

Area Agency on Aging *Connections*

New service links seniors to information they need

By Daniel Casciato
For Pittsburgh Senior News

If you need information about a program or service that can help you, where do you begin? Do you spend hours researching at the library? Are you put on hold or lost in the system when phoning a referral line? The Internet seems to be quick and convenient but even then, navigating through hundreds of web pages can be time consuming.

At some point, finding your desired information can become frustrating and overwhelming. Help is available for seniors and people with disabilities residing in Allegheny County – whether they are seeking services or just looking for information about a particular organization or program to help with basic needs. “Trying to find information can be quite daunting for seniors who don’t have all the resources,” said Joe Elliott, resource center manager for Allegheny Link to Aging and Disability Resources (ADRC) of the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS).

Last month, DHS and its partners officially kicked off ADRC, a one-stop shop for information and connections to services. ADRC is funded by a three-year federal grant from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) and the Administration on Aging, and administered by the Governor’s Office of Health Care Reform (OHCR) in collaboration with the Pennsylvania Department of Aging and Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare. The grant began in August 2005. “We did a slow rollout of the center in the fall but the official grand opening occurred May 10,” Joe explained.

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services Disability Connection was selected by the Governor’s Office of Health Care Reform as one of two sites in the commonwealth to operate the pilot project “Aging and Disability Resource Center.” After receiving the grant, the center was renamed the Allegheny Link to Aging and Disability Resources. Housed in the Office of Community Relations, the overarching goals of Allegheny Link are to:

- develop a seamless system that includes eligibility screening, counseling, quicker functional and financial eligibility determinations and personalized referrals;
- make comprehensive and consumer-friendly information on long-term living services and benefits more easily available;
- link individuals who are not eligible for home and community based services with other community resources (including private pay individuals); and
- integrate the Nursing Home Transition Program into ADRC’s operation.

According to Joe, Allegheny Link’s mission is to simplify and streamline access to long-term living services and supports; provide assistance to consumers who are seeking services and making long-term living decisions; and increase awareness and provide reliable information. Allegheny Link will accomplish this by providing integrated screening, counseling and referral, and will facilitate access to publicly and privately funded services and benefits to people regardless of age or type of disability.

This is a collaborative effort among local agencies, organizations and individual consumers. Program areas covered under the scope of Allegheny Link activity include but are not limited to:

- aging, mental retardation, waiver programs and other home and community based service programs;
- income assistance such as food stamps, cash assistance and LI-HEAP;
- health insurance such as Medical Assistance, and basic as well as private insurance benefits;
- employment assistance;
- transportation and housing programs; and
- mental health and drug and alcohol programs.

To date, about 250 people have contacted Allegheny Link for assistance. Joe expects the number of calls to increase now that they’re officially open to the public. “We’re here to help seniors and



Photo provided by Margaret G. Stanley, Allegheny County

From left: Sandi Weber, Darlene Burlazzi, Merry Lee Conway, Elaine Smith, John Tague, Mike Nardone, Allen Kukovich, Marc Cherna, Joe Elliott and Judy Barricella.

people with disabilities,” he said. “In the past, seniors would call an information referral line and get a number for a service or program. Now, we are helping seniors make those connections directly. We’ll either do the calls ourselves to retrieve any information they need, or we will make the call with the senior on the other line.”

Allegheny Link will also help prescreen seniors with eligibility requirements for certain programs. “We’ll streamline the process for them,” Joe added. “We’ll start to pare down the resources they need with the

information we receive from them based on their age, income and other factors. We can then call various organizations and let them know what the seniors need and find out whether they can help. We want to make it as simple as possible for seniors to get what they need.”

Allegheny Link can accept calls or walk-in referrals. The office is located on the first floor of One Smithfield Street and can be reached by calling 1 (866) 730-2368 (voice) or (412) 350-5205 (TTY) from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. *PSN*

Allegheny Link is a collaborative effort among many partners, including:

- Action Housing
- Allegheny County Assistance Office
- Allegheny County Department of Human Services Area Agency on Aging, Office of Behavioral Health, Office of Mental Retardation/Developmental Disabilities
- Allegheny County Housing Authority
- Community Life
- Consumer Health Coalition
- Disabilities Law Project
- Housing Authority of the City of Pittsburgh
- Kane Glen Hazel
- Life Pittsburgh
- Mental Health Association of Allegheny County
- The Office of Vocational Rehabilitation
- Social Security Administration
- Three Rivers Center for Independent Living
- United Cerebral Palsy of Pittsburgh
- University of Pittsburgh School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences