



## DATA BRIEF

# An Agile Response to an Unexpected Challenge: How Allegheny County's Older Adult Protective Services (OAPS) Program Has Reinvented Itself to Respond to Growing Demand

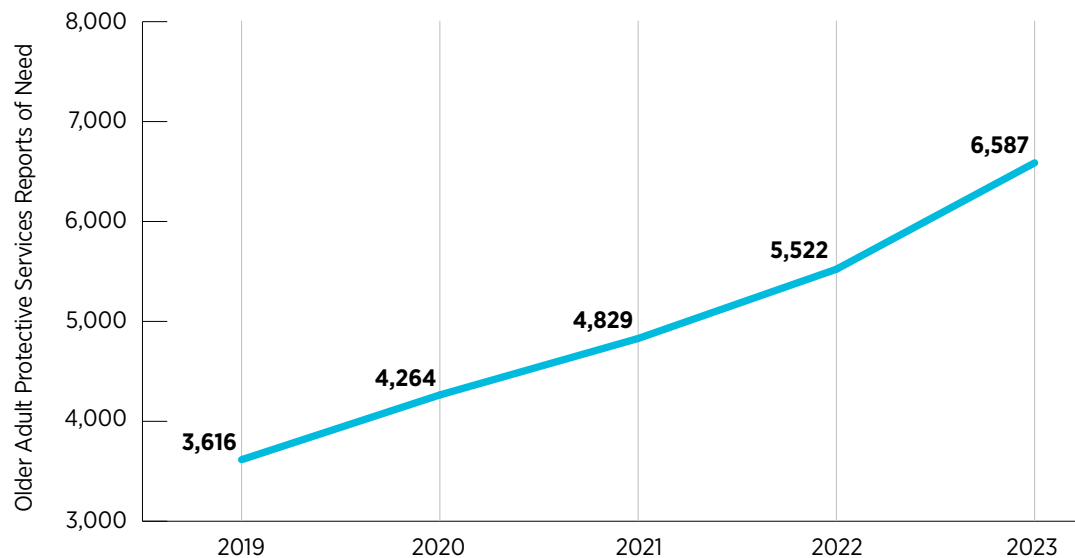
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The Older Adult Protective Services (OAPS) system, which investigates possible cases of elder abuse or neglect, has come under extreme pressure in recent years. The increasing number of older Americans, the isolation and emotional strains that accompanied the COVID-19 pandemic, and greater awareness of the problem have all led to a sharp rise in the demand for OAPS assistance.

In Pennsylvania, OAPS programs are managed under county Area Agencies on Aging. When an OAPS program receives a call concerning possible abuse or neglect, a Report of Need (RON) is completed. Statewide, the number of RONs rose by 55 percent over a five-year period, from fiscal year 2016-17 through fiscal year 2021-22. During the same period, the number of investigations initiated in Pennsylvania (when the RON indicates a credible cause for concern) increased by a staggering 77 percent.

In Allegheny County, the surge in demand has been even worse than the statewide trend. The number of RONs rose from 3,616 in 2019 to 6,587 in 2023, representing an 82 percent increase in just four years (see **Figure 1**). At the same time, Allegheny County did not receive an increase in the state dollars that support this work. In fact, due to a recent funding formula change, Allegheny County lost some of its state-sponsored aging funding — resulting in a situation in which OAPS staff must respond to increased need with decreased resources.

**FIGURE 1: RON Trend in Allegheny County, 2019 through 2023**



This trend placed great strain on protective services investigators (PSIs), leading to large caseloads, long hours, high risk of burnout and severe retention problems. Allegheny County's Department of Human Services (DHS), within which Aging Services resides, has not been immune to those challenges. DHS has responded with agility and decisiveness, weathering the storm and finding innovative ways to deploy a sufficient number of well-trained staff and ensure timely, thorough completion of sensitive investigations.

As recently as 2019, DHS's OAPS bureau had a staff of 17 (13 PSIs and four supervisors), employed by DHS directly or through one of three local contractors: Eastern Area Adult Services, LifeSpan and Ursuline Support Services.

As the number of RONS increased, DHS increased the authorized staff complement from 17 to 26. "Our first response was to ask to bring on more PSIs to meet the growing need," stated Shannah Tharp Gilliam, director of Aging Services at DHS. With caseloads still growing rapidly, in February 2022 DHS administration took the bold step of nearly doubling the number of approved positions, from 26 to 50.

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However, the high caseload volume and the resulting emotional burdens of the job made onboarding and retention of staff very difficult. By the end of 2022, only 25 of the 50 authorized positions had been filled, and the average caseload size was over 60.

These problems were reflected in a February 2023 Pennsylvania Department of Aging monitoring review that examined a random sample of cases from June through December 2022. The review looks primarily for evidence of timely documentation and supervision; Allegheny County's OAPS unit received resulted in a rating of 74 percent, or 6 percent below the threshold to be assessed as "in compliance."

Even before this monitoring visit occurred, however, DHS was working to solve the mounting challenge. In January 2023, DHS surveyed its PSIs to understand their needs and obtain their suggestions for improving their work situation. Three predominant concerns were cited: caseload volume, training adequacy and financial compensation.

To address the caseload volume and compensation concerns, DHS authorized the use of funds from a different funding stream to raise salaries for PSIs and supervisors. As the number of PSIs increased, DHS instructed OAPS supervisors, who had been taking on direct casework themselves to ease the burden on PSIs, to sharply reduce or eliminate their caseloads so that they could focus more intently on supervision.

To enhance training quality, DHS created its own OAPS training center, which delivers a combination of both virtual and in-person programs, specific to OAPS topics and exceeding the level of training required by the state Department of Aging. The training center, overseen by an OAPS supervisor, offers expert-led sessions on such issues as guardianship, medical diagnoses and financial exploitation, as well as customized support for individuals with particular training needs. The training is required for all PSIs.

Moreover, drawing on best practices developed in other Pennsylvania counties, DHS introduced a new “dual response” investigative model, under which each case is assigned to two investigators rather than one. “Having two sets of eyes involved enables us to investigate new cases in a timelier manner and complete them more quickly,” explained Brendan Hanley, OAPS bureau director.

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In July 2023, in addition to implementing the dual process investigative model and the OAPS training center, DHS added the Blair County Area Agency on Aging as a fourth contractor. Blair County staff cannot take on most cases as sole investigators because they are too distant geographically to conduct on-site visits, but they can complete those aspects of the investigation that do not require an on-site visit.

Melissa Osman, who supervises PSIs for Ursuline Support Services, one of DHS’s OAPS contractors, has become an enthusiastic supporter of the dual response model. “As one of the more tenured staff in the network,” Osman stated, “I was very skeptical at first that this new model could work, but I have quickly discovered that change isn’t always bad. The new model has made our investigations more efficient and detail oriented. Also, it allows our staff to spend additional time reaching out to collateral contacts and interacting with the older adult during the initial in-person visit.”

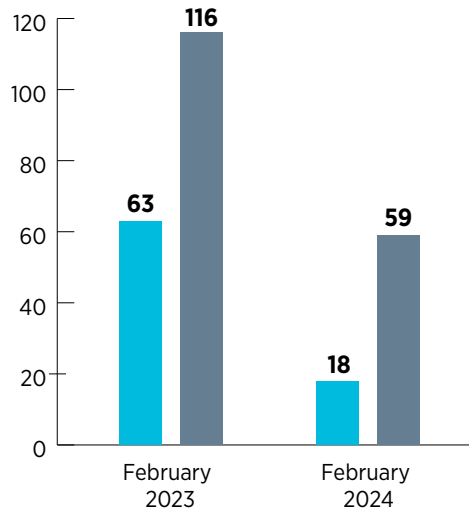
As a result of these actions, by the time the state Department of Aging provided DHS with a corrective action plan in August 2023, the recommended improvements had already been made.<sup>1</sup> “OAPS has led multiple efforts over the past two years that are improving our numbers,” Giliam stated. “We also have other ideas and are hopeful that the state will allow those improvements to be tested, as well.”

As of February 2024, OAPS had 44 PSIs and 789 active cases, or fewer than 18 cases per staff member. Reflecting the dramatic improvements achieved in just one year, the largest PSI caseload in February 2024 was lower than the average caseload size in February 2023 (See **Figure 2**). DHS has additional ideas to better triage cases and make processes more efficient and are hopeful the state will approve these improvements.

<sup>1</sup> Recent media coverage describing DHS as “out of compliance” is based on the state’s review of **2022 cases**. DHS cannot be

redesignated as in compliance until the state Department of Aging conducts another monitoring visit, which has not yet occurred.

FIGURE 2: Average and Largest PSI Caseloads, February 2023 vs. February 2024



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“Protecting the safety of older adults is one of the most important things we do,” Hanley said. “I am grateful for our County government’s leadership and responsiveness in committing the resources to ensure that every call to OAPS receives a timely, high-quality response.”

Unfortunately, at the same time as OAPS reports, investigations and related expenses have increased, Allegheny County’s allocation from the PA Department of Aging decreased due to a change in the funding formula used to distribute federal dollars to Area Agencies on Aging. To meet increasing costs and achieve the progress described above in the face of decreasing Aging Services funds, DHS has been committing a much larger share of its most flexible funding source – the Human Services Block Grant – to Aging Services, which affects funding availability for other Block Grant categorical programs, notably Mental Health and Homelessness Assistance. DHS also submitted a request for additional funding to the PA Department of Aging and has taken actions to raise awareness of our funding shortage among legislators and state officials.