



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
August 26, 2020

Wolf Administration Promotes Programs and Resources Available to Pennsylvania Families with Children During COVID-19 Crisis and 2020-21 Back-to-School Season

Harrisburg, PA – Pennsylvania’s secretaries of the departments of Health, Education and Human Services today assured Pennsylvania families that the Wolf Administration is committed to helping families with children overcome challenges created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Human Services announced that it is creating flexibilities in child care options, including temporarily suspending some regulatory policies on school-age child care to give families options on learning pods, and providing assistance to families struggling financially. Health promoted healthy habits to protect children and communities, and Education focused on how to nurture every child’s educational needs.

As schools begin the new school year – one that will be unprecedented in many ways – administration officials encouraged parents and guardians of school-age children to reinforce routines and practice habits that prioritize a child’s mental, physical, social and emotional health.

“This school year may look different for Pennsylvanians, but ensuring students have everything they need to succeed in education has never been a more important task on the back-to-school to-do list,” Secretary of Health Dr. Levine said. “Back-to-school essentials like teaching healthy habits, wearing a mask and staying up-to-date on all recommended immunizations must be done to help protect your student and others around them, like those who cannot wear masks or get vaccinated. It is essential that everyone take proper steps to protect against COVID-19 and a number of other serious, life-threatening diseases as students resume learning.”

As they consider a mountain of scientific information that grows daily, the resulting guidance of public-health professionals and the wide-ranging spectrum of opinions among their community members, school boards and educators across Pennsylvania are demonstrating an unwavering commitment to two important priorities: the health and safety of everyone and the rights of our children to continue their educational journeys.

“As the school year progresses, the Wolf Administration will continue to offer resources to school communities to help them make decisions and meet the needs of their students,” Department of Education (PDE) Secretary Pedro Rivera said. “The department, school leaders and families are all focused on the health and safety of

children and staff, and to ensuring our students can continue to engage in educational opportunities and grow.”

Throughout the summer, PDE worked with partners inside and outside of state government to create resources to help school leaders make difficult decisions about the return to school, including public health guidance, instructional model recommendations, and distributing \$87.5 million in Governor's Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Funds. Knowing that schools are more than classrooms, PDE has also developed resources for aiding in student social and emotional learning, as well as [supporting student and staff wellness](#). PDE has also provided [resources to parents of children with special needs](#) to help them engage with schools in adapting their children's educational plan.

Before the pandemic, Pennsylvania's public-assistance system administered by the Department of Human Services (DHS) served approximately 3.3 million people. The numbers of Pennsylvanians enrolled in safety-net programs like Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have steadily increased since March, and DHS anticipates that trend to continue as economic instability takes hold nationwide.

“This has been an extremely difficult time for families, particularly those with children. This virus has been cruel, and its effects only compound the longer this crisis drags on. But we are going to beat this virus. Things will get better,” Department of Human Services (DHS) Secretary Teresa Miller said. “I want you to know that your family is not alone. There are resources available to help you, and you have every right to reach out and ask for help when you need it.”

Child Care

DHS has announced the temporary suspension of some regulatory policies on school-age child care, with the goal of providing flexibilities for families who need safe child care options during traditional school hours for children who are distance learning.

“We want children to be in situations where they are safe and supervised by trusted adults; where they are able to focus on their education; and where their interactions with other people are limited so as to minimize the risk of COVID-19 transmission,” Secretary Miller said. “What we don't want are parents quitting their jobs to stay home with their school-age children.”

Families may create collectives – or learning pods – of other trusted families in their community who can depend on each other for supervised child care during school hours without needing a licensed child care certification. Guidance for families interested in establishing learning pods is available online [here](#).

DHS is also collaborating with organizations across Pennsylvania, including the United Way and YMCA, to establish part-day child care programs for school-age children.

These programs are required to develop Health and Safety plans for COVID-19 mitigation and to comply with requirements under Pennsylvania's Child Protective Services Law for all adults working with children to have background clearance checks. Soon, DHS will launch a tool on its website where families can go for information about these programs.

When possible, DHS recommends that families choose licensed child care providers, which have routine oversight and must comply with statewide child care regulations. Accommodations for school-age children engaged in distance learning will depend on the individual provider, so families should have that discussion with the provider before enrolling their school-age child. To find licensed providers in your community, visit www.findchildcare.pa.gov or contact your Early Learning Resource Center (ELRC). Find your ELRC at www.raiseyourstar.org.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)

SNAP helps more than 1.9 million Pennsylvanians expand purchasing power by providing money each month to spend on groceries, helping households have resources to purchase enough food to avoid going hungry. Inadequate food and chronic nutrient deficiencies have profound effects on a person's life and health, including increased risks for chronic diseases, higher chances of hospitalization, poorer overall health, and increased health care costs.

Families struggling to afford food should consider applying for SNAP, formerly known as food stamps. Pennsylvanians can apply any time at www.compass.state.pa.us.

Those who prefer to submit paper documentation can print from the website or request an application by phone at 1-800-692-7462 and mail it to their local [County Assistance Office](#) (CAO) or place it in a CAO's secure drop box, if available. While CAOs remain closed to the public, the work continues to process applications, determine eligibility and issue benefits. Applications are processed within six days on average for SNAP and once a benefit is approved, it can be immediately accessed. All Pennsylvanians who are in a difficult financial situation due to the economic challenges of this pandemic should apply to see if they are eligible for assistance.

Health Care

Pennsylvanians who have lost health coverage or are currently uninsured and need coverage for themselves or their children may qualify for coverage through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP). Medicaid and CHIP provide coverage for routine and emergency health services, tests and screenings, and prescriptions. COVID-19 testing and treatment are also covered by both Medicaid and CHIP.

Medicaid and CHIP enroll individuals throughout the year and do not have a limited or special enrollment time, so people needing health coverage can apply for these

programs at any time. There are income limits for Medicaid, but all children qualify for coverage through CHIP regardless of family income. Families can apply for Medicaid or CHIP at www.compass.state.pa.us.

Women, Infants and Children Program (WIC)

The Pennsylvania Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC) has improved the nutrition and health of families in Pennsylvania since 1974 by providing nutrition services, breastfeeding support, health care and social service referrals, and healthy foods. Through WIC, pregnant women, mothers, and caregivers of infants and young children learn about good nutrition to keep themselves and their families healthy.

WIC serves pregnant women, breastfeeding women for up to one year postpartum, women up to six months postpartum who are not breastfeeding, and infants and children under 5 years old. Furthermore, these individuals must also meet [WIC income guidelines](#) and a medical or nutritional risk, which is determined at the WIC certification appointment. To apply for WIC, call the toll-free WIC Hotline [1-800-WIC-WINS](tel:1-800-WIC-WINS) to be connected to WIC office staff who will answer your questions and schedule your appointment, or [get started online](#).

ChildLine

DHS administers ChildLine, which is a 24/7 hotline available to anyone concerned for the safety or well-being of a child. To report a concern, call 1-800-932-0313.

Anyone can make a report to ChildLine. Anyone who is not a mandated reporter can make a report to ChildLine anonymously. DHS is encouraging all Pennsylvanians to learn more about the signs of potential abuse or neglect and make a report to ChildLine if they suspect abuse or neglect. Pennsylvanians can learn more about potential signs of abuse at www.keepkidssafe.pa.gov.

Immunizations

The Department of Health (DOH) provides vaccines for specific diseases that affect infants, children, adolescents and adults. These vaccines are available through both public and private health care providers. In addition to providing vaccines, DOH offers educational programs, ongoing disease surveillance systems, disease investigations, assessment of immunization coverage, immunization registry and tracking systems, outbreak control interventions, and special efforts directed toward the prevention of hepatitis B disease.

It is important to note that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, DOH has [temporarily suspended](#) the regulation regarding requirements for children's immunization for a two-month period after the beginning of the school year or the beginning of enrollment in an early childhood education program. As a recommendation, caregivers should schedule

immunization appointments early since many health care providers may have delays in scheduling and decreased appointment windows.

Anyone looking to visit a local immunization clinic to receive vaccinations should call 1-877-PA-HEALTH (1-877-724-3258) to schedule an appointment. Pennsylvanians should have their vaccination records available when they call to make an appointment. A parent or legal guardian must accompany a child receiving vaccinations.

Support and Referral Helpline

Anyone struggling with mental health and in need of referrals to helpful programs can call Pennsylvania's new Support & Referral Helpline, which is operated 24/7 by skilled caseworkers who can provide emotional support during this difficult period. The number to call is 1-855-284-2494. For TTY, dial 724-631-5600.

Another helpful resource is the 2-1-1 [hotline](#) operated by the United Way, which can connect people and families to local resources that can help during the public health crisis.

The Wolf Administration recently launched an online [Mental Health Resources Guide](#) to provide Pennsylvanians with a full complement of resources available to help everyone with their mental health needs.