



COMMONWEALTH OF PENNSYLVANIA
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

2023-24 Appropriations Hearing Testimony
Pennsylvania Department of Human Services
Acting Secretary Val Arkoosh

Chairman Harris, Chairman Grove, and members of the House Appropriations Committee, thank you for the opportunity to discuss Governor Josh Shapiro’s proposed fiscal year 2023-24 budget for the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services (DHS).

DHS exists to help Pennsylvanians have what they need to live healthy, safe, and fulfilling lives. This essential work and the programs we administer and oversee directly have a significant impact on millions of lives every day. Our department currently serves more than 3.6 million Pennsylvanians directly through programs that provide access to health care, food assistance, safe housing, and supportive services that help them live independently. Our programs help Pennsylvanians build the kind of lives they want for themselves and their families by helping people who are pursuing educational, vocational, and professional goals, all while investing in their future, and allowing them to be a part of a vibrant economy. This is not where our work ends. DHS’ responsibility and commitment to Pennsylvania extends through protective services for vulnerable people, licensing, program oversight, and quality assurance. This portion of our work has the opportunity to reach essentially any Pennsylvanian at some point in their life’s journey and requires DHS to partner with private and local partners to monitor their work. Our work helps to ensure Pennsylvanians of all ages, in all counties, in any circumstance receive the best care and are treated with dignity – something we all deserve.

Governor Shapiro’s proposed budget provides resources to effectively meet DHS’ responsibility to serve and protect Pennsylvanians through our programs and services while investing in the future, knowing how our work and programs can improve circumstances for people across their lives and for future generations. We are seeking to build a resilient foundation and make a sustained commitment that will support a robust human services system. This system must be able to simultaneously meet present-day needs *and* make longer-term investments that can prevent or offset future challenges or barriers to good health, economic security, and overall quality of life. As a physician, I know that it is not enough to simply address a patient’s more urgent needs in a single moment – as an agency, DHS must always consider the root causes of these challenges to prevent or mitigate future ones. This proposed budget will help DHS and our partners continue to navigate the changing environment of a recovering economy. These essential services must remain available while improving and innovating on behalf of the growing numbers of Pennsylvanians affected by this work in some way, every day – our constituents, neighbors, peers, friends, and family members.

Supporting the Mental Health of Every Pennsylvanian

Our society has made great strides in recent years in fostering a more open, empathetic dialogue around mental health. This normalization is overdue and necessary to save lives, helping people to really *know* that no matter what they are navigating – it can get better. As we seek to bolster supports for Pennsylvanians affected by mental health challenges, investments that strengthen systems of care are essential to easing barriers to care. We need people to know that when they decide to seek help, they will be met with the support they need. When the system is strained and under-resourced, we risk excessive turnover in an overburdened workforce and jeopardize lives with time spent waiting for care. By making both short-term and sustained investments, this proposed budget will help our partners support their communities' current challenges while planning for longer term innovation to continue to make mental health care the priority that it must be.

As a former county commissioner for Montgomery County, I led a diverse county with urban, suburban *and* rural communities with varied socioeconomic statuses. Throughout each of these communities, a common issue was the rise in mental health challenges and how we adequately support people experiencing crisis or managing the daily effects of a mental illness. As people become more comfortable sharing what they are going through, we must also be sure that our behavioral health system is equipped and able to provide necessary support without straining its workforce to the point of burnout. This is something Pennsylvania is grappling with across all counties, and we must support our systems of care so they have the resources to do their essential work at the necessary scale.

Governor Shapiro's budget seeks to make a long overdue investment in county mental health systems by dedicating \$20 million towards base funding, with a commitment to growing this enhanced dedicated funding through the 2027-28 fiscal year. This sustained funding will allow our partners at the county level to engage in longer term planning and direct increased resources to where additional support and capacity are most needed. Also, we are seeking to invest in community-based treatment options for people with mental health needs involved in the criminal justice system. County jails are not meant to be treatment centers, and if we are not building behavioral health supports into this system, we risk further trauma and future disruptions to a person's life, family, and health. This proposed budget will invest \$4 million to help counties continue to develop community-based behavioral health interventions for people involved in the criminal justice system; it also proposes \$1.25 million to expand community-based placements for people receiving care at one of DHS' state hospitals.

This proposed budget will also build sustainable funding for Pennsylvania's crisis response infrastructure – a life-saving resource for people experiencing a crisis and their loved ones who need urgent support. We are seeking to invest \$5 million in initial funding to support operations and capacity at Pennsylvania's 13 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline call centers, and, moving forward, to increase the multi-purpose Emergency Communications Fee, with 97.25 percent of the fee going to 911 and 2.75 percent towards 988 call centers. This ongoing investment will help 988 continue to meet the growing awareness of the simplified, three-digit access, supporting and reducing strain on our 911 systems by providing a resource able to respond to and triage mental health crises.

Building a Strong Workforce

We are lucky to live in a Commonwealth rich in industry that offers many opportunities for Pennsylvanians to build vibrant lives and careers. But building that career is not always as easy as simply getting a job – if a person chooses to start a family, affordable, accessible child care is essential to a parent’s ability to obtain and keep a job. If child care is inaccessible due to cost or availability, parents may be forced to stay out of the workforce. Child care programs are an incredibly important catalyst for both a child’s growth and development, and even our economy more broadly. We must invest in this essential infrastructure so it can continue to give both children and parents the opportunity for long-term success.

Governor Shapiro’s proposed budget continues Pennsylvania’s investment in enhanced rates paid to child care providers who participate in Child Care Works (CCW), our subsidized child care program. This program eases affordability for lower income, working parents, helping them to navigate the access barrier that could otherwise prevent them from building a career and a better future. We are seeking to invest \$66.7 million to sustain our commitment to CCW as we expect to expend federal relief funding. This commitment allows CCW providers to invest in quality of care and their programs amidst challenges of operating in the current economic climate. Parents in all communities need and deserve reliable, quality child care, and when we target support towards rates paid for subsidized care, we invest in equity and opportunity for all children served by our child care workforce. Also, we will use a small portion of state funds, combined with federal funding, to establish a \$4 million program to support child care options for parents seeking a degree or industry-recognized certification. This funding will help parents have the support they need to take a leap that can improve their quality of life and provide opportunities for them and their children. If we want to support a vibrant economy, we need to support parents and their families as they grow and achieve their goals. Supporting access to child care and the dedicated professionals who choose this field are essential to reaching our broader workforce and economic goals. We cannot sustain a vibrant economy without also strengthening this caring infrastructure.

Protecting Vulnerable Populations

As I touched on earlier, one of DHS’ core responsibilities is to protect and advocate for the health and well-being of Pennsylvanians we serve. We do this through protective services, working with county and local partners to promote safety and quality in licensed care, and administration of life-sustaining programs that meet our essential, human needs. Children, seniors, people with disabilities, people living in or near poverty, and people with chronic health needs may be at greater risk of inadequate care, being taken advantage of or abused – the effects of which risk lasting trauma, poor health, or worse. Governor Shapiro’s proposed budget makes a number of investments in DHS and our partners’ abilities to help people served and protected by our programs live with the safety, independence, quality of life, and dignity that they deserve.

DHS’ staff work every day – including on a 24/7, on-call basis – to assist licensed providers to assure that people receiving care from day and residential providers are safe and receiving the type and quality of care we expect. This work includes regular monitoring, annual licensing, and, at times, emergency response in all communities and counties of Pennsylvania. We are seeking to invest \$2.2 million to support to provide additional resources so we can maintain and exceed standards for service, oversight, and support for partners providing services as well as the people we seek to protect.

Governor Shapiro's proposed 2023-24 budget invests in quality of care and access to services for Pennsylvanians with disabilities and seniors needing long-term services and supports. Federal pandemic relief funding has allowed Pennsylvania to direct greater support to intellectual disability/autism services and long-term care providers, but we know that this support was greatly needed before the pandemic. This proposed budget will sustain enhanced rates through a new commitment of state funding, allowing our partners to continue to receive this level of support.

We hope to expand services to 850 Pennsylvanians with intellectual disabilities waiting for services with an investment of \$17.5 million. Beyond sustaining this investment, we are also looking to expand options for care and foster innovation in service delivery. This proposed budget will invest \$3.4 million to broaden the array of LifeSharing options available to support people needing daily care and will invest \$700,000 to better leverage telehealth to provide real-time support to people with intellectual disabilities and their caretakers. This effort will help better triage concerns in the hope of reducing rates of avoidable hospitalizations – giving additional supports to people living independently and helping them manage and assess their needs.

As we invest in quality of care and services provided by DHS, we must also ensure that vulnerable Pennsylvanians are able to meet their basic needs, such as food and shelter. The interconnection of an adequate diet – both in nutrition and having enough to eat – and a person's present and long-term health is well-documented. Malnutrition can accelerate or worsen existing health challenges or inhibit a person's ability to live safely on their own. The proposed budget will make a \$16 million investment to increase the minimum monthly Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefit for seniors and people with disabilities by 50 percent. This investment would raise the monthly minimum to \$35 – an increase that we estimate would benefit approximately 105,000 people. As Pennsylvania and the nation lose enhanced pandemic SNAP funding, this investment in seniors and people with disabilities, paired with Governor Shapiro's effort to continue universal school breakfast, will help meet this most essential need for people affected by the loss of federal assistance.

Governor Shapiro's proposed 2023-24 budget and its investments in the Department of Human Services and our partners across the Commonwealth rise to current challenges and needs, while setting a path to build for the future. When we invest in this system and this work, we invest in our future and the promise that this agency and its partners will be there for every Pennsylvanian when they inevitably interact with the human services system - be it through needing child care, finding in-home care for an aging or disabled loved one, or if an unexpected challenge or change causes a person to fall on hard times like too many have experienced in the last three years and prior. I have seen first-hand through my medical practice, the outsized impact that a person's environment and circumstances can have on their overall wellbeing, and I am committed to leading a human services system that responsibly stewards our Commonwealth's investments and resources by helping us realize and advance our critical work and mission. This proposed budget will help us effectively continue our work and steer us for a better, prosperous, and healthy future.

I look forward to working with each of you, your committee, and the rest of the Pennsylvania General Assembly to help make this future possible.