



COVID-19 Response, Guidance, and Actions

Updated: March 17, 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.

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.

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. 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.