



ALLEGHENY COUNTY

Recommendations for Act 33

November 2022

The 2008 Act 33 Amendment to the Child Protective Services law requires state and local reviews of all child fatalities and near-fatalities that result from suspected child abuse. In response, Allegheny County Department of Human Services (AC DHS) conducts a comprehensive and multidisciplinary review of child fatalities and near-fatalities in cases where there is suspicion of child abuse or neglect. These reviews are a component of DHS's continual quality improvement process.

A key component of the Act 33 review process is making recommendations for changes at the state and local levels toward reducing the likelihood of future child fatalities and near-fatalities related to abuse and neglect. In the past several years, the Act 33 Review Team identified several areas for continued improvement that appeared in many of the case reviews and had significant impact on child safety and well-being. An overview of these activities, and their outcomes, is provided in this report.

IMPROVED COLLABORATION WITH MEDICAL PHYSICIANS

A significant proportion of young children who die or nearly die from physical abuse have had previous referral(s) to CYF for injuries that, in hindsight, were likely the result of abuse. In fact, research findings indicate that after adjusting for risk factors at birth, children named as victim in prior allegation of maltreatment died from intentional injuries at a rate that was 5.9 times greater than that of unreported children. Medical professionals are helpful in determining whether an injury is the result of abuse (as opposed to an accident), but there is currently no standard practice to ensure that young children who are victims of potential physical abuse are evaluated by a medical professional prior to case closure. There is also no standard process by which CYF caseworkers can determine whether the child received an appropriate medical evaluation when they were seen by a medical professional and/or a process by which the child's primary care physician (PCP) was made aware when a CYF case is closing.

In 2021, Allegheny County CYF — in close collaboration with physicians who are experts in child abuse — implemented a new program to improve coordination between CYF and primary care physicians (PCPs), focusing on those children who are under 3, who are at highest risk for maltreatment. Project MAGICO (Medical Assessment Guidelines to Improve Child Outcomes) aims to ensure rapid and accurate medical assessment of injuries by a PCP and to improve the communication between CYF and PCPs — who form the safety net for young children once CYF closes the case. Project MAGICO has standardized practices to ensure that young children are evaluated by a medical professional prior to investigation and case closure.

UPSTREAM PREVENTION AND INTERVENTION SERVICES

In half of all cases in Allegheny County in which a child was seriously injured or died as a result of abuse and/or neglect, no child welfare referral had ever been made for the affected child, implying that there had been no opportunity for CYF to support the family or protect the child before the tragedy occurred. Act 33 review findings have informed AC DHS's continued investments in upstream prevention and intervention services that support high-risk families to prevent child maltreatment before families become known to CYF. This prevention continuum includes evidence-based home visiting, critical economic supports, and differentiated outreach and support through a new program called Hello Baby.

AC DHS launched Hello Baby in September 2020 as a collaborative effort among family-focused organizations in Allegheny County, including AC DHS, Allegheny County Health Department, Healthy Start, Allegheny County Family Centers, Nurture PA and United Way of Southwestern PA. This voluntary program for parents of new babies is designed to strengthen families, improve children's outcomes, and maximize child and family well-being, safety, and security. The program offers help to every parent with a newborn in the County by offering a variety of supports to meet families' individual needs. Families looking for connections in their communities are encouraged to check out their local Family Center, where parents can take classes, participate in activities, and access resources to meet their basic needs. Families who want more individualized support can participate in home visiting programs, and some families are offered more intensive supports from a care team based on an assessment of need. Since launch, the program has served 116 families with intensive case-managing services and expanded to serve populations throughout Allegheny County.

INTEGRATION OF THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM AND THE SUBSTANCE USE TREATMENT SYSTEM

Parental substance use continues to be a driver of fatalities and near-fatalities. Along with the rise of overdose deaths from opioids in Allegheny County, the region has also experienced an increase in fatalities and near-fatalities among children from accidental opioid ingestion. Child ingestion events have increased from 2 in 2019 to 6 in 2020, 8 in 2021 and 7 in 2022 (year-to-date). Of the 21 total children from 2020 to the present who ingested substances, 6 died and the others experienced serious effects. Fentanyl was present in 63% of the combined cases in 2020–2021 and has been present in every ingestion by a child thus far in 2022. Act 33 review findings have informed AC DHS's responses to families affected by substance use. As an integrated Department that houses both the Office of Behavioral Health (OBH) and CYF, AC DHS is working across systems to implement a coordinated response that will improve and expand access to prevention, treatment and recovery services that will promote families' safety and well-being. While the effects of the opioid epidemic and the prevalence of fentanyl continue to devastate the lives of children and families, AC DHS strives to respond to this crisis with innovative and evidence-based services and supports. For example:

- In 2022, the AC DHS OBH developed new practice standards for substance use providers in response to Act 33 review findings, and launched a community-wide education and awareness campaign.
- AC DHS is refining its approach to developing and implementing Plans of Safe Care (PoSCs) — which aim to support the safety and well-being of families that have infants who were affected by substance exposure during and after pregnancy. Specifically, AC DHS established a multi-system structure for PoSC planning and coordination that includes stakeholders and medical providers, experts from birthing hospitals, behavioral health treatment providers, Early Intervention, managed care organizations, local government and community organizations. Further, AC DHS recently designated its Hello Baby service providers as the lead agencies for all PoSCs, helping families that have infants affected by substance exposure to connect with prevention and intervention supports.

- AC DHS recently implemented Family-Based Recovery, an intensive program for families with young children at risk for abuse and neglect, poor developmental outcomes, and/or home removal due to parental substance use. Clinicians conduct in-home visits to provide clinical treatment and recovery support to parents while promoting positive parent-child interactions, reducing maltreatment and neglect.
- AC DHS will soon open its Family Healing Center — a residential program where families can continue to live together while parents with substance use disorder engage in on-site treatment and recovery supports.

COMMUNITY AND FIREARM VIOLENCE

Community and firearm violence contributed to 6 child fatalities and near-fatalities in the past 5 years. In partnership with the Allegheny County Health Department's Office of Violence Prevention and the City of Pittsburgh, AC DHS is funding public health approaches to community violence reduction that are rooted in evidence, well-coordinated and comprehensive. AC DHS is doing this both countywide and within highly impacted communities. Additionally, CYF has obtained firearm safety locks for distribution to families involved with the agency. Safety locks are an effective tool to curb gun deaths and injuries among children and teens.

APPLYING SAFETY SCIENCE TO CHILD PROTECTION

Over the last 12 years, there has been an increase in child fatalities and near fatalities in Allegheny County. The county recorded 25 such incidents in 2021, up from 18 in 2020. In response to this increased volume, AC DHS is implementing an updated and in-depth Act 33 process (through critical incident case reviews) to perform investigations of fatalities and near-fatalities and identify system issues that need to be addressed. This Safety Science curriculum is modeled after systems developed in Tennessee, Arizona, Minnesota, Wisconsin and other jurisdictions around the country. The impetus for applying safety science to child protection is that it has the potential to promote learning and change through an approach that:

- transitions from individual blame to overall systemic accountability
- applies systemic methods of learning and investigation
- addresses complex systemic issues rather than focusing on the application of quick, simplistic fixes such as firing staff

Collaborative Safety, Inc. has been supporting implementation of the new model since February 2022, starting with training the CYF Analytics team, regional office directors and managers, and the CYF Executive Team. The Safety Science model has shifted the focus of critical incident case reviews from blame to accountability by engaging frontline workers to tell their stories and be part of the solution. Since implementation, caseworkers report that participating in Act 33 reviews has been more healing and less traumatizing as compared to the previous model. In addition to better supporting and retaining caseworkers, this model will lead to system improvements and a reduction of critical incidents. In the coming year, AC DHS will implement the strategies recommended by these partners to improve the quality of service delivered to clients.

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