



ALLEGHENY COUNTY DHS

Hello Baby Update: September 2023





What is Hello Baby?

Hello Baby is designed for parents of new babies to strengthen families, improve children's outcomes, and maximize child and family well-being, safety and security. Through Hello Baby, DHS will reach more families who can benefit from support, better match families and babies to the right services, and ensure that the most vulnerable families and babies have access to the best supports we can offer.

After delivering her baby, Latasha told hospital staff she was struggling with food and child care needs. Then she wondered if she had said too much and might get in trouble or have her children taken away.

Instead, two weeks later, a gift basket with snacks, baby needs, and other practical items showed up at her home. “Who cares about me this much?” she wondered. Inside, she found a note encouraging her to call “Hello Baby” for support.

Destiny was behind on some bill payments when her baby was born after a difficult pregnancy. She initially declined services when in the hospital but responded when someone from “Hello Baby” reached out to her directly. “I am not used to taking handouts, but this time I needed help,” she said.

Latasha and Destiny illustrate a common pattern among new mothers with complex needs. They often hesitate to ask for help, especially if they think that doing so may trigger involvement of the child welfare system. But a personal touch can help them move from reluctant suspicion to cautious engagement.

That is the driving force behind Hello Baby, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services’ (DHS) innovative outreach approach to assist families coping with the challenges that accompany a new baby.



Offering support as early as possible

Hello Baby serves newborns (up to age 3) and their families across Allegheny County. Its goals are to strengthen families, improve outcomes for young children, and maximize the well-being, safety and security of both children and families, so as to reduce the incidence of abuse, neglect, and interaction with the child welfare system.

Hello Baby’s establishment was motivated in part by an analysis of child fatality data. Over an eight-year period (2009 to 2016), almost 80% of all Allegheny County fatalities and near fatalities associated with child abuse and neglect involved children under age 3. In about half of these cases, there was no opportunity for intervention because no referral or report of problems was made to the child welfare system before the tragic event occurred.

"That means we could be absolutely perfect in our child welfare decision making and still miss half the opportunities to protect babies and support families," said DHS director Erin Dalton. "If we care about prevention, we have to find another way."

The obvious answer is early intervention to engage families with the most complex needs. But how can one know where to intervene? For Hello Baby, DHS's data-driven risk model is the answer.

By processing data such as parental age, family size, and prior involvement with the human services and justice systems, the model gives each family a tier level. Families with scores in the top 20 percent land on the referral lists provided to Hello Baby outreach staff for individualized follow-up. Interested families are then connected to Healthy Start, Family Check-up and Family Centers to receive ongoing support and help with basic needs.

"All programs have to choose whom they will target and serve. Most use simple rules like if a person is on Medicaid or is a teen parent, both of which identify too many families with low needs." Dalton pointed out. "Our model helps us identify and concentrate resources on families with the biggest needs."

Tara Law, a DHS staff member involved in Hello Baby outreach, has a unique vantage point from which to confirm the data-driven model's value. She receives referrals from the model and can see if a hospital social worker also referred that family. "Hospital workers are identifying many of the same high need families, which helps to validate the model. But they miss some families that need help, which shows the benefit of having both sources of referrals," Law explained.



"Our model helps us identify and concentrate resources on families with the biggest needs."

Quick turnarounds

Latasha and Destiny are very glad they overcame their initial reluctance and responded to Hello Baby.

Latasha received counseling for postpartum depression, parenting instruction, and basic resources. After she became homeless in April 2022, Hello Baby helped with an initial rent payment and provided beds and an air conditioner for her children. Within 13 months, Latasha was not only working but had purchased a home.

"Other programs feel more like a business, telling you what papers to sign," said Destiny, who secured a new job and caught up financially with Hello Baby's assistance and encouragement. "When Charece [Lyons, Destiny's Hello Baby social worker with Healthy Start] reached out, it was more personal. She came to the house, and we set goals to complete. I did not feel pressured. Hello Baby has done everything they promised and more."

Lyons said she can relate well to skeptical new moms because she's been there herself.

"Twenty-nine years ago, when my daughter was born, Healthy Start reached out to me," she explained. "I let them sign me up for WIC and that was all, because I didn't trust them." That memory drives Lyons to build authentic relationships, letting consumers set the meeting schedule and assuring them that "you're not just a number for me. ... I may have 30 families, but I want you to feel like you're my one family."

"More Than Stuff"

Jaylan learned about Hello Baby at a "community baby shower" event in her Carrick neighborhood last year. The Hello Baby outreach team followed up just after her February 2023 due date and connected her with Sharon Geibel, a family coach at Family Check Up.



Thus began a relationship that supported Jaylan in multiple ways. "Sharon and I met every two weeks," Jaylan recalled. "She wanted to hear about my problems with being a mom, and about my relationship with my husband. She always set goals for the next time."

The goals were quite practical: taking walks with the baby (since Jaylan was largely homebound, as a stay-at-home mom recovering from a C-section and postpartum depression); getting the necessary paperwork filled out so the family could get rental assistance and move to a larger residence; making new friends.

***"Without Hello Baby,
I would not have half the
resources I have now,"***

"Without Hello Baby, I would not have half the resources I have now," Jaylan said. But her appreciation goes beyond the diapers, baby formula, and car seat that the program provided.

"Sharon and I have had the best conversations," Jaylan added. "She's helped me improve my relationship with my husband. Hello Baby doesn't just give you stuff, it helps you mentally."

Determined, caring outreach

Law has found that Hello Baby's best way to overcome skepticism or reluctance is the practical assistance it can offer. "I talk with new moms full of emotions and offer them something valuable, in real time," she stated. "I don't have to send paperwork to fill out. I tell them that if they need diapers or wipes, I can get them some right away."

Law's protocol includes making five attempts to reach a newborn's mother, starting with a text message that explains Hello Baby, with a link to the program's website, and how she can help them. "I'm trying to set them up for a phone call," she said. "Ultimately, if they are going to receive services, they will have to talk to people. But 90 percent of the time, we text back and forth prior to the first call. Of course, some families who need help don't realize they need it. But I think that number is dropping."

Law stressed that connecting effectively with families can't be just a day job. "You have to be accessible if someone texts you at 9:00 p.m. or on Sunday morning or asks for a visit," she said.

A strategically planned structure

Hello Baby's program structure rests on four principles:

- **Universal**—Hello Baby is offered to all families with newborns
- Seeking to make **initial contact as early as possible** after childbirth
- **Voluntary**—no one is required to participate
- **Use of a data driven model** to identify families at higher risk of negative outcomes and offer them more intensive services

The risk scores are used to establish three tiers of outreach:

Priority Tier, who are connected to Healthy Start and Family Check-up through Hello Baby outreach specialists. These programs help connect them to basic needs, provide services to build parenting and life skills, and provide connections to other supports as deemed appropriate.

Family Support Tier, implemented by the county's 22 Family Centers, receive referrals for families identified as at moderate risk.

Universal Tier, which encompasses any other families who choose to participate.

General marketing occurs through brochure distribution at hospitals, billboards, and bus shelter ads. Every family also receives a postcard in the mail a few weeks after a baby is born. Families can be referred by hospital or child welfare staff or by publicly funded child-care providers, with the family's consent. Self-referrals are welcome but rare.

Equally important as the means of identifying families is the range of services provided. Hello Baby offers assistance in many ways, generally divided into two categories:

- **Basic needs**, such as food, baby formula, car seats, and diapers. Priority families are also eligible for emergency child care and/or rental assistance and utility payments in some cases.
- **Supportive services**, including case management, home visits, parenting support, employment assistance, and physical and mental health services.



From the outset, Hello Baby committed to providing more than what families with complex needs typically receive.

At the Priority tier, a social worker or family coach collaborates with the family; at the Family Support tier, a Family Center service coordinator is the main link between the family and services suitable for their needs.

From the outset, Hello Baby committed to providing more than what families with complex needs typically receive. Program partner Healthy Start collaborated with the Camden (New Jersey) Coalition for Health Care Providers to design a specialized approach to meeting families where they are. The model's core principles include developing authentic healing relationships, letting the family drive goal setting, and a coaching style that builds families' capacity.

"We find that when we follow the family's lead, they are more invested in the services we are giving them and more likely to achieve their goals," said Angela Gressem, Hello Baby director for Healthy Start. "When families have actively participated, they have achieved life-changing goals such as home ownership, job training, better employment, and basic needs security."

Gressem also highlighted Hello Baby's ability to fill gaps creatively when other community resources cannot meet needs—such as covering a small unpaid fine so that a family could become eligible for county services or obtaining a school transcript to meet an application requirement for a mother who had been offered a job.

Results

Hello Baby scaled up gradually—starting as a pilot in the Mon Valley, then adding the eastern section of the county before going countywide as of October 2022.

Table 1 shows referral and engagement statistics since launch.

Table 1: Hello Baby referral and engagement, Sept 2020-June 2023

Number of babies born	30,682
Number identified as Priority or Family Support Tier	6,218 (20.3% of total)
Number enrolled	2,355 (37.9% of those referred)
Number enrolled at a Family Center*	2,030 (86.2% of all those enrolled)
Number enrolled by a Priority tier provider	325 (13.8%)

* Also includes a small number of self-referrals from the Universal tier

No families have objected to being contacted, although only about one-third of those at high or moderate risk according to the risk model have chosen to engage. According to the independent evaluator's report, clients have uniformly felt safe asking for help and felt that all support was offered in a non-judgmental way.

Enrollment percentages have improved over time, as shown in **Table 2**. Improvements in consistency and style of outreach could be among the reasons. Staff indicate that the offer of tangible goods such as diapers and baby formula is the most successful way to encourage engagement.

Table 2: Referrals and enrollment before and after centralizing outreach efforts

	Referrals	Enrolled	Enrollment Rate
November 2021-May 2022	1,068	253	23.7%
June-December 2022	1,298	482	37.1%

"Hello Baby is all about continuous process improvement," said Amy Malen, DHS assistant deputy director, who oversees the program. "What we've learned through our outreach efforts has led to a more coordinated approach, resulting in increased engagement rates."

Future steps

As Hello Baby continues to evaluate, in partnership with the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children and the Urban Institute, and refine its operations, issues under consideration include the following:

- **Finding ways to engage earlier.** Because the data-driven risk model has relied on birth records, there has been an unavoidable time lag between birth and the initial outreach to a new family. As of September 2023, Hello Baby is implementing a new version of the model that does not require any information from birth records. This change should enable the first contact of hospital referrals to be directed immediately to the appropriate service provider.
- **Expanding capacity** to help with basic needs, especially child care and affordable housing, the two most common obstacles to economic stability.
- **Reviewing the client assessment process**, which some staff conducting the assessments view as more useful to project researchers than to assisting the client.
- **Addressing staff turnover**, which has been affected by growing caseloads.

Along with the ongoing process evaluation, a formal evaluation of Hello Baby outcomes will begin soon. But based on the evidence so far, "Hello Baby is reaching families who can most benefit from its help, in a creative, focused way," Malen said. "We are excited to be at scale and operating smoothly all across Allegheny County. But we are still learning more every day about the most impactful ways to support the families we are reaching."

