for treatment but there is a delay in finding an appropriate placement.

The high-quality client engagement at Pathway features meals prepared by Renewal's full-service kitchen, plus assistance in removing any obstacles to care such as arranging insurance coverage or obtaining an ID card.

"We make the process easy and seamless and take all the legwork out so that clients can just focus on themselves," said Pathway director Melissa Breckenridge. "As one client told me, 'If I had to do this on my own, I would have given up by now.' Our goal is to provide a welcoming, safe, nonjudgmental place for people who need help."

With the opening of Pathway, Howze believes that Allegheny County now has a coordinated entry point for SUD services that further enhance an already robust system.

### **Many warm welcomes at the Safe Haven Hotel**

The arrival of cold weather in late 2020 brought new adventures at the Safe Haven Hotel, which DHS had established the preceding April to provide a safe residence for people with COVID-19, because their job presented a potential risk of contagion to their family, or at high vulnerability of contracting the virus due to their age, underlying health conditions and residential status.

The Safe Haven Hotel provides lodging, food, medical care, and transportation to medical appointments in a carefully monitored environment that keeps people who have tested positive for COVID-19 from encountering others.

During fall 2020, the hotel had a steady clientele of about 50 high-vulnerability residents and a smaller but increasing flow of individuals with COVID-19 or in quarantine. Those who had tested positive were housed on the building's first floor to separate them from other "guests."

However, cold temperatures brought increased need, especially since social distancing protocols had reduced capacities at existing shelters. Accordingly, the hotel took on an additional function as Allegheny County's winter shelter overflow space.

The offer of a hotel room with three meals a day could have unleashed a torrent of demand among shelter patrons. Following a detailed analysis that took into account the need in prior years and the

downsized capacity of downtown shelters, DHS settled on a standard practice according to which Pittsburgh Mercy referred individuals to the hotel only after they had sought shelter downtown for at least three nights. Also, hotel stays for shelter clients lasted three nights at a time and commenced on different days, so that hotel staff would not have to clean and sterilize too many rooms each day.



*Carrie Smidl, LPN, delivers meals to guests at Safe Haven Hotel. Those staying receive three meals a day, provided by the nonprofit Community Kitchen.*

“This balance ensured we could follow our cleaning and sanitization protocols, ease the turnover of rooms, and continue to serve those most vulnerable and in need of shelter,” said Stephanie Meyer, DHS housing services program specialist, who supervised hotel operations. “If we had 50 people leaving each day and 50 new people coming that night, it would be overwhelming.”

By mid-December, shelters downtown and in McKeesport were hitting their capacity thresholds and the Access paratransit service, which had a van on standby, was ferrying about 15 to 20 people each night to the Safe Haven Hotel. Overall nightly occupancy reached 115, split about evenly between three-night visitors from shelters and longer-term residents.

The rising numbers put extra pressure on the generally unflappable Luray Fladd, supervisor of specialty shelters for Community Human Services, the Safe Haven Hotel’s staffing provider.



*Staff and volunteers at Safe Haven Hotel are provided with PPE. Mattie Johnson dons a face shield as she prepares to tend to guests.*

During the hotel’s opening days in April 2020, Fladd lived there herself for a week while her staff worked 12-hour shifts. Within a few months, things were running more smoothly. The hotel had full staffing, policies and procedures; prescribed health protocols weren’t changing constantly as they did in the early months of the pandemic; and there was an on-site medical advisor “so I [Fladd] didn’t have to do Google searches for medical recommendations when we discharged someone.”

But then came two back-to-back shelter outbreaks, causing 40 residents to be transferred to the hotel within days. The number of exposed residents exceeded the space reserved for them. The carefully



constructed floor plans, with plastic barriers in hallways and firm directives on who used the elevator and who took the stairs, had to be revised.

Meanwhile, Meyer managed the sensitive relationship with hotel building management, which continued to use a front wing of the building for regular customers during the fall. A few unusual reviews of the facility showed up online, but hotel management gained a positive appreciation of the Safe Haven staff after calling on them to intervene in two emergencies—a drug overdose reversal and a domestic violence situation—involving paying customers.

The hotel has achieved its primary goal: in over a year, not a single person has become infected on site, although two guests disappeared without authorization—one of them to speak at a funeral—and were COVID-positive when they returned. Furthermore, the impact on some residents has been life-transforming.

By the time the pandemic restrictions were lifted, more than 640 residents had come through its doors.<sup>1</sup>

*1 With re-admissions and overflow from the winter shelter, there were actually 1,750 unique stays. In total, the hotel served four distinct populations, 24/7 at one site, with zero spread within the facility.*

*A breakdown of COVID-19 statistics shows that:*

- 203 clients were in isolation (symptoms or positive)
- 113 were quarantined due to exposures
- 135 were quarantined due to a high-risk condition

Fladd recalled one woman who arrived at the hotel wearing hospital socks and no shoes. She ended up staying for most of a year. As the staff worked to find independent housing for this client, she became resistant, presenting all sorts of demands. Through compassionate questioning, the real problem emerged: she didn't want to live alone again. Even in a hotel with isolation protocols, her relationships with a caring staff gave her a sense of community. Fladd said the woman is now thriving in her new residence and even came back to the hotel for her COVID-19 vaccination.

Meyer expressed great appreciation for key partners: the Pittsburgh EMS units that transported infected or exposed individuals, the Allegheny County Health Department



*Two residents of Artis Senior Living enjoyed fielding Alyx's questions about their satisfaction with the facility. Alyx enabled the Area Agency on Aging ombudsman team to conduct a site visit for the first time in nearly a year.*

### **A friendly robot takes over senior living inspections**

The pandemic prevented the DHS Area Agency on Aging (AAA) ombudsman team from performing its usual monitoring visits to senior centers. But a new team member named Alyx was able to take over the work with no risk of spreading COVID-19.

That's because Alyx is a robot.

Alyx performed its first inspection visit in February 2021, at a senior living facility in the South Hills. While the ombudsman team stayed outside, Alyx traveled through the hallways and interacted with residents. AAA staff were able to speak to residents through Alyx, as well as to conduct a visual check. Residents had a great time interacting with their unusual but very well-behaved visitor!

epidemiology team for its role in facility planning, Pittsburgh Mercy for its COVID-19 testing and vaccination assistance, Community Kitchen for food service, and especially the Community Human Services staff and leadership team. “Amidst a seemingly constant series of surprises and changing needs, they have all continually risen to the occasion,” she said.

To Fladd, a key ingredient of success was the presence of a creative staff team willing to embrace new procedures when the normal way of doing things wasn’t an option. “Working together, we’ve solved problems we never had to face before,” she summarized. “I will never have as poignant a professional experience as this one.”

## **Rental assistance: repairing a crucial lifeline**

For lower-income adults who faced substantial financial hardship due to the pandemic, a \$600 stimulus check was only a temporary bandaid. The larger lifeline was rental assistance, which for thousands of Americans made the difference between stable housing and eviction.

Like most emergency programs with very little launch time, the first iteration had its growing pains. “The state gave us a paper application and we developed an online portal,” said Charles Keenan, administrator in DHS’s Bureau of Homeless Services. “But the program was quite onerous. It required a lot of documentation, including pay stubs from the beginning of the year. You would have had to be a soothsayer and know to keep your stubs from before the pandemic.”

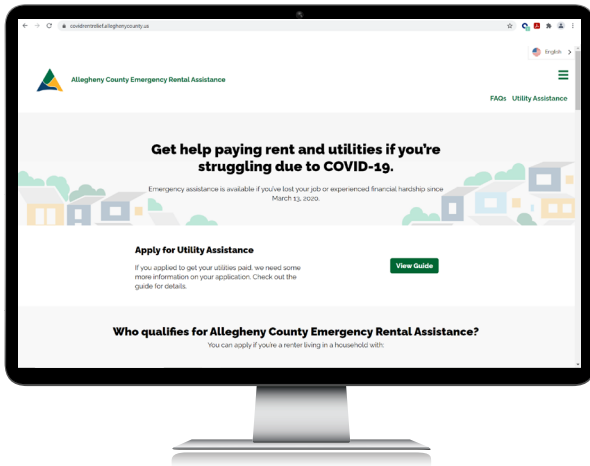
The original web portal did not permit users to create an account number, so they had to complete the whole application—including various document uploads—at once. If someone mailed an application in, participating program staff from four DHS providers had to input the data themselves; if an e-mailed application was incomplete, staff had to call the client and review the eligibility requirements.

To expedite application review and disbursement of rental assistance, the County created its own companion program with county CRF monies and simplified criteria. But the process was still painfully slow. Anxious applicants had no way to check their status other than to call the program office, further diverting staff resources from application processing.

In October 2020, Justine Galbraith, an engineer laid off due to the pandemic, offered volunteer time to help Kyle Webster of ACTION-Housing<sup>2</sup> diagnose the problems and streamline the system. Using business management methods, Galbraith created a program in Google Sheets that helped staff manage their day-to-day workload and gave supervisors visibility into the application review process. She also instituted a five-step procedure for each application: review the file, contact the client for any missing information, assess eligibility, confirm with the landlord and transmit the payment. In that way, all staff members had clarity about their work and became experts in their part of the process.

Thanks to these system improvements, productivity shot upward during the last two months of 2020, enabling Allegheny County to distribute about \$14 million to 3,500 recipients by year end. As a result, DHS asked Webster and ACTION-Housing to take over project management for phase 2. (DHS also hired Galbraith, who had volunteered for ACTION with no intent to pursue a job, as an analyst to support system improvements in other programs.)

According to Alexa Seretti, content strategy manager in DHS’s Office of Equity and Engagement, the improvements for phase 2 involved experts in three areas – homelessness and community services, technology and communications. “Program knows what information they have to get out, IT ensures that the system works, and we want something that people can actually understand and use,” Seretti said. “There is some tension between the three, but the tension results in a good product.”



*The website created for the Allegheny County Emergency Rental Assistance Program*

For phase 2, DHS introduced an **easily navigable website**, created by Senior Designer Meredith Joos and Web Developer Kim Sholl, that lets consumers access their application. But DHS knew that wasn't enough.

"We figured that 75% of applicants would do fine online and would just need staff follow-up if they had missing documents," Keenan stated. "But there is a big digital divide." To reach the other 25%, ACTION-Housing trained staff at eight community organizations in high-need neighborhoods to serve as drop-in application centers, and it engaged 20 more organizations to help reach underserved populations, even knocking on doors. And Alisyn Blackwell, DHS's video production manager, created a step-by-step video to walk applicants through the process.

Seretti analyzed data on other DHS-managed sites and found that only 30% of online users were connecting from a laptop, so she insisted that the website must be easy to navigate by smartphone. "A lot of thought went into how this would look on a mobile device," she explained. "For some people, that's their only Internet."

The website is in the six languages most widely used in Allegheny County, marketing materials are in 10 languages, and anyone who calls the program phone number at ACTION-Housing and says their language will get a translator on the line.

When phase 2 opened on March 15, 2021, DHS immediately discovered the success of both its marketing and the new website. "We got 1,200 applications the first day—and the system didn't crash," Keenan said. "We even paid three clients on the very first day."

The program retained five basic eligibility requirements: recipients must live in Allegheny County, be earning no more than 80% of the area median income, have suffered negative financial impact due to the pandemic, present a lease, and be homeless or at risk of homelessness. Payments are made directly to the landlord.

Keenan believes that the application process has appropriately simplified the process while retaining redundancies that help in prohibiting fraud. "The people who need the help most are often the ones with the least ability to provide information," he observed. "This program works because the Treasury Department thought it through and gave us regulations we could work with and because of support from local leadership.

Webster of ACTION-Housing added, "We took a leadership role in the implementation of emergency rental assistance because we felt a lead organization was needed. But the reason phase 2 has succeeded is the very collaborative, community-oriented approach DHS, ACTION and all the other partners are using to serve people effectively. This is a true team effort to help our neighbors."

For more information about the rental assistance program, see the **[Allegheny County COVID-19 Emergency Rental Assistance Program: Dashboard](#)**.



## **Better now than before**

As of the completion of this report, in May 2021, things are inching back toward “normal.” But one widely appreciated reminder of DHS’s extended struggle to beat COVID-19 remains.

On March 16, 2020 (as described in our initial report on DHS’s responses to the pandemic), DHS initiated daily briefings for everyone involved in the Allegheny County human services system. As the crisis receded in severity, the briefings decreased in frequency. But they are not going away. They still happen every two weeks, even though COVID-19 is not the main topic. The value of the enhanced communication and collaboration between DHS and its provider network cannot be overstated. Plans are afoot to streamline the briefings and to keep them relevant to a wide audience.

This innovation—bringing the whole county’s human services network together on a regularly scheduled basis—started out of necessity but has become a permanent improvement. It stands as a symbol of DHS’s performance in an unforgettable crisis: initially frenetic and exhausting, now more relaxed, but always seeking to become better than ever.