



## **COVID-19 Response, Guidance, and Actions**

**Updated: April 22, 2020**

Governor Wolf, Dr. Levine, and local leaders across the commonwealth have taken unprecedented actions to protect the health and safety of Pennsylvanians. These measures, based on the guidance of public health professionals, are necessary to slow the spread of the virus that causes COVID-19. Life has slowed and it has changed, but it has not stopped for the millions of Pennsylvanians who depend on the Department of Human Services. The essential functions of this department cannot stop. DHS has an obligation to do everything we can to ensure continuity of services and programs for people who need them. Many of these services are critical now more than ever, and we are working internally and with providers and partners around the commonwealth to make adjustments as necessary. We are putting processes in place to ensure continuity of coverage so individuals do not lose their health care, cash assistance or food assistance during this uncertain time.

We will continue to update and reissue this document following each of our weekly calls. We hope that it is helpful to have all of these updates in one place, and we will note if new or updated guidance changes previous information.

Thank you for your support and partnership,

Teresa Miller  
Secretary of Human Services

## **April 29, 2020 Update**

### **Reopening Pennsylvania**

Many of you are aware that Governor Wolf and Dr. Levine have begun to discuss what a reopening process would look like for Pennsylvania. While this process will be phased and gradual in order to protect public health, DHS is working closely with our partners across the administration to prepare for what the reopening will look like for our DHS-run and licensed services and facilities.

You all can understand why we must be careful and deliberate in this process. All of us want to go back to normal life however we can, but we must continue to diligently follow social distancing and mitigation guidelines even as we reopen to do what we can to try to avoid a future resurgence. With that being said, we want to work with our providers so that when they are authorized to begin resuming services, they operate and provide services in a way that keeps staff and the people we serve safe.

Program offices will be issuing guidance as to how providers can operate through the reopening phases as well as recommendations on how to provide services in an adjusted manner. We are also working on a plan to safely reopen our County Assistance Offices to the public. As we solidify what these resumed operations will look like and counties begin to move from red to yellow, we will communicate how these

offices will open and operate.

The threat of COVID-19 will not disappear completely as we move to yellow and to green eventually, so we must continue to be cognizant of this as we move forward. Specifically, we will need to remain cognizant of the fact that for our seniors, people with disabilities who are dependent on some level of care, and people who are immuno-compromised or have other conditions that put them at higher risk to contract and/or become ill from COVID-19, the threat of COVID-19 will remain very real until we have a vaccine. On behalf of these more vulnerable Pennsylvanians, we need to remain vigilant, in the red, yellow and green phases.

We will have more information to share on this in the coming days and weeks, and I want to thank you all in advance for your patience and flexibility as we navigate what will become our new normal.

### **Applications for Public Assistance Programs**

There has been a lot of interest in data and trends we are seeing on public assistance applications, so we are going to begin providing an update on this each week.

We are anticipating that the economic challenges of the pandemic will eventually cause the public assistance system to see increased need, but we are not at that point yet. Since many of the impacts of this crisis didn't occur until late March, we wouldn't anticipate seeing increases until April's enrollment data, which becomes available in mid-May. We are monitoring application data closely, though. At this point, we have not seen a significant spike in overall applications, and our application level is about where it was before the crisis began.

We experienced about three weeks of declining applications from mid-March until early April, which occurred due to a significant decrease in paper applications. Online applications through COMPASS did increase during this period, but not enough to compensate for the decline in paper applications. We are beginning to see paper applications increase again and we are seeing nearly the same number of applications now as we did prior to the CAOs closing to the public.

In previous recessions, there was often a delay in terms of an impact on Medicaid and other public assistance applications. We expect the same will happen here as the increase could come from Pennsylvanians who may not have previously used DHS' programs. There is likely a knowledge gap regarding what kind of help is available and how someone could qualify, and, unfortunately, there's likely some level of stigma or fear of turning to a government program. We are communicating availability of these programs regularly through DHS' social media, press releases, and media availabilities, and we are working on messaging targeted to Pennsylvanians who may not be familiar with or do not see themselves as someone who could be helped by SNAP or other DHS programs. We understand that it may be difficult to ask for help from the government if you've never taken that step before, but we need all Pennsylvanians to know that they do not have to weather this period alone.

We will share this messaging when it is ready as we did with resources on child abuse, and we hope you can help us get this information out to the people you serve and your constituents.

### **Emergency Cash Assistance Program**

The economic disruption caused by this pandemic is affecting families and communities across Pennsylvania in different ways. For many low-income Pennsylvanians, especially those awaiting unemployment compensation, this disruption could be completely destabilizing, and we must do what we can to help them weather this uncertain period.

DHS is in the process of establishing an emergency cash assistance program to extend support to families with low incomes using existing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds. The emergency cash assistance program would be open to families with a child under age 18 or a woman who is currently pregnant. Families must meet emergency cash assistance income and resource limits and have at least one person who was employed as of March 11, 2020 and lost employment or experienced an hour and wage reduction of at least 50 percent for at least two weeks due to the pandemic. Eligible families will receive a one-time payment equal to two months of TANF benefits for their household size, so a family of three would get an average one-time payment of \$806.

We are finalizing details of the program and plan to announce more broadly and begin accepting applications in the coming days. When the program is formally announced, we will send you a copy of the press release so you are aware and can alert the people you serve.

### **Status of Other Office of Income Maintenance Initiatives**

DHS' Office of Income Maintenance continues to work on numerous initiatives to extend support to Pennsylvanians during the public health crisis and recovery period to follow.

#### LIHEAP Crisis

On last week's call, we mentioned that we intend to begin a LIHEAP Crisis program to help with home energy bills during the public health crisis. We are still waiting for word from the federal government on how much additional LIHEAP funding Pennsylvania will receive, so we do not have more information to share at this time.

#### Pandemic Electronic Benefit Transfer (P-EBT)

We are still awaiting approval on the P-EBT program. DHS and the Department of Education have answered numerous questions from FNS, so we hope to receive authorization soon so we can extend this assistance to families across Pennsylvania. Again, this program will assist families eligible for free and reduced-price meals as children no longer have access to these meals with schools closed.

#### SNAP Online Grocery Purchasing

We are very close to submitting our plan to FNS to bring Pennsylvania into the pilot for online grocery purchasing through SNAP. As mentioned last week, it is important to remember that participation in this does not mean that retailers can work through DHS to begin to accept online SNAP payments. Retailers still need to work through FNS for this, and currently, just Amazon, Walmart, and ShopRite would be available for online payment in Pennsylvania.

Once our plan is submitted and approved, we will work with these retailers and our EBT vendor Conduent to activate online ordering for SNAP recipients in Pennsylvania. I encourage any retailer who is interested in accepting online payment for SNAP participants to contact FNS to join the pilot.

As a reminder, retailers can create flexibility for SNAP recipients looking to utilize delivery or pick-up options without having to join the federal pilot program or seek approval by using mobile EBT processing equipment that would allow customers to pay with SNAP when groceries are delivered or picked up.

#### Letters to United States Department of Agriculture and Congressional Delegation

We appreciate the flexibility we've been given thus far to make adjustments to our SNAP program, but we still think that more could be done to help us utilize SNAP in a way that truly meets the need presented by this crisis.

Yesterday, Governor Wolf sent letters to Pennsylvania's congressional delegation and United States Department of Agriculture Secretary Sonny Perdue requesting greater flexibility for SNAP moving forward and reconsideration of denied waivers. Specifically, we are asking both Congress and the USDA to:

- Allow for low-income households with a student who is attending an institution of higher education to receive SNAP benefits. Current SNAP rules do not allow college students to be counted when determining a household's monthly SNAP benefit. Now that students are home, these families may not have the resources, either monetarily or in food supply, to support the additional person now residing with them. FNS previously denied this waiver, saying they did not have the authority to make this change to federal SNAP policy.
- Permit additional SNAP payments to all enrolled households. Pennsylvania previously requested authority to issue an extra payment equal to half a month's benefits to all SNAP households. FNS interpreted the Families First Coronavirus Response Act to mean an extra payment that would bring households up to the maximum monthly benefit. However, this interpretation means that households currently receiving the maximum monthly benefit – 40 percent of Pennsylvania's SNAP households – received no extra assistance. Broader issuance of emergency payments would help to further shift some demand from the emergency food system and into grocery stores, directly supporting Pennsylvania's struggling retail and agriculture economy. Congress must be clear about how future SNAP payments should be allocated so we can maximize support to SNAP households during this difficult period.
- Allow states to accept self-attestation for verification documents when we are unable to obtain such information due the pandemic.
- Permit states to exclude Pandemic Unemployment Compensation from the SNAP grant benefit calculation. This is not counted as income for Medicaid or the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs, but is for SNAP. Counting this short-term payment as a regular payment would create an administrative burden that could result in households being removed from SNAP for a short period, only to be eligible again when payments end. This would create unnecessary confusion and loss of benefits for households that were eligible for SNAP prior to losing their employment.

Our focus should be easing processes for people needing assistance during this time, not creating hurdles that could result in loss of benefits, and we appreciate the support of the USDA and Congress to make this possible.

### **Elective Procedures**

Earlier this week, the Department of Health announced hospitals may begin elective admissions and may perform elective surgeries and procedures if they are able to do so without jeopardizing patient health and safety and the hospital's ability to respond to COVID-19. Ambulatory surgical facilities may do the same. Because of this, guidance issued by the Office of Medical Assistance Programs in response to elective procedures during the public health crisis is now obsolete. OMAP is revising the previous operations memo in light of these new recommendations.

### **Fingerprinting Update**

We continue to work towards a solution on fingerprinting. HB 360, introduced by Representative Topper, was amended yesterday with language to provide a reprieve for individuals seeking their FBI clearances under the CPSL in order to work with children. The Senate passed this bill today and sent it back to the House, where the House voted to concur, sending the bill to the Governor for signature.

Once it is signed into law, we will work quickly to issue guidance on any changes to the fingerprinting process. In the meantime, everyone should continue to attempt to get FBI fingerprint checks necessary to keep vulnerable Pennsylvanians safe. This bill will be a short-term solution for the challenges faced right now, but if you are able to get fingerprinted, you should continue to do so.

I would like to thank the legislature for their fast assistance in addressing this important issue for foster and adoptive parents, child care facility workers, and teachers. I hope this can be fully resolved soon.

### **Budget Update**

There continues to be interest in how and when stimulus funding will be available to support providers. We hear these requests, and we are communicating these requests to the Governor's Budget Office. Over the past week, the Governor's Budget Office has received guidance for funds under the CARES Act. Pennsylvania will receive approximately \$4.964 billion. Of this amount, \$3.9 billion will be used and distributed by the state and \$1.0 billion will go to local governments. These funds are intended to be used to address the needs throughout the state due to the impact of COVID-19.

The Governor's Office is working closely with the legislature to determine the most appropriate way to distribute these funds to assist providers with their financial needs, and as we have more information to share, we will keep you all in the loop. Thank you all for your patience as we navigate this process.

Thank you all again for taking time out of your day to join us today and for all you are doing to serve the people of Pennsylvania during this time.

## April 22, 2020 Update

### **Fingerprinting Update**

We continue to understand the difficulty of attaining FBI fingerprint clearances due to the limited number of available sites. We are working on multiple efforts to alleviate this situation.

We are working with legislative staff to prepare language to provide a temporary reprieve for some individuals who are required to be certified or recertified under the Child Protective Services Law. This reprieve would still require individuals to complete available state clearances, sign an attestation where the individual confirms in writing that they have not been convicted of certain offenses, and complete the FBI clearance within certain timeframes following the lifting of the Governor's orders.

As we are awaiting this temporary reprieve, DHS has supported temporary mobile sites to help alleviate the current needs. Our first mobile site was earlier this week. During the call, we mentioned that a second site would take place on Thursday, April 23 in Allegheny County. Earlier this evening, we received word that this site was canceled and will be rescheduled. We apologize for any inconvenience. While we are doing what we can, these mobile sites will in no way meet the full demand or lessen the need for the legislative solution, which we continue to work towards.

### **Preventive Efforts in Congregate Settings**

As we fight this pandemic, we remain keenly focused on doing all we can to protect vulnerable populations under DHS' care and oversight.

Long-term and residential care facilities serving older adults, people with disabilities, and people with mental illness are feeling particular strain and pressure due to the circumstances we're facing. People served in these settings often have co-occurring disabilities and chronic medical conditions like heart or lung disease and diabetes, putting them at greater risk of a more aggressive case of COVID-19 and serious complications if they do test positive. This time creates serious risks and challenges, but these populations are care-dependent, so we cannot lose sight of our obligation to ensure both DHS staff and providers in the community are able to continue these services while keeping residents and staff as safe as possible.

DHS is following all guidance issued by the Pennsylvania Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in our state-run intermediate care facilities, hospitals for people with mental illness, and youth development centers and forestry camps. We have also directed all congregate care providers operating in communities across Pennsylvania – groups homes serving people with intellectual disabilities, personal care and assisted living facilities, and private intermediate care facilities, among others, to closely heed these recommendations as well. Specifically, we are working closely with licensed providers to adhere to the CDC's long-term care facility guidance that speaks to screening for COVID-19 and visitation restriction as we try to limit the spread of COVID-19.

Long-term care providers are in an extremely precarious situation in this pandemic, and we are doing all we can to allow necessary operational adjustments and provide support from the state level. We continue to issue new guidance as necessary and make additional requests to the federal government to support the flexibility we all need to properly respond as the pandemic evolves. We're also [facilitating](#)

[support networks](#) between long-term care providers, health systems, and health care quality units to help assist with preparedness, mitigation, and infection control efforts. This week, the majority of personal care homes and assisted living residences have been reached by a health system partnering with DHS to provide educational support and clinical coaching to help prevent the spread of COVID-19.

We know that there are concerns around availability of personal protective equipment for community providers. PPE distribution is centralized through a process overseen by the Department of Health and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. This process is prioritizing hospitals and nursing facilities. For other congregate care settings, including person care homes, assisted living residences, intermediate care facilities, and licensed community homes, they are doing their best to be responsive to other needs as resources become available. Facilities with active cases are prioritized. We also know that COVID-19 testing for these long-term care facilities is also a concern. DHS is currently following the guidance of the CDC as well as DOH when determining when it is appropriate to test long-term care residents.

We know this period is difficult, but we need our care providers to know that they are not alone, and we are doing what we can to listen to your needs and support you through this difficult period. Care providers around Pennsylvania are heroes every day in normal times, and during times of great challenge like we face now, that heroism comes at great personal risk. On behalf of the Wolf Administration, I want to thank everyone working in direct and long-term care. We are with you, and we will overcome this challenge in the coming months together.

### **State-Run and Licensed Facility Data**

I wanted to give an overview of what we are experiencing in our DHS-run facilities – our state centers, state hospitals, and our youth development centers and forestry camps.

As mentioned previously, we are paying meticulous attention to guidance and following protocols to mitigate the risk of COVID-19. Protecting the health and safety of people receiving care and services and our staff who provide these critical services is our utmost priority. We have published and discussed guidance related to changes in admissions and visitation policies to protect residents and staff during the public health crisis.

As the pandemic progresses, we want to be transparent about the status of our state-run facilities. This week, we started publishing [data on cases of COVID-19](#) among staff and people served in these facilities. This information is accessible through the “DHS Data” section of our COVID-19 landing page at [www.dhs.pa.gov](http://www.dhs.pa.gov) and will be updated every weekday. The data reflects active cases of COVID-19 among staff and people served, so as individuals recover, they will not be reflected in active case counts.

Currently, positive cases are found among both staff and residents at Norristown, Wernersville and Torrance State Hospitals. Hospital staff and leadership in the Office of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services have made numerous adjustments to limit further spread as much as possible.

Staff at all state hospitals have their temperature checked and are screened with four standard questions that evaluate risk of exposure to COVID-19 at the beginning of every shift. Anyone who works

a shift longer than eight hours is screened again before the overtime shift begins. Staff who work in the isolation units have temperature taken every four hours. All staff have a final temperature check at the end of their shift before leaving the facility.

Staff with a temperature higher than 100 degrees are directed to go home. Any staff who call off sick are asked to report their reasons to the hospital's Infection Control Nurse so they can be properly counseled on next steps. Staff with possible symptoms of COVID-19 are required to provide documentation from their physician or meet with an infection control professional before returning to work.

Currently, our state hospitals are requiring all residents to wear masks in compliance with the recent guidance from the Department of Health and Governor Wolf. Additionally, residents have their temperature checked every eight hours. Anyone with a temperature over 100 degrees has temperature checks every four hours, and if their temperature does not drop, residents are moved to isolation in the infirmary unit for closer observation.

Both residents and staff who demonstrate high risk for exposure or symptoms of COVID-19 are tested. Residents awaiting test results are also isolated to mitigate risk of further exposure. Presently, test results take several days. DHS is in the process of acquiring testing equipment and supplies to enable a higher volume of tests to be performed with faster test results at multiple locations in the commonwealth, and Norristown State Hospital will be a testing site. Staff are being trained in the proper use and maintenance of the equipment so that testing may begin on site in the near future.

All state hospital staff are utilizing PPE according to Centers for Disease Control and Department of Health guidelines. The kinds of PPE utilized may vary based upon the risk of exposure per area to which staff are assigned, but some level of PPE is mandatory and being provided for all staff on the campuses. Hospital housekeeping staff are using Electrostatic Disinfection Process regularly in all buildings to enhance the cleaning and disinfection processes.

We are monitoring these situations closely and at all other DHS-run facilities should circumstances begin to change. We are working on a method to provide data on our licensed facilities as well, so look for an update in the future on that data.

## **OIM Programs**

### LIHEAP Recovery Crisis

As the pandemic progresses, we are working to support access to vital public assistance programs and establish new opportunities to support Pennsylvanians through this difficult period and the months of recovery ahead. The 2019-2020 Low-Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP) season closed on April 10, 2020. Before the season ended, there were numerous suggestions to extend the season, expand services, or increase benefit amounts due to the pandemic.

There has been significant interest in this important program and we value the suggestions countless stakeholders have made over the last several weeks. We appreciate all the input we have received and are making adjustments to our proposed LIHEAP Recovery Program in light of those recommendations that will provide utility and energy assistance for households affected by COVID-19's economic



challenges. This program will be funded through LIHEAP funds contained in the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Stimulus Act – also known as the CARES Act. However, it has not yet been made clear to us exactly how much funding will be received for LIHEAP. Requests for information to the federal government have been denied, so we cannot move forward until we know how much funding we will receive.

Once funding becomes available, DHS intends to operate a Recovery Crisis program beginning in mid-May and running through August 31, or until funds are expended. Parameters for the Recovery Crisis program will be the same as the normal LIHEAP Crisis program with a few adjustments that take into account circumstances created by COVID-19.

We are ironing out final details on this program, but as soon as we are ready to move forward, we will be asking for your help in making sure the people who need to know about this opportunity can apply and receive assistance. Thank you, as always, for your support and partnership in connecting the people you serve to DHS programs that can help.

#### SNAP Online Ordering

Over the past several weeks, there has been significant interest in how Pennsylvania can join in the United States Department of Agriculture's pilot program to allow SNAP recipients to purchase groceries online. We share an interest in helping SNAP recipients access this resource and option to help SNAP participants mitigate risk of being exposed to COVID-19, but this is not a program we can simply opt into.

The USDA's Food and Nutrition Services (FNS) is responsible for approving both states and retailers for participation in the pilot. In Pennsylvania, only Amazon, Walmart, and ShopRite would be available through the pilot. If other retailers want to join this pilot, they would need to work through FNS directly. DHS does not have authority to add retailers. I also want to caution that in some states where the program currently exists, SNAP recipients face higher prices and difficulties accessing delivery or pick-up times that other customers are experiencing right now. DHS would not have any authority to address these issues or make accommodations for customers paying with SNAP. Additionally, SNAP funds would not be able to be used for delivery fees. DHS cannot waive this federal requirement, but we would be open to partnering with stakeholders and legislators to suggest that these fees be waived for SNAP customers.

We are planning to join this pilot and are preparing to submit the plan to FNS. If approved, there would be necessary system changes required by our EBT contractor and other business partners to make implementation possible. We have already had conversations with Amazon, Walmart, ShopRite and FIS, the third-party processor and all have agreed to provide commitment letters. We are now working with our EBT contractor to determine the timeline for the required changes that would allow us to make both SNAP and cash benefits available through the EBT card online. As soon we finalize these details, we will submit our plan to FNS. We will provide additional updates as we receive them.

There are options, though, for retailers to create flexibility for SNAP recipients looking to utilize delivery or pick-up options without having to join the federal pilot program or seek approval from anyone. The

pilot establishes a way for SNAP recipients to pay online for groceries, but if a retailer already has mobile EBT processing equipment, they can allow SNAP customers to pay when groceries are delivered or picked up. Wireless point of sale devices can be purchased at any time, and we are working with the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association so their members are aware of this on-going opportunity to create flexibility for customers paying with SNAP.

We also received a grant prior to the pandemic to provide EBT processing equipment to farmers markets. Interested markets would have to be an approved SNAP retailer through FNS, but once approved, a free mobile point of sale device can be obtained through our EBT vendor, Conduent. These grants also cover setup costs and one year of SNAP transaction fees. We are working with our partners to make farmers markets and their vendors aware of this option.

#### SNAP Emergency Allotments

We also received updated guidance from FNS regarding the issuing of [additional emergency SNAP allotments](#). States have been granted approval to continue issuing emergency allotments each month until such a time as the Secretary of Health and Human Services rescinds the public health emergency declaration. This means that beginning in mid-May and thereafter, we will issue additional payments to current SNAP households for the difference between what they received in their regular scheduled benefit in the previous month and the maximum SNAP amount for their household size. Current SNAP households that already receive the maximum benefit are not eligible for the additional emergency allotment.

We are drafting a letter to the United States Congress expressing our concern about FNS's interpretation of the Families First Corona Virus Relief Act as it relates to the issuance of the SNAP emergency allotment and requesting additional resources for the 40 percent of SNAP households that do not benefit from this change.

#### Pandemic EBT

DHS and the Department of Education did [submit our Pandemic EBT plan](#) to FNS on Monday. If approved, this plan would provide SNAP to students who are eligible to receive free or reduced-price meals through the National School Lunch Program. This would provide an approximate benefit of \$365 per child for approximately 958,000 Pennsylvania school-aged children.

We are still awaiting approval, and will keep you all in the loop when this hopefully moves forward. If approved, the first round of payments will be issued 14 days after approval.

#### **Child Care Updates**

On April 21, OCDEL released an [updated policy announcement](#) to child care and the Early Learning Resource Centers that Child Care Works (CCW) payments will continue to all providers. Payments will be made based on CCW enrollments for the month of May regardless of whether the provider remained open or closed. The policy continues the suspension of CCW co-payments charged to families if their children are not actively attending child care due to COVID-19 or if the child care is closed.

Last week, we mentioned the receipt of the CARES Act Stimulus funds released through the Child Care Development Fund. OCDEL is continuing to review data and consider stakeholder input to develop a plan to best direct these funds.

The Department of Labor and Industry's website for COVID-19 Employment Opportunities has linked directly to the [DHS COVID-19 Child Care map](#), allowing Pennsylvanians seeking to find work in an open life sustaining business the ability to review available child care near the job or their home. We continue to share available resources with individual families, employers, and associations regarding the availability of child care during COVID-19. Early Learning Resource Centers can connect families with open child care in their communities. The easiest way to identify which ELRCs serve a community is to visit [www.raiseyourstar.org](http://www.raiseyourstar.org).

### **Stimulus Funding Update**

We and the entire Wolf Administration realize the financial strain that the COVID-19 pandemic has placed upon providers. Over the past several weeks, DHS has been collecting data from providers on the impact of COVID-19 and are working closely with the Governor's Budget and Policy Offices to develop plans to help stabilize our provider community to ensure they are there and able to serve participants once the pandemic is over. Part of these plans include accelerating some fourth quarter payments to hospitals so they will receive them in May instead of August. Retainer payments and alternative payment arrangements are another way DHS is providing relief.

Like many of our providers and partners, the state also has been put under a financial strain due to decreased sales tax revenue, payroll tax, and several other income sources – with an estimated \$3 to \$5 billion in projected revenue loss. However, under the CARES Act, Pennsylvania will receive approximately \$2.7 billion, with another \$2.2 billion going to local governments. These funds are intended to be used to address the needs throughout the state due to the impact of COVID-19. While we have begun to receive some of the CARES Act funding, federal guidance is not yet available on how these funds may be used.

The Governor's Office will need to work closely with the legislature to determine the most appropriate way to distribute these funds to assist you with your financial needs, and as we have more information to share, we will keep you all in the loop. Thank you all for your patience as we navigate this process.

## April 15, 2020 Update

### **Child Abuse/Protective Services**

This unprecedented disruption creates challenges across nearly every facet of both our personal lives and our work at the Department of Human Services, but one area that brings deep concern is our work to protect children across Pennsylvania.

April is Child Abuse Prevention Month – a month normally marked by state and local recognitions of precious lives affected by and lost to abuse and an opportunity to educate everyone on signs of abuse and neglect and the role we all can play in keeping kids safe. As we navigate this public health crisis and the necessary disruptions, we cannot lose sight of our obligation to do all we can to keep kids safe and prevent child abuse, and the Wolf Administration is not compromising that duty.

Our child abuse reporting hotline – ChildLine – adapted quickly to office closures and transitioned to telework on March 19. We are, however, seeing a decrease in calls. Since March 19, calls to ChildLine have ranged from a daily low of 287 calls to a high of 365 calls on weekdays. The number of calls on Saturdays and Sundays is lower – ranging from 138 to 169 calls per day. These numbers represent a roughly 50 percent reduction in average daily calls to ChildLine since the commonwealth’s implementation of significant social-distancing measures advised by public-health professionals to slow the spread of the COVID-19 virus and save lives. This is in comparison to the same two-week period in 2019. We’re projecting that ChildLine will receive approximately 11,000 calls in April – 5,000 fewer than average thus far this year.

Unfortunately, the data trend of fewer child abuse reports cannot be interpreted to indicate fewer instances of child abuse. Rather, one unfortunate effect of school closures and the general disruption in life is the lack of interaction between children, their teachers, and other mandated reporters in school and other social services settings. We do normally see a drop in reporting during the summer months when school is closed, but during this time when we all must protect ourselves, our families, and our communities by staying home, how are we looking out for children who may be in danger at home?

To try to work against this trend, we are working to educate the public on signs of potential abuse and neglect, how to report to ChildLine, and what people should know when making a report to ChildLine. The Child Protective Services Law specifies who is and isn’t a mandated reporter, but that designation shouldn’t stop someone from making a call if they are concerned about a child’s safety. That call allows trained professionals to properly investigate and intervene if necessary.

We are lifting these messages through an on-going paid media campaign for ChildLine and through social media, but we need your help to reach Pennsylvanians more broadly. We put together a media kit with talking points, social media graphics, and other resources to help educate on child abuse reporting. The resources also include support outlets for parents who are likely experiencing extra stress as a result of this crisis.

I hope that you can join us in helping to do what we can to educate on reporting and preventing child abuse during this difficult time. We can all help keep kids safe – it starts with a call to ChildLine.

## **Fingerprinting**

As mentioned on previous weeks' calls, we continue to work closely with our partner agencies on the fingerprinting issue.

This morning we received new guidance from the federal Children's Bureau regarding fingerprint-based background checks. DHS is currently assessing what this guidance means for Pennsylvanians. We have also continued work in Pennsylvania to determine next steps for moving forward based on our own state laws and regulations.

For the time being, we are actively working on establishing temporary mobile fingerprinting sites for targeted programs to help meet this need. If you are interested in setting up a mobile fingerprinting site for individuals you serve, please email [statemobileservices@us.idemia.com](mailto:statemobileservices@us.idemia.com). Some IdentoGo locations are also either still operational or beginning to reopen, so I encourage you to call your local site if you or someone you know needs to get fingerprints at this time.

We will keep you all informed as this process and potential solutions develop, and thank you all, again, for your patience.

## **Education Support and Clinical Coaching Program Update**

I wanted to provide a brief update on something we announced during last week's call. Our Education Support and Clinical Coaching Program, which established a learning support network for personal care homes and assisted living facilities that includes the Jewish Healthcare Foundation and health systems across Pennsylvania, is continuing to grow. We've added two health systems – Geisinger and Allegheny Health Network – to help support long-term care facilities during the public health crisis.

The educational support component of this program includes weekly webinars hosted by the Jewish Healthcare foundation on important topics for personal care homes and assisted living residences and direct connections between the facilities and health systems to provide clinical coaching to address needs and challenges. Our hope is that this network will give our facilities the support they need and deserve as we all work through this difficult time. More information on trainings and how to sign up can be found at <https://www.tomorrowhealthcare.org/>.

## **Child Care**

It's been a few weeks since we touched on child care during this call, so I wanted to take a moment to remind you all that while most types of child care centers were closed under the Governor's order to close all non-life-sustaining businesses, many are operating with a waiver from our Office of Child Development and Early Learning to support essential workers with children needing care.

More than 1,500 child care providers are still operating as of today. 725 of these are operating with a waiver, and about 800 of these are family child care homes or group child care in a private residence, which do not require waivers. A centralized list of all operating child care facilities is available on [DHS'](#)

[COVID-19 webpage](#), and this map is updated every day to reflect new waivers and closures.

We are still urging these essential services personnel to consider their options if their child care provider chooses to close even if they are operating with a waiver. If families are able to make alternative child care arrangements at home, please do so to allow vacancies to be used for those who do not have other options, and begin to make an actionable contingency plan if your child care arrangement has to change.

DHS received notification from the federal Office of Child Care regarding the CARES Act Stimulus funds allocated to Pennsylvania in support of the Child Care Development Fund. Pennsylvania received \$106,397,624. Allowable uses for these funds include:

- Payments to child care providers in the case of decreased enrollment or closures to lend support to providers remaining open or for when they reopen;
- Payments to assist with costs of cleaning, sanitation, and other activities necessary to maintain or resume the operation of programs due to the coronavirus. Funds under this activity are available to child care providers, even if such providers were not previously receiving CCDF assistance;
- Providing child care assistance to health care sector employees, emergency responders, sanitation workers, and other workers like grocery store employees deemed essential during the response to the coronavirus, without regard to the income eligibility requirements; and;
- Any other allowable CCDF uses.

DHS is also partnering with Penn State Harrisburg's Institute of State and Regional Affairs on a short-duration, high-effort, mixed-methods research study looking at the impacts of COVID-19 on Pennsylvania Child Care Providers. The study will seek to answer the following questions:

- How have child care providers responded to COVID-19, and what are the financial costs?
- How many child care providers will remain operational without revenue in the next few months?
- What level of investment is needed to cover provider costs to enable their continued operation after restrictions on public movement are lifted?
- What level of investment is needed to ensure that child care services are accessible to families during a transition period of low demand because of unemployment and fear of infection?

Results of this study will inform future investments and allocation of resources to support child care providers' recovery. Providers will be selected to participate through a random selection of all licensed providers, so we encourage all who are contacted to participate.

### **CAO Updates**

We continue to monitor our County Assistance Offices closely and are making more adjustments to keep staff safe while CAO operations continue.

Effective this past Monday, in lieu of the staggered shifts in the larger offices, we implemented dual shifts where some staff will work in the morning and some in the evening. Implementing dual shifts also allowed us to maximize productivity since all staff are working full time. This allows us to continue

to protect employee safety and limit the number of people in an office at one time. Additionally, we are ramping up teleworking capacity for CAO employees. Last week, more than 90 employees were transitioned to telework as part of a pilot, and we now have more than 2,900 staff teleworking with more to come over the next few weeks.

As we face growing economic challenges in the wake of this public-health crisis, assistance programs that help people and families access health care and keep food on the table will be vital in helping Pennsylvania recover. We are committed to doing all we can to keep staff safe as they keep this critical function of government operating and available for Pennsylvanians who need it most.

### **SNAP Disbursement and Waiver Updates**

On Friday, April 10, the Food and Nutrition Service issued blanket denials of certain waivers that had been requested by individual or multiple states, including Pennsylvania.

The first waiver denied pertains to eligibility for college students. Under normal SNAP eligibility rules, college students enrolled more than half-time in an institution of higher education must meet an exception to potentially qualify for SNAP. The exception that most students meet is working at least 20 hours per week. Many other students have meal plans on campus and while these plans do not cover all the nutritional needs for students, they are no longer available since colleges have transitioned to distance learning and low-income students have returned home.

Under federal rules, college students cannot be counted towards a household's SNAP allotment. In other words, SNAP households may be supporting more people without additional benefits to meet this need. This leaves many of these families, who were already struggling, trying to feed an additional family member with no additional financial support. And if they are able to work, students may not be able to meet this exception criteria due to the COVID crisis and cannot qualify for SNAP without risking their health or the health of their families. FNS denied this waiver stating that the Families First Coronavirus Response Act (FFRCA) allows them to adjust SNAP issuance methods and application and reporting requirements, but not to adjust SNAP eligibility requirements.

The second waiver denied is related to the interpretation of the response act as it pertains to the issuance of the SNAP emergency allotment. While all states are approved to provide an emergency SNAP allotment up to the maximum amount for the household size, there was a disagreement about the interpretation of the rule between the states and FNS. States interpreted the language to mean that all SNAP households would be issued an additional payment to cover 14 days' worth of food as recommended by the CDC. FNS interpreted the language to mean that if a SNAP household received less than the maximum amount in the previous month, they would be eligible for the difference between what they received previously and the maximum amount in the subsequent month. The correspondence received by FNS reiterated their position on the issuance of the allotment.

This interpretation means families that received the maximum SNAP payment for their household size – about 40 percent of the cases in Pennsylvania – received no additional funding and, therefore, are unable to fill their pantries as recommended. We are proceeding with issuance of the emergency allotment based on FNS' interpretation and those payments will begin going out on April 16.

The third waiver denial pertains to the state's ability to not reduce or close SNAP benefits when a household's circumstances change or the household is found to be ineligible. This waiver would have resulted in no SNAP reductions or closures during the COVID-19 health emergency, similar to the procedure currently used for Medical Assistance benefits.

We continue to work with FNS and hope that they will reconsider some of these denials in recognition of the serious situation we all find ourselves in.

### **Pandemic SNAP (P-SNAP)**

Pandemic SNAP benefits provide funds via EBT card for low-income kids who are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch through the National School Lunch Program. These programs are temporary in nature and designed to help meet the gap left by schools closing due to the COVID-19 crisis. Eligibility certifications for the National School Lunch Program are administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, however, DHS provides direct certification for about 680,000 kids based on participation in SNAP or Medicaid. PDE certifies students as eligible based on their income, or they can certify schools at large based on the percentage of students that qualify for free and reduced cost lunches.

P-SNAP will allow us to provide additional funds to cover the cost of lunch and snacks for approximately 958,000 kids. To participate in P-SNAP, we are required to submit a detailed plan to FNS outlining the process for identifying the eligible populations and how the funding will be issued.

For the last several weeks, we've been collaborating with PDE to work through the process and we are now working on the formal request with the goal of sending it to FNS by the end of the week. This is yet another opportunity for us to help those families in need, and we hope FNS will support us in this effort. As we have additional updates, we will communicate with all of you.

### **Job Portal**

I wanted to be sure you are all familiar with a new resource launched by the Department of Labor and Industry earlier this week – a centralized job portal for life-sustaining businesses hiring during the public health crisis. This resource is available by visiting [PA CareerLink online](#).

All businesses posted on this resource are life-sustaining and therefore are still operating. And because these jobs are life-sustaining, if people need child care, they would be able to use one of the [operating child care providers](#).

This resource will be updated daily, so I encourage you to refer people you serve who are looking for work during this difficult economic period.



## April 8, 2020 Update

### **Education Support and Clinical Coaching Program**

More than 65,000 Pennsylvanians live in over 1,200 personal care homes and assisted living residences throughout the Commonwealth, and these facilities care for some of the most vulnerable Pennsylvanians. Unlike nursing facilities, they normally lack clinical staff, and so direct care workers in these settings may feel ill-equipped to deal with COVID-19.

DHS, in partnership with health care systems and the Jewish Healthcare Foundation, is launching the Educational Support and Clinical Coaching Program to help these facilities during the COVID-19 public health crisis. The educational support component of this program includes weekly webinars hosted by the Jewish Healthcare foundation on important topics for personal care homes and assisted living residences. Our first webinar was scheduled for April 7, and so many people signed up for it that we needed to expand the technological capacity of the webinar.

The Office of Long-Term Living is also reaching out to personal care homes and assisted living facilities to conduct preliminary needs assessments. When needs are identified, they are referred to the five health systems that are partnering with DHS for this initiative: Temple University, University of Pennsylvania, Penn State Hershey Medical Center, the Wright Center, and University of Pittsburgh Medical Center. Outgoing calls from these health systems are slated to begin this week, where the health systems will provide clinical coaching on how to prepare and manage COVID-19. Health systems are also holding daily office hours for individual facilities that need extra coaching, explaining the latest guidance from DOH and CDC.

This is a frightening time for these DHS-licensed facilities and the vulnerable residents they serve. But we have their backs. Collectively, we believe that with the additional educational support and clinical coaching that we are providing, personal care homes and assisted living residences will finally have the support they need.

### **Fingerprinting**

As we discussed last week, we are aware of the ongoing concerns around fingerprinting requirements and limited access to IdentiGo scanning sites because of closures related to COVID-19.

We, in collaboration with the Departments of Education, Aging, and General Services, sent a letter to “Enroll Your Own” fingerprinting sites (approved by the fingerprinting vendor Identigo) asking that they reopen additional locations. Some of these sites have agreed to open up and we will be updating the list of open fingerprinting sites as that information becomes available. Additionally, we understand some Identigo locations are beginning to reopen, so I encourage anyone needing fingerprints to call the closest locations to verify whether they are or aren’t operating as this may begin to change. As a part of our efforts with other agencies, we were able to produce a [map that shows the open fingerprinting sites](#) across the commonwealth. We continue to monitor and update this map.

We are not able to broadly waive this requirement from the state level because it is contained in numerous federal laws like the Family First Prevention Services Act, the Adam Walsh Act, and the Child

Care Development Block Grant Act. However, we continue to work towards solutions that can alleviate the challenges presented by this.

We released guidance on waiving licensing requirements in Personal Care Homes and Assisted Living Residences, but understand that this guidance does not align with information just issued by the Department of Aging. We are working with the Department of Aging to address the discrepancies and will provide clarification.

We know that there are many more people who first obtained clearances in 2015 following changes to the Child Protective Services Law who will need to renew these clearances this year. We are open to temporarily delaying the five-year requirement, but this would need to happen through legislative action. DHS and the Governor's Office are working with the legislature to try to accomplish this, but we know this cannot be our only option. We are also pursuing potentially opening additional, temporary fingerprinting sites that can help us meet this need as we work through the public health crisis.

We will keep you informed as this moves forward and appreciate your patience as we navigate the challenges that arise due to this crisis.

#### **Bureau of Juvenile Justice Services (BJJS) Admissions**

Last week, there was some concern and media attention over concerns regarding transfer of youth to juvenile justice facilities operated by DHS.

DHS does not have a right of refusal at these facilities, but we are, however, monitoring operations closely and working with our partners at county juvenile parole offices and delinquency courts to ensure transfers are absolutely necessary and made safely as we navigate this public health crisis. We do not want to risk the health of youth or staff at our youth development centers and youth forestry camps, and operational adjustments are necessary to meet the challenges of this unprecedented period.

As of April 4, we temporarily suspended all transfers to our state-run juvenile justice facilities. This step was taken to allow staff in BJJS to create two ten-bed intake units to mitigate risk of spread at the state-run facilities. Youth awaiting transfer to the YDC/YFC system will be admitted to the intake unit on the same day and remain in the unit for 14 days until they are cleared for entry into their designated program. If any youth test positive for COVID-19 during this 14-day period, that youth will be moved into isolation and the youth who are in the intake unit will re-start their 14 days in the unit to make sure that they do not develop symptoms of COVID-19.

Screening for COVID-19 must occur and be documented prior to admission and include questions about exposure to COVID-19 and assessment for symptoms. Youth who are not documented as having been appropriately screened will not be accepted for admission. Youth who do not pass pre-admissions screening will not be accepted for admission until they are medically cleared for transport.

Youth in the intake unit will have access to a temporary counselor, psychological and medical services, physical activity, and other individualized recreational activities. Social distancing will be enforced, and youth will be able to maintain contact with their family through phone calls, video conferencing, and

letters. Youth will be transported to the YDC or YFC following 14 days without testing positive for COVID-19, without symptoms, or without contact with someone who tested positive for COVID-19.

Transfers to the intake unit will be accepted based on the number of YDC/YFC beds projected to be available 14 days after intake begins and will be based on each program operating at 100 percent capacity. Youth and staff safety is our first priority, so this shift will allow us to maintain our responsibility to provide an option for youth who need these services while recognizing the risk presented by COVID-19.

### **Federal Funding Requests**

Many of you have reached out regarding issuance of funding contained in the federal stimulus bill. At this point, we do not have a timeline for when these funds will become available, but I assure you that as soon as we have more information to share, we will communicate that.

We also wanted to make sure you were aware of three key elements of the federal CARES Act. For those of you that have less than 500 employees, there are the Small Business Administration (SBA) grant and Economic Injury Disaster Loan programs. Also available is the Payroll Protection Program that is available through SBA-approved banks. These programs offer a limited amount of loan forgiveness and other benefits that are designed to keep staff employed. Please consult with your accountant to see if these are right for your situation.

Information about available federal relief programs may be found from the [U.S. Treasury](#) or the [Small Business Administration](#).

### **Low Income Home Energy Assistance (LIHEAP) update**

The LIHEAP program provides assistance with heating needs through the heating season. It was scheduled to close on April 10, and that is the last day we will accept applications for the current season.

DHS knows how vital this program will be to help those who have been financially impacted by the COVID emergency. Because of this, we started to plan a recovery program that would be made available to assist with accumulated bills. We have met with representatives from the PUC, the Energy Association, local community groups, Rural Electric, the Petroleum Association and others to discuss how this program can best be designed to meet the needs of those who need help to recover economically.

To further assist these households, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act included additional funding for the LIHEAP program. Pennsylvania anticipates receiving approximately \$50 million in additional LIHEAP funding. This funding can go a long way to helping people in the economic recovery process.

We are working with partners to further develop this plan so that it will meet the needs of as many as possible. We will provide updates as this program becomes more final.

### **SNAP Waivers**

We've previously discussed requests made to the United States Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Services regarding the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – better known as SNAP. As of today, we've requested the following changes to SNAP:

- We sought to delay implementation of rule affecting work requirements for able-bodied adults without dependents – also known as the ABAWD rule. This request was negated by provisions in the Families First Coronavirus Response Act.
- We requested a waiver of the requirements for face-to-face interviews and interviews for expedited SNAP applications. FNS provided a blanket waiver of all SNAP interviews including expedited, application and renewals.
- We requested an extension of SNAP certification periods so households will not lose access to benefits during this public health crisis, which was also waived at the federal level by FNS.
- We are currently awaiting response on two waivers: one that would allow SNAP education providers to assist with distribution of national school lunch program meals, and another that would waive college student eligibility criteria so students and families with college students can receive their own benefits or additional benefits for the household so needs are met during this period.
- We received approval from FNS to issue emergency allotments to all ongoing SNAP households as part of the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. This approval will allow us to increase the current monthly allotment up to the maximum monthly allotment for a household of that size. The approval is for March and April and we will make this as one payment that will be issued on a staggered basis beginning April 16 through April 29. This payment is in addition to their normal April benefit issuance that's made in the first half of the month.

We will continue to keep you all informed as we receive a response on outstanding waivers and if future changes become necessary.

### **CAO Operational Update**

As I've mentioned over the past few weeks, concerns have been raised due to CAO employees continuing to work from the office during this time. I'm aware that there have been questions of whether we would close offices.

CAO staff are the backbone of our public assistance system, and we are committed to keeping them safe as they perform their critical role. Without their work and efforts, benefits applications would not be able to be processed. As we face growing economic challenges in the wake of this public health crisis, assistance programs that help people and families access health care and keep food on the table will be vital in helping Pennsylvania recover. Programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, (SNAP), Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Medicaid will be necessary as we weather this public health crisis. We cannot eliminate this function, and we have taken numerous steps to protect the health of these workers as all essential sectors are doing at this time.

Social distancing and staggered shifts were implemented and offices are being cleaned and sanitized regularly. The Department of General Services has been in regular contact with lessors regarding this

expectation. We are also working to scale up teleworking for CAO staff as quickly as we can. This week, more than 90 employees were transitioned to telework as part of a pilot, and our goal is to significantly ramp up the number of staff teleworking over the next few weeks so thousands of our staff will be able to work from home in the very near future. Additionally, over this past weekend, DHS delivered masks to CAOs in all of Pennsylvania's 67 counties so that CAO staff were equipped on Monday morning with cloth masks to help protect against the spread of the COVID-19 virus consistent with the latest guidance from public-health professionals.

Keeping our staff safe is an utmost priority, and we will continue to do all we can to make this possible so operations that allow us to maintain our vital safety net can continue.

### **Support & Referral Helpline Update**

Finally, last week we used this call to announce the launch of our Support & Referral Helpline – a resource for anyone struggling with anxiety, mental health challenges, or other difficult emotions due to the COVID-19 crisis. In the first week since this was launched, the helpline has received nearly 1,300 calls – people who may not have known where to turn without this resource.

The Support & Referral Helpline will continue to be available toll-free, 24/7 throughout this public health crisis, and helpline staff will refer callers to local resources in their community that can continue to help if needed. It can be reached at 1-855-284-2494 or through TTY at 724-631-5600.

Thank you all who have helped us promote this resource, and I hope you'll continue to spread the word for those who need it.

## April 1, 2020 Update

### **1135 Waiver Approval**

On Friday, March 27, Pennsylvania received approval from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services for part of our 1135 Waiver request. You can read our press release [here](#) and the approval letter [here](#).

A federal public health emergency allows the federal Secretary of Health and Human Services to grant temporary changes to Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program to ensure needs of people covered by these programs are met during an emergency. The waiver also allows flexibility in how providers are paid for health care services to ensure they are able to adequately respond to and adjust care in light of a public health emergency. States may request these changes through an 1135 Waiver.

Approval received Friday speaks to part of DHS' and the Department of Health's request, and we were given approval to:

- Suspend Medicaid fee-for-service prior authorization requirements and extend pre-existing authorizations through the end of the public health emergency;
- Suspend Pre-Admission Screening and Annual Resident Review (PASRR) Level I and II assessments for 30 days;
- Extend the timeframes for beneficiaries to file an appeal;
- Temporarily waive provider enrollment and screening requirements, including:
  - Payment of an application fee;
  - Criminal background checks and fingerprinting;
  - Site visits; and
  - State licensure, if the provider is licensed in good standing in another state.
- Provide payment to some out-of-state providers who are not enrolled in the Pennsylvania Medicaid program for services rendered to Pennsylvania Medicaid recipients; and
- Provide payment for facility services rendered in alternative settings.

DHS is working on guidance to providers on how we intend to implement operational changes based on these waivers and will issue it as soon as we can. We also continue to work with CMS and will keep you all in the loop if we receive further approval for other requests.

We are also aware that CMS issued additional guidance Monday waiving requirements from their level. We are still reviewing this action and at this time, we're still trying to understand how this affects our programs. When this is complete, we will issue guidance as necessary.

### **Community HealthChoices**

As we face this public health crisis, we are particularly focused on how we can maintain services and supports for the vulnerable populations we serve without jeopardizing their health and safety. A big focus for DHS over the last few years has been transitioning long-term services and supports to the managed care Community HealthChoices program. CHC was implemented statewide in January and provides assistive services through Medicaid for more than 400,000 seniors and adults with physical

disabilities.

We are very cognizant of both the risk of exposure for this population and the importance that this population still gets care. We're working very closely with the three CHC managed care organizations, their network providers, and our stakeholder partners to ensure that necessary care is not disrupted.

This public health crisis is a difficult test of a still new system, but so far we are not aware of major disruptions of life sustaining services, and our CHC MCOs are in regular communication with participants to educate them about COVID-19 and encourage use of telemedicine to keep both participants and direct care professionals safe during this time. On behalf of all of DHS, I am grateful for their partnership and their efforts to keep this population safe while ensuring continuity of services during this unprecedented period.

### **Personal Care Homes & Assisted Living Facilities**

On Sunday, March 29, the Office of Long-Term Living (OLTL) suspended, with conditions, specific license regulations for Personal Care Homes and for Assisted Living Residences. OLTL has also imposed restrictions on visitations and temporarily suspended annual inspections. This guidance is available online [here](#).

### **MATP**

As we face this public health crisis, we are doing all we can to ensure continuity of services however possible. We know, though, that there will be and should be some level of disruption in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and protect people served by DHS' programs.

We know that this crisis is having a significant impact on the Medical Assistance Transportation Program, or MATP. We've advised county administrators and other MATP providers that MATP use should be limited during this time. Elective procedures have been prohibited in certain medical facilities, and non-urgent routine visits should be limited or handled through telehealth, if possible.

Despite this, there are still driver and vehicle shortages. We are encouraging individuals to use personal vehicles whenever possible and will be increasing the mileage reimbursement rate for personal vehicles. More information on this increase is forthcoming. We are monitoring this situation and plan to issue guidance soon.

### **Mental Health/Warmline**

As I've mentioned previously, we're in an unprecedented time for everyone. It's uncertain and very scary. This fear is completely understandable, and the indefinite timeline is likely creating a lot of anxiety during a time where we may be or feel more removed from our support networks. But social distancing doesn't have to mean social isolation, and we want people to know that even as we all face this difficult period, no one is alone.

Beginning at 6 p.m. on April 1, we are partnering with the Center for Community Resources to offer a 24/7 mental health and crisis support line for people dealing with anxiety or other difficult emotions. Callers will be able to speak with staff who are trained in trauma-informed principles and will listen,

assess the person's needs, triage, and refer to other local supports and professionals as needed.

The Mental Health Support Line can be reached toll-free, 24/7 at 1-855-284-2494. We're going to be formally announcing this soon, but I hope you all help us spread the word on this critical resource.

It's a difficult time, and it's easy to feel alone and cut-off from the world, but we need people to know that they are not alone, and support is available. Thank you for the help in advance. We will be sharing information about this resource on our social media accounts, but if you need more information, feel free to reach out to our Communications office at [RA-PWDHSPressOffice@pa.gov](mailto:RA-PWDHSPressOffice@pa.gov).

### **Fingerprinting**

We continue to monitor access to fingerprinting services in order to obtain FBI clearances and fully appreciate the impact the closure of fingerprinting sites has had on our providers that offer services to children. This is a critical issue, and we continue to explore all options with our state and federal partners.

Just yesterday and as a result of the approval of our 1135 waiver request, the Office of Developmental Programs (ODP) announced that it will suspend the FBI fingerprinting check for employers hiring staff serving adults and will accept a self-attestation on a temporary basis for staff serving adults if an FBI clearance is unable to be obtained. We are hoping to issue similar guidance for OLTL's providers.

Unfortunately, the ability to provisionally hire is prohibited by federal law for programs and providers serving children so this remains an issue. We are working closely with the Pennsylvania departments of Education and General Services on potential paths forward, but as mentioned in our written update following last week's call, we encourage interested parties to discuss this with federal lawmakers as well.

### **Federal Funding**

I understand that there are likely questions about legislation being passed at the federal level in response to the COVID-19 crisis and how this stimulus funding will be allocated in Pennsylvania. We do anticipate receiving stimulus funds that may affect DHS' programs, but we are still evaluating the level of funding and the exact method of distribution.

One thing we are happy to report, is that it was determined that the federal stimulus check issued to individuals will not be considered income for eligibility purpose for our federal benefit programs, and from what we've been told, individuals who did not file taxes because they receive Social Security will be able to receive this as well.

Once we have more information to share, we will communicate with you all.

### **CAOs/Essential Staff**

As this public health crisis progresses, we find ourselves in an increasingly challenging position with regards to continuity of government. The health and safety of our team is a primary objective and will



continue to be at the forefront of our decisions as we move forward.

As we've discussed previously, our County Assistance Office workers had to be recalled so we can keep eligibility determinations and benefits issuance going. Our CAOs are the backbone of DHS, and their work is needed now more than ever.

Operational adjustments have been implemented in response to the ever-changing tide of this emergency situation. To date, we are doing the following in an effort to protect OIM staff:

- Closing CAOs to the public indefinitely to limit person-to-person contact;
- Enacting staggered shifts in large CAOs, with two groups of staff rotating shifts in a 2-days-on, 2-days-off pattern;
- Mandating social distancing practices such as seating people at least 6ft. apart in offices or switching to staggered shifts in spaces where this is not possible;
- Ordering antibacterial soap, hand sanitizer, and cleaning supplies for all offices and supporting CAOs purchasing items if they become available;
- Collaborating with DGS to send a communication specifically to the CAO lessors reminding them of their contractual obligation to properly clean our offices and requesting that they complete a log identifying when the office was cleaned; and,
- Continuing to explore and evaluate other solutions such as telework and the identification of alternate work sites that will ensure the safety of our staff while maintaining the ability to ensure access to critical benefits.

Since this crisis began more than two weeks ago, there has been significant attention and questions about continuing this work while responding to employee concerns. And that concern extends beyond our CAO staff – while our licensing operations are altered, we are still responding to and investigating complaints. We are still investigating cases of abuse and neglect. We are still maintaining operations at our state-run facilities. There are many functions of government and DHS that cannot run on telework, and we must keep these going to keep the people we serve safe and healthy. We also have an obligation to protect our staff as they do this critical work.

As we make operational shifts to keep these functions going, we must remember that our first priorities are to keep staff safe while ensuring continuity of operations and services. We are doing all we can to respond to suggestions for improvements during this period and new guidance from the federal level, but we must keep these services going. Other states are seeing significant spikes in applications for benefits due to economic challenges associated with the public health crisis, and we expect that this will occur in Pennsylvania as well.

Our staff are working through an incredibly difficult situation – a situation that is likely to become more challenging before it eases. We are and will be receptive to opportunities to make adjustments as we can, but we must remember that the staff who make these adjustments are also the staff that we need to keep essential operations going. As COVID-19 spreads, our staffing levels are being impacted, creating new challenges we have to overcome. We expect our resources to become increasingly strained in the coming weeks and are trying to remain cognizant that we not overload staff, who have a myriad of competing priorities at times.

This is an unprecedented period for all of us, and we really appreciate your partnership and support as we navigate it together.

## March 25, 2020 Update

### **1135 Waiver Request**

DHS and the Department of Health submitted our request for an 1135 Waiver on March 24. The application [letter](#) and [checklist](#) are available on DHS' COVID-19 Provider Resources page. As of March 25, we are still waiting for a response from the federal government.

When the president declares a disaster or emergency under the Stafford or National Emergencies Act and the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) declares a public health emergency under Section 319 of the Public Health Service Act, the HHS Secretary is granted additional authority. Under section 1135 of the Social Security Act, this authority permits changes to Medicare, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) to ensure needs of people covered by these programs are met during an emergency.

DHS and the DOH submitted an 1135 waiver request to the federal government seeking temporary changes to our Medicaid Fee-for-Service Program, the HealthChoices managed care programs for both physical and behavioral health services, Community HealthChoices (CHC), Home and Community Based Services (HCBS) waivers, the Section 1115 Demonstration waiver for Former Foster Care Youth and Substance Use Disorder, and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). If granted, this waiver request would allow us to:

- Enhance provider access by expediting provider enrollment, permitting services from providers not yet enrolled in the Medicaid program, permitting services from providers enrolled in another states' Medicaid program, and permit payment for services provided in alternate sites of care;
- Enhance benefit access by suspending some prior authorization requirements, permitting non-physician directed services by physician assistants and certified registered nurse practitioners, reducing limitations on institutions serving people with mental illness, reducing need for face-to-face visits for durable medical equipment prescriptions, reducing limitations on service locations, and reducing acute care hospital space demand;
- Enhance benefit access in eligibility by extending continuous eligibility periods and suspending the Pre-Admission Screening and Annual Resident Review (PASRR) assessment for 30 days;
- Ease state administrative burdens by permitting eligibility determinations to exceed typical timeframes, extending grievance and appeal timeframes, and implementing a lock-in period for CHC participants.

Now that the waiver has been submitted, we will keep you all informed of its progress and, ideally, when our request is granted.

### **Child Care Updates**

Child care centers and group child care homes outside of a residence were closed under the Governor's order to close non-life-sustaining businesses, but waivers are being granted to continue operation

recognizing that these services are necessary to allow essential personnel like health care workers, first responders, home care workers, and grocery and food service staff to keep doing the critical work they provide. We continue to receive and process waiver requests for child care centers and group child care homes seeking to continue to operate during this time, and as of March 25, more than 690 child care providers continue to operate with a waiver.

As the non-life-sustaining business closure order is being enforced around Pennsylvania, we are working closely with law enforcement agencies so they know that some child care providers may continue to operate. Child care providers operating with a waiver should be prepared to present this waiver if contacted regarding how or why they are operating during this time. The Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) also recently [issued guidance to operating child care providers](#) on keeping children, their families, and staff safe during this public health emergency. We encourage all providers to take this guidance seriously.

We are also urging these essential services personnel to consider their options if their child care provider chooses to close even if they are operating with a waiver. If families are able to make alternative child care arrangements at home, we are encouraging them to allow vacancies to be used for those who do not have other options, and begin to make an actionable contingency plan if their child care arrangement has to change.

We centralized a list of open child care facilities if families working in essential jobs need to contact a new provider. This is now available on [DHS' COVID-19 resources section](#) on the resources for citizens page. We are updating it regularly as new providers request waivers and as some may choose to close.

### **Early Intervention Guidance**

OCDEL continues to develop guidance responsive to child care and early learning providers' needs. Guidance was recently issued for early intervention providers and is available [here](#).

### **County Assistance Office Updates**

Our county assistance offices (CAOs) continue to operate as closed to the public during this time. We are working closely with the unions and the commonwealth's labor relations staff to ensure both continued operations and safe workspaces for our staff doing this essential work.

We are monitoring this situation hour-by-hour and actively working to address employee concerns and implement strategies that mitigate the risk of exposure to the coronavirus while maintaining these essential functions. For example:

- CAOs with large staff complements are implementing staggered shifts – two days on, two days off – rotated between total staff. The Office of Income Maintenance (OIM) is also actively evaluating the use of alternative office locations so that employees will have more space to work and reduced contact with each other. Although the initial focus is on the larger CAOs, 50 or more staff, we will extend mitigation efforts to all CAOs as soon as feasible.
- The Department of General Services, which manages leases with the owners of many CAO offices, is in communication with landlords across the commonwealth about proper cleaning and CDC guidelines. All of these leases include requirements for regular cleaning;

- We have ordered additional sanitation supplies and CAOs have been provided the ability to purchase these items as they become available;
- DHS is also actively evaluating the feasibility of and options to facilitate telework for CAO staff.

We are in constant contact with employee unions to address concerns and collaborate on solutions that protect employees and maintain these essential functions.

### **SNAP and Food Security Efforts**

Maintaining access to food – one of our most basic needs – continues to be a top priority for DHS during this period.

The federal government approved our request to extend the time that people are eligible to receive benefits. This will allow us to continue benefits during this crisis. We also continue to engage with Food and Nutrition Services regarding additional SNAP benefits that may be issued to eligible households during this crisis. We hope to have guidance soon so we can offer additional SNAP assistance to all the SNAP eligible households.

We are also submitting a waiver request to waive restrictions preventing most college students from receiving SNAP. The waiver will allow for low-income households with a student who is attending an institution of higher education to receive additional SNAP benefits to feed the whole family during the COVID-19 emergency.

Federal regulations state that an individual who is enrolled at least half-time in an institution of higher education shall be ineligible to participate in SNAP unless they qualify for an exemption or are employed for a minimum of 20 hours per week. The Wolf Administration's waiver request seeks to give DHS the ability to waive these regulations for students that meet the income thresholds for SNAP benefits until COVID-19 health emergency has ended.

Current federal regulations also state that students not meeting additional eligibility criteria are not included in their household's SNAP eligibility. For example, in a household of three where one member is a student, the household would only receive SNAP benefits for two of the members, despite the student still residing and eating meals with that household. Now that students are home, these families may not have the resources, either monetarily or in food supply, to support the additional person now residing with them.

We know that this pandemic has caused many people and families to find that they are suddenly food insecure and require assistance. The Feeding Task Force has been operationalized to support Pennsylvanians and charitable food networks during this time. The task force is comprised of public, private, and non-profit partners from across the state, including, among others, the Governor's Food Security Partnership state agencies, the Salvation Army, Feeding PA, and the Pennsylvania Food Merchants Association. This centralized hub allows us to determine where our needs are, how many meals are needed, how we are getting food to people, and how we are getting volunteers to help charitable food networks across Pennsylvania.

One example of the task force's work is coordinating a donation of 19 pallets of milk from Powers Brand Communications LLC (Giant Distribution center) to an anti-hunger program serving Centre and Clearfield Counties. If you know of other businesses with resources to share, the task force is collecting this information. Companies can share information about resources available with the Feeding Task Force [here](#).

The Feeding task force has also created a second survey that'll attempt to capture where people who are suddenly food insecure are so we can operationalize and allocate resources appropriately. If people suddenly find themselves needing help keeping food on the table due to COVID-19 mitigation efforts, we are encouraging them to [fill out this survey](#) to help the task force meet food needs around Pennsylvania. If people are in immediate need of food assistance, [Feeding Pennsylvania](#) and [Hunger-Free Pennsylvania](#) are hubs of information for where people can get assistance locally in their communities.

We know that this time is also creating an incredible strain on charitable organizations, so if organizations need volunteers or resources, they may visit the [United Way of Pennsylvania's 211 website](#). We are also encouraging anyone who is healthy and able to consider taking some time to volunteer with their local food bank. Their operations are seriously altered because of this situation, but their services are and will continue to be incredibly needed as COVID-19 continues to disrupt daily lives. We need to be sure our charitable food networks are able to continue their daily operations and meet the needs of their communities, so we will continue to encourage healthy and able people to contact their local food bank to get involved and help their neighbors and community during this time of great need. To find a food bank or pantry in your community, visit [Feeding Pennsylvania](#) and [Hunger-Free Pennsylvania](#).

### **Protective Services**

We've made adjustments to ensure continuity for ChildLine and Adult Protective Services, but these critical outlets are not effective if potential abuse or neglect is not being reported.

People who are mandated reporters under the Child Protective Services Law should report online at [www.KeepKidsSafe.pa.gov](http://www.KeepKidsSafe.pa.gov), but ChildLine is also available to anyone wishing to report, 24/7 at 1-800-932-0313.

Adult Protective Services protects adults who are 18 to 59 and have a physical or intellectual disability. Reports can be made 24/7 to 1-800-490-8505. Reports submitted are still fielded and directed to the appropriate parties to investigate. We appreciate you continuing to lift these resources so we can keep Pennsylvanians safe.

In addition, domestic violence programs and rape crisis centers continue to provide services to victims and survivors. If you need to find rape crisis services, please call 1-888-772-7227 or visit [www.pcar.org](http://www.pcar.org) to be connected with your local rape crisis center. For domestic violence services, please visit [www.pcadv.org](http://www.pcadv.org) or call the National Domestic Violence Hotline at 1-800-

799-7233 (SAFE), 1-800-787-3224 (TTY for people who are deaf). If you are unable to speak safely, you can also log onto [www.thehotline.org](http://www.thehotline.org) or text LOVEIS to 22522.

## March 17, 2020 Update

### **Medicaid and CHIP Programs**

Our offices that oversee and administer Medicaid access for the millions of Pennsylvanians who rely on it – the offices of Developmental Programs (ODP), Long-Term Living (OLTL), Medical Assistance Programs (OMAP), and Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services (OMHSAS) - are working closely together to get [guidance out to providers](#) to support operational changes while aiming for continuity of services.

### COVID-19 Diagnostic Testing and Treatment

OMAP is also working with [CHIP](#) and [Medical Assistance](#) program-enrolled providers and managed care organizations to ensure that people needing testing and treatment related to COVID-19 [are able to get this without copays or prior authorizations](#).

### Home and Community-Based Services

ODP and the OLTL have submitted waiver requests to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services allowing for flexibility around staffing for direct care and direct support workers. We are working to create flexibility given the evolving situation but are communicating with participants in these programs to ensure that services are still being rendered when needed. The [Appendix K waivers](#) OLTL and ODP submitted were approved on March 18, and we are in the process of drafting guidance to providers pursuant to this.

*Update: March 25: The Appendix K waivers were approved.*

OLTL has also directed the Community HealthChoices managed care organizations (CHC-MCOs) to not reduce or terminate any personal assistance services or reassess long-term services and supports for at least the next three months. The three CHC-MCOs will also verify service continuity with all long-term care and HCBS participants and to ensure all HCBS participants have an executable back-up plan in place to guard against potential disruptions in service with personal assistance providers and direct care workers.

### Telehealth Services

[OMAP](#) and [OMHSAS](#) issued guidance around telehealth to ease this option for providers around Pennsylvania and Pennsylvanians seeking services while observing social distancing and mitigation guidelines.

### **County Assistance Offices and Public Assistance Programs**

We are also doing everything we can to ensure continuity of benefits and application processing for new applications for benefits that come in during this period. This uncertain time is undoubtedly going to create difficult situations for people around Pennsylvania, and we need to continue to administer these vital programs for those who need it most. We also recognize that there may be changes based on federal action that will affect these programs, and we continue to monitor and will adapt if necessary.

### CAO Operations

[On March 16, the decision was made to continue to operate county assistance offices but close them to the public.](#) This is necessary to ensure continuity of program operations so we may continue to process applications and maintain existing cases.

I recognize the frustration and concern that this decision has prompted. However, these job functions are essential and cannot be performed off-site with existing technological capacity. We continue to monitor this on a day-to-day, hour-by-hour basis. If additional adjustments become necessary, decisions will be made and communicated, but this work is essential and we cannot abandon the people who need or may need these programs when they need them most.

#### Medicaid

We continue to accept and process Medical Assistance applications. Individuals can notate on the application if they have a health emergency including COVID-19. We will continue to prioritize Medical Assistance applications where there is an immediate health concern. Self-attestations will be accepted.

#### SNAP

SNAP certification periods will be extended at least for the next three months so SNAP cases will not be terminated during this period. We have submitted a waiver request to the federal Food and Nutrition Service (FNS) for this extension.

When processing changes to hours worked, we are exercising flexibility as we recognize that this may be difficult to verify as business operations shift across the private sector as well. We are also closely monitoring developments related to the Able Bodied Adults Without Dependents (ABAWD) rule at the federal level. Last week, we submitted a waiver request to FNS to delay implementation of this rule. On Friday night, the DC Federal District Court issued an injunction for the rule. The Commonwealth is exploring ways to ensure ABAWDs do not lose benefits due to the time limits.

We also submitted a request for a SNAP Issuance Waiver that would allow us to issue a payment of 50 percent of a household's maximum SNAP grant to ensure food security and the ability of SNAP recipients to comply with CDC guidelines calling for households to have two weeks' worth of food available. If this is granted, we will communicate this broadly.

#### TANF

We are encouraging employment and training providers to provide remote services where possible and, if not, exercise flexibility for participants. We are also suspending face-to-face interviews and will not terminate or sanction recipients based on RESET requirements.

#### LIHEAP

We are evaluating the best possible way to support the needs of the LIHEAP eligible population with the limited federal funds available.

#### Protective Services

Protective services also continue to be administered by DHS. The Office of Children, Youth, and Families (OCYF) and OLTL continue to operate both ChildLine and Adult Protective Services and will continue to



work with our partners at the county level to ensure these vulnerable populations are protected and referrals are investigated.

### **State-Run Facilities**

The offices that oversee our state-run facilities – ODP, OMHSAS, and OCYF – are restricting access to these facilities, exercising increased cleaning and sanitation efforts, and screening staff to protect the health of people we serve. We recognize that this may create challenges for individuals under the care of these facilities and their loved ones, and we are working to facilitate visiting and interactions through programs like FaceTime and Skype.

### **Licensing Operations**

DHS' routine annual licensing visits are on hold at this time. DHS' licensing offices will continue to monitor facilities and are prepared to respond to and investigate complaints as they are received.

### **Child Care Operations**

Child care facilities [were closed statewide](#) on March 16 to support COVID-19 mitigation efforts. Exceptions to this policy are family child care homes and group child care homes operating inside a residence. All child care providers will continue to receive Child Care Works payments through April. Closures and operational guidance are communicated directly to child care providers and other early education and early intervention providers through the child care certification listserv and the Pennsylvania early education listserv.

This temporary closure of child care facilities may be a burden for Pennsylvania families who depend on this service. Because it is especially burdensome for essential personnel such as health care workers and first responders who must have safe and stable care options for their children in order to report to work, the Office of Child Development and Early Learning (OCDEL) has implemented a waiver process for child care centers and group child care homes that serve these families. Operators of these facilities who seek a waiver from the Governor's temporary closure order should contact OCDEL at [RA-PWDRACERT@pa.gov](mailto:RA-PWDRACERT@pa.gov). Waiver requests will be processed as quickly as possible.

### **Coordinated State Response**

The Office of Administration's Division of Emergency Preparedness and Safety Operations (DEPSO) team has been working closely with state agencies and partners around the state to support the COVID-19 response across Pennsylvania since the beginning of February. DEPSO has provided ongoing support to DOH and PEMA at the CRCC through coordination and communications as needed. We have responsibility for Emergency Support Function #6, which is to provide for mass care, shelter and human services including food distribution.

Currently, the Mass Task Force is coordinating multiple food distribution programs to ensure appropriate food availability to our children, older Pennsylvanians and families. The Sheltering Task Force is supporting quarantining and sheltering coordination. The Disabilities Integration Task Force is working to ensure that those with access or functional needs are supported during these trying times.