

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL SERVICES-ECONOMIC SECURITY



2023 ANNUAL REPORT

Sarah G. Merrick, Commissioner

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MESSAGE FROM THE COMMISSIONER

Dear Friends of Social Services-Economic Security,

I am pleased to present the Onondaga County's Department of Social Services-Economic Security's (DSS-ES) 2023 Annual Report.

During 2023 DSS-ES served the 140,000 plus Onondaga County residents who utilized one or more of our programs. In addition, Federal Pandemic relief programs wound down or closed resulting in an increase in the number of families seeking services.

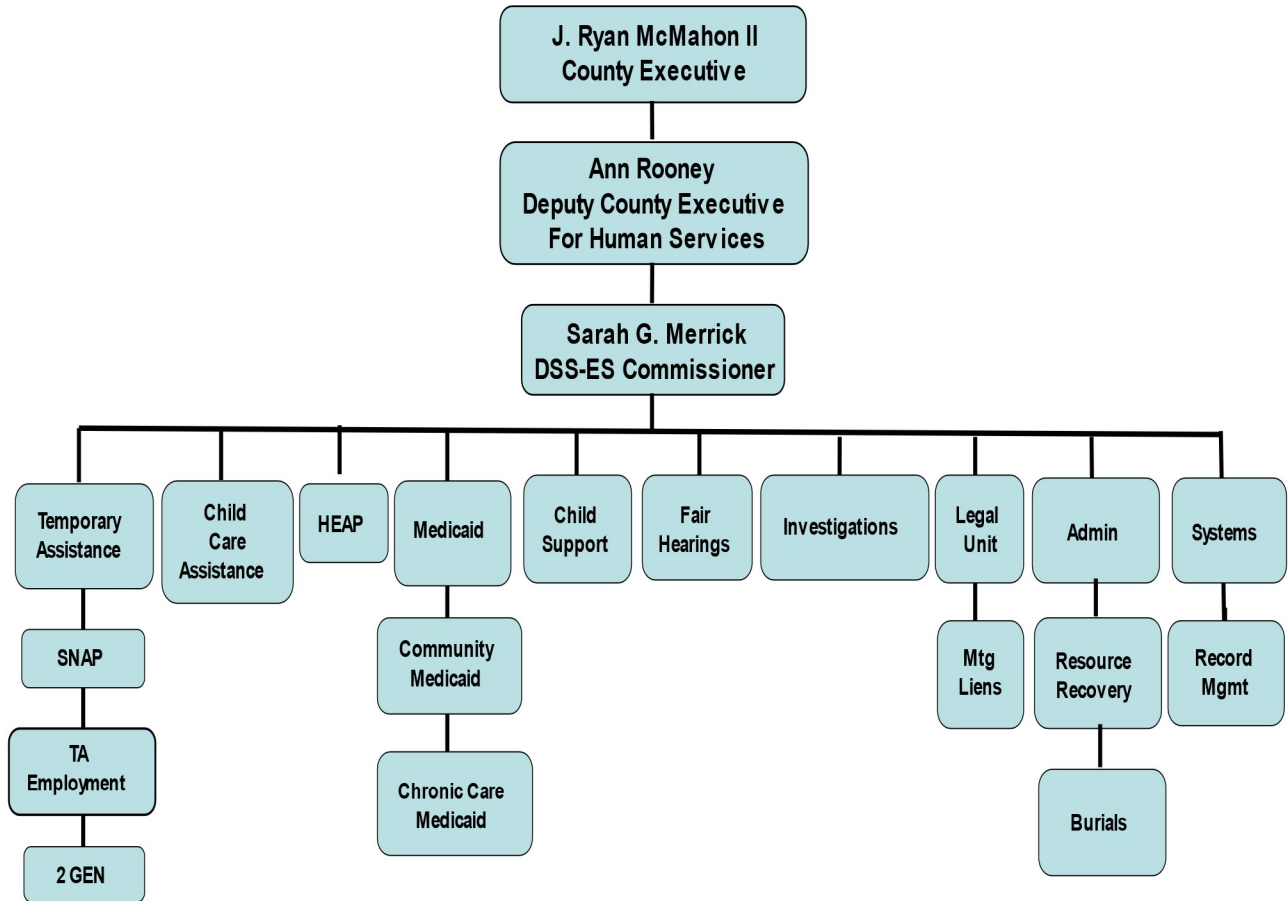
Program highlights, volumes and additional information shared on the following pages. Included as well are the 2024 goals.

As the report illustrates, most of Social Services-Economic Security program volumes increased. At the same time, the staff vacancy rate hovered at 10%. Despite these challenges, employees demonstrated continued commitment through their dedication and hard work.



Sarah G. Merrick, M.P.A.

Onondaga County DSS -ES 2023 Organizational Chart



Onondaga County Legislature Health and Human Services Committee

Cody Kelly

Ken Bush

Mary Kuhn

Vice Chair Peggy Chase

Chair Colleen Gunnip

Mission, Vision & Values

Mission

The mission of the Department of Social Services-Economic Security is to administer economic support and services accurately and efficiently to county residents in a respectful manner where each person is treated fairly. Our staff is responsible for following state and federal guidelines for delivering appropriate assistance. The delivery of services will be conducted in a safe and supportive environment for members of our staff and the public. Our goal is to help people achieve their highest level of independence by providing quality service in a timely, efficient, and dignified manner.

Vision

The Department will be represented by trained, respectful and proficient staff that will:

- o Take a holistic approach while providing services in a safe environment for both employees and individuals, we serve.
- o Function as facilitators and/or problem solvers taking personal accountability to be responsive.
- o Provide clear and consistent information.
- o Address a range of customer needs while treating the individuals we serve as equals.
- o Be sensitive to cultural and linguistic differences of the public we serve including but not limited to ethnicity, age, gender, disability, literacy, and mental health limitations, and/or citizen status.

Values

The Department of Social Services-Economic Security established five (5) core values that form the basis for the work that the Department does in fulfillment of its mission:

Confidentiality

Staff is dedicated to maintaining and sustaining confidentiality to protect all personal information.

Teamwork

Maximum results are achieved by a community of partners working together.

Quality Service

Deliver services in a professional, knowledgeable, respectful and inclusive manner.

Commitment and

Accountability

Be accurate, productive, efficient, committed to public service, and invested in one's job. Be open-minded, dedicated, and cooperative.

Communication

Communicate information appropriately, clearly, concisely, and accurately.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program(SNAP) continues to be the largest DSS-ES program. Over 25,000 applications were processed; open cases increased by 1.5%.
- ❖ Temporary Assistance(TA) handled a 4% increase in application processing and a 7% increase in open cases.
- ❖ TA housing unit handled a spike in family homelessness. 20 families were in shelter in July; that number increased to 95 by December. This trend can be attributed to the limited affordable housing options for low-income households.
- ❖ Child Care Assistance applications increased by 23% while open cases increased by 24%. This is due in part to expansive childcare assistance eligibility standards coupled with an awareness campaign launched by the County.
- ❖ Child Support unit was one of 13 counties in NY state involved in a pilot program funded by the Federal Government to bring child support to custodial parents who have experienced Domestic Violence issues(SAVES) project.
- ❖ Fair Hearing unit was the only county in New York state to receive a Gold Star award from Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance/ Office of Administrative Hearings for Pre-Hearing Disposition submissions.
- ❖ A remote work policy was implemented in September allowing employees to work remote up to two days a week.
- ❖ Leadership training sessions were held for supervisors.
- ❖ Program call centers received handled over 190,000 client calls
- ❖ Transitioned from CISCO phone system to Amazon/Ring Central phone system thus ending a dependency on County IT. In addition, Amazon has resulted in greater call center functionality

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE

Temporary Assistance (TA) is New York State term for public assistance programs commonly known as welfare. Temporary Assistance (TA) offers temporary help for those in need. The Department of Social Services-Economic Security is the local administrative entity to administer benefits contingent on Federal guidelines.

TYPES OF TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE

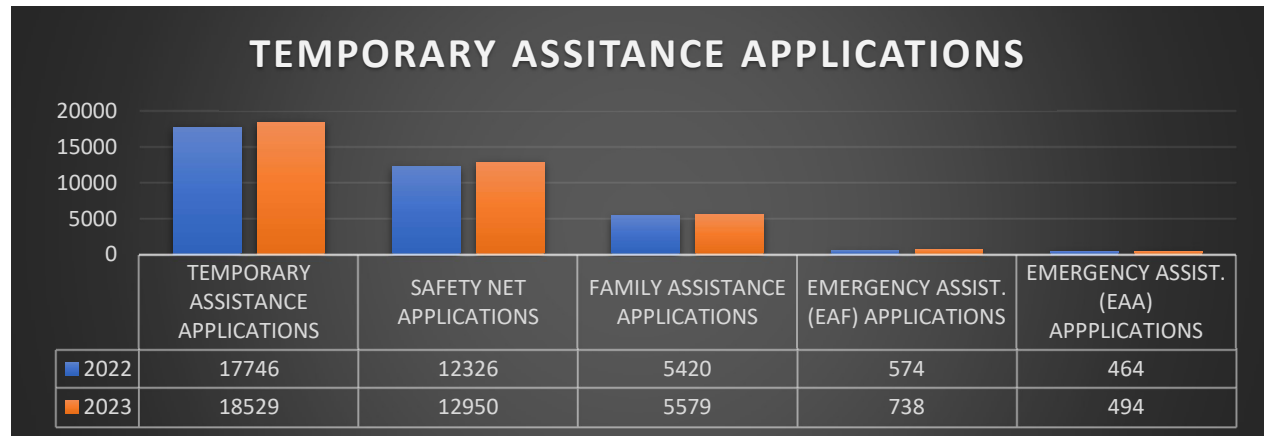
FAMILY ASSISTANCE (FA): This program aids families with dependent children. Under Temporary Assistance Federal guidelines eligible needy families are limited to receiving benefits for a total of 60 months in their lifetime which includes months of assistance granted in other states.

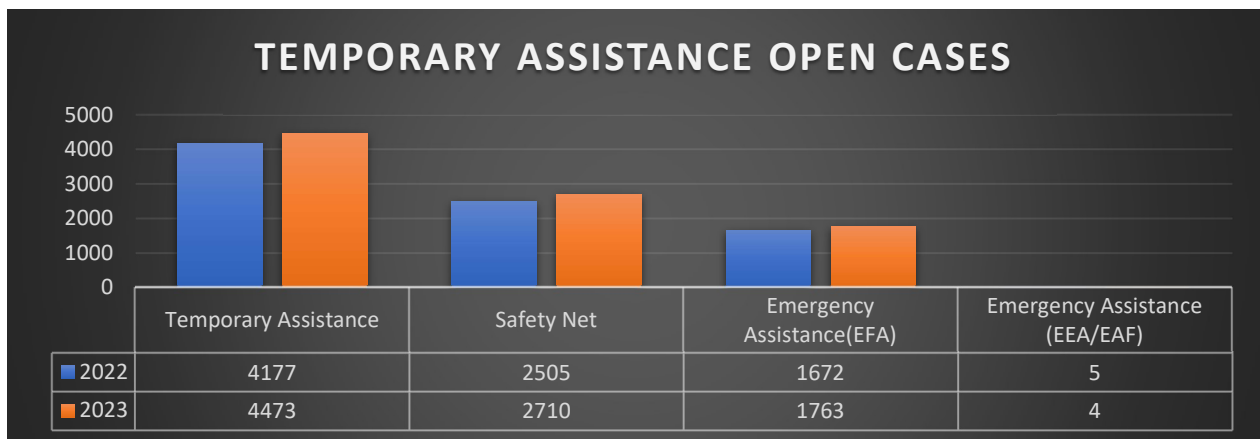
SAFETY NET ASSISTANCE (SNA): This program helps people who are not eligible for FA benefits. Safety Net benefits are provided as cash for 24 months. After 24 months, benefits may continue as non-cash benefits (vouchers or payments made directly to vendors as landlords).

All FA and SNA applicants are considered for Medicaid Medical Assistance and the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance (SNAP) program. In addition, the Temporary Assistance umbrella includes:

Emergency Assistance to Adults (EAA): This helps individuals receiving Social Security income who are facing emergency situations such as homelessness, utility or fuel emergencies, or other item of critical need.

Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF): This aids families with unforeseen emergency needs such as homelessness, etc.





HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Ran two programs to serve homelessness:
 - Completed 1st full year administering the Rental Supplement Program (RSP)
 - Served 149 households and paid \$1.3 million dollars directly to landlords to safely house RSP recipients.
 - In December, approval was received for, and implementation began for the Shelter Supplement Plan maximizing the TA grant to allow Public Assistance recipients a higher shelter allowance.

- ❖ The refugee caseload increased from 20% to 24%. The anticipation is that these numbers will continue to increase in 2024.

- ❖ TA Employment was able to get 1,521 TA clients employed and 359 TA clients Social Security Disability Income

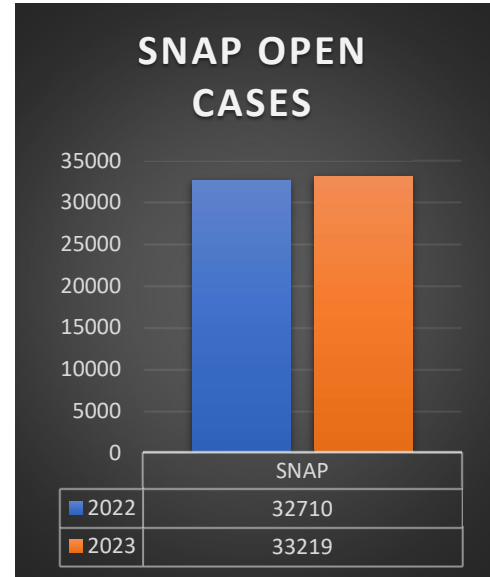
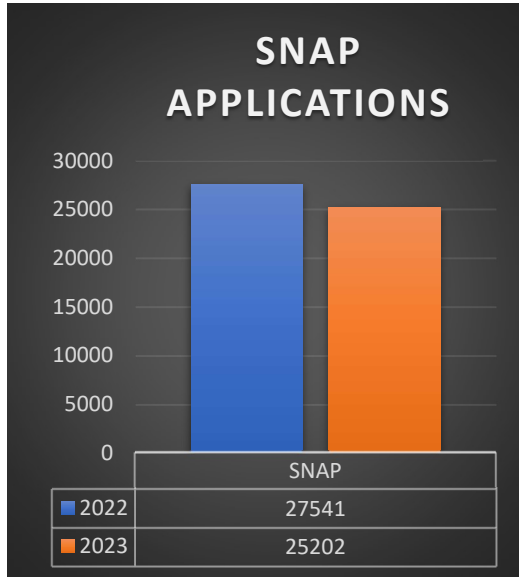
SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food purchase for low income working people, senior citizens, and impaired individuals. Electronic benefit cards (similar to a debit card) are issued to the clients for food purchase.

All Temporary Assistance recipients receive SNAP as part of their overall assistance grant. Under federal rules benefit eligibility is determined by household income, resources and subjected to three tests:

- Gross monthly income, that is, household income before any of the program's deductions are applied-generally must be at or below 130% of the poverty line. The poverty level is dependent on family size

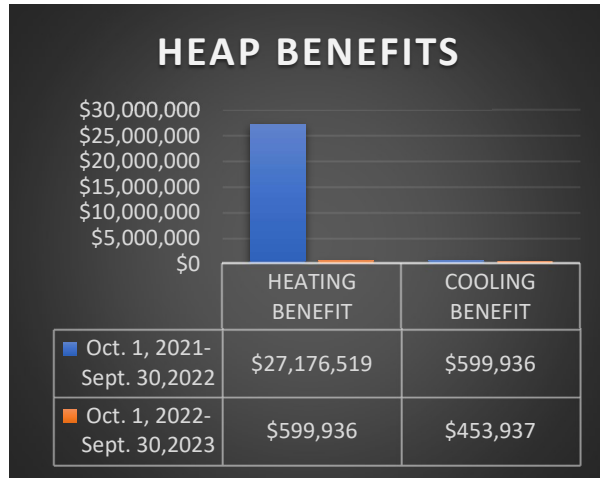
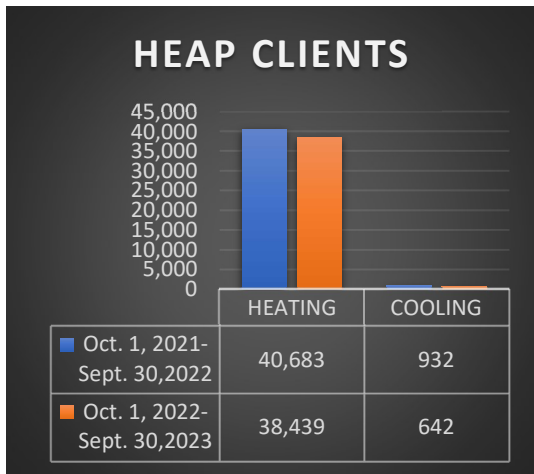
- Net income, or household income after deductions are applied, must be at or below the poverty line
- Assets including but not limited to bank accounts must fall under established guideline amounts



HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HEAP)

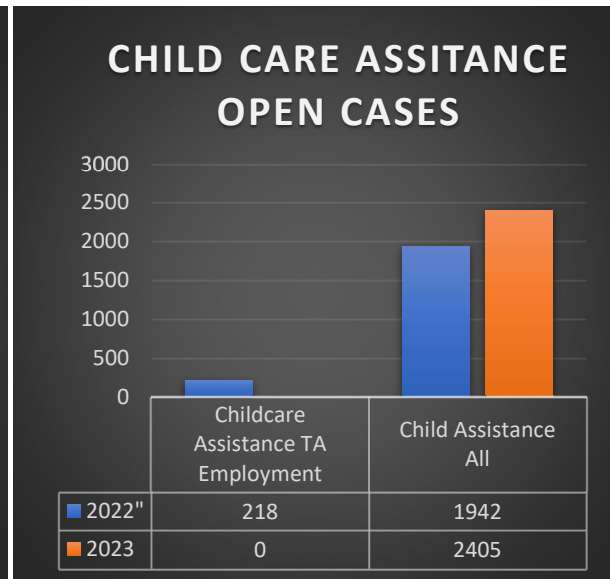
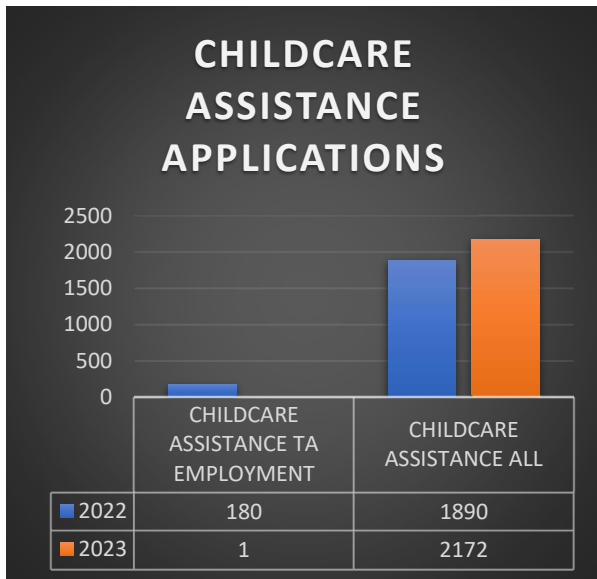
The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program administered by New York state which provides to those eligible assistance with home energy bills. The HEAP program consists of six components-Regular HEAP, Emergency HEAP, Heating Equipment Repair and Replacement (HERR,) Cooling, and the Clean and Tune benefit.

HEAP is unique in that unlike other DSS-ES departments it does not operate on a calendar year, rather seasonally from October to September. The bottom charts illustrate that of the six components listed above, heating and cooling are dominant.



Child Care Assistance

Child Care Assistance is available for certain eligible parents or caretakers to allow them to work. Block grant allowance from the federal and state government predicate the availability of subsidies issued to Onondaga County residents.

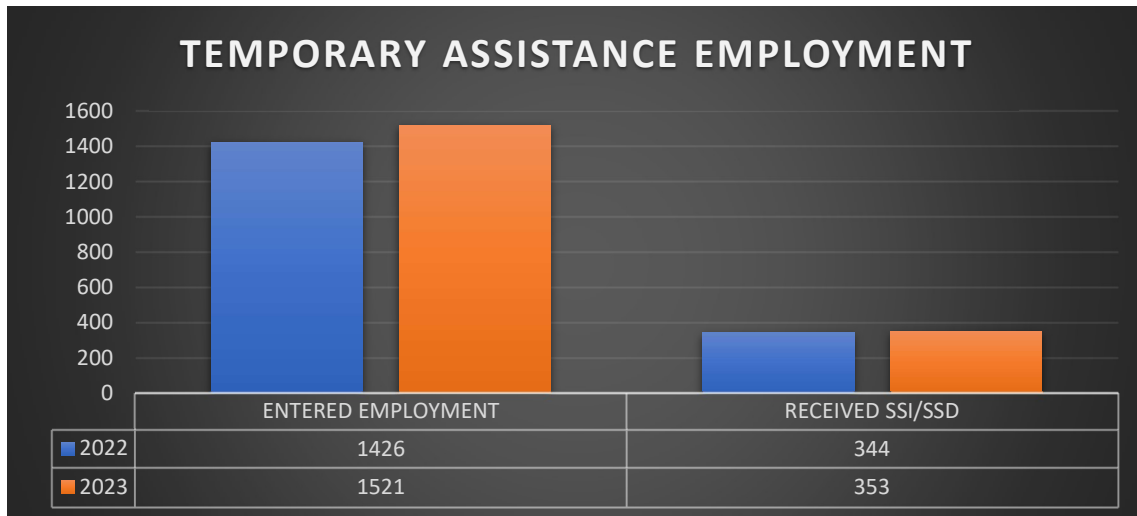


TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE (TA) EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

The TA Employment Program assists Temporary Assistance and /or SNAP applicants and recipients overcome employment barriers. When applying for Temporary Assistance, each applicant is screened for barriers to employment. Employment Counselors work with everyone to determine an appropriate track of participation based on the individual's needs.

ASSISTANCE INCLUDES:

- Supervised Job Searches
- Educational and Vocational Training
- Job Readiness Training
- Work Experience Placements
- On-the-job Training
- Case Management
- Transportation Assistance
- Child Care
- Other Employment Related Activities



HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Completed first full year under the DSS-umbrella. Department re-organized in distinct teams to focus on exempt, non-exempt, Social Security, English as Second Language.
- ❖ Strengthened collaboration with partners. Volunteer Lawyers began assisting SSI appropriate refugee individuals with citizenship barriers to application. Legal Aid began assists clients early in the process.
- ❖ Developed English as a Second Language(ESOL) development to provide specialized assistance to those working on naturalization and citizenship, have resettlement agency

involvement, are refugees or another related status, and non-English speakers who need additional support. Visited community partners including RISE, Refugee Assistance Program (SCSD), Partners in Learning, SUNY EOC, and Interfaith Works to learn more about their offerings to better assist mutual clients.

- ❖ Work Experience- Established the required insurance and relaunched the Work Experience Program. Sessions were held on-site to provide information and the opportunity to meet with site supervisors. New contracts were developed, and jobseekers have been assigned.
- ❖ Employers and community partners attended a Community Job Fair planned and hosted by TA Employment at Syracuse Community Connections.

2Gen

Two generation(2Gen) is an approach that builds family wellbeing by working with children and the adults in their lives. Most programs focus solely on a child or parents but 2Gen is not specifically focused on the child's development and or the adult's needs because both are interconnected. 2Gen centers on families by integrating services, removing barriers, providing coaching, partnering with community agencies, and measuring outcomes. 2Gen goal is educational and economic success to pass from one generation to the next.

HIGHLIGHTS

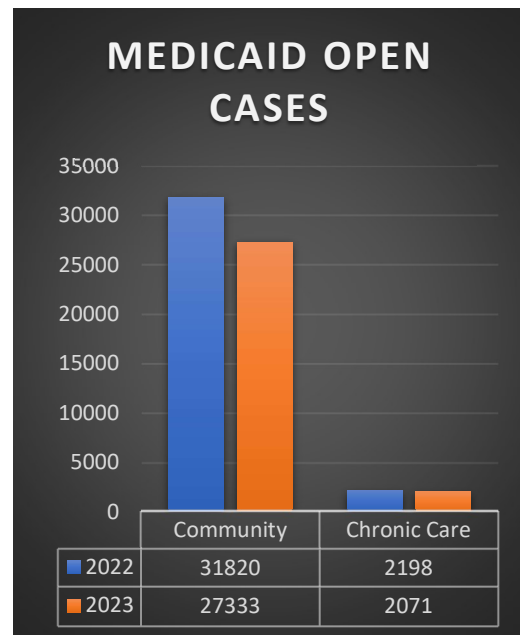
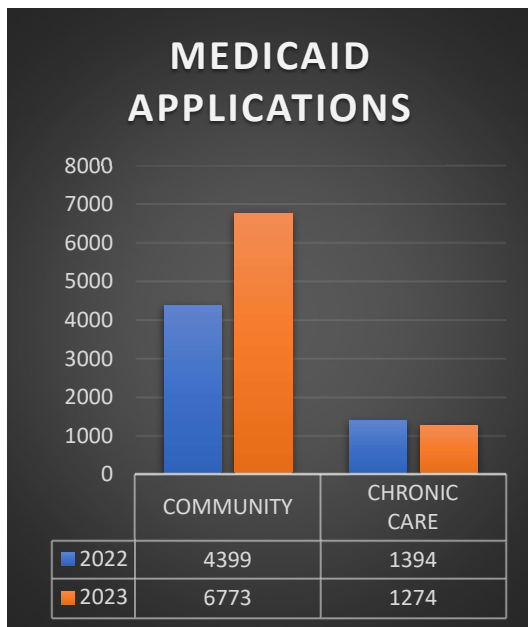
- ❖ Second year of 2Gen Onondaga.
- ❖ 60 families engaged in the program.
- ❖ Supported clients with transportation barriers by creating a Transportation Help Program which assists with :
 - Car repairs
 - Obtaining NYS driver permits
 - Driving lessons
- ❖ The following client referrals were made:
 - Head Start - 6 referrals.
 - Help Me Grow - 20 referrals.
 - Social Development and Enrichment - 6 referrals
 - Rent Payment Assistance - 2
 - Financial Empowerment Services- over 25 referrals
- ❖ 2Gen and Help Me Grow partnered together to provide assessments to 2Gen families. A joint screening/launch luncheon was held at the Rosamond Gifford Zoo. 11 families attended whose children were screened for development milestones.

MEDICAID

Medicaid is a federal insurance program for persons of all ages whose income and resources are insufficient to pay for health care. There are two types of Medicaid:

Medicaid Community-Medical care for people with low incomes not in need of long term institutional or home care.

Chronic Care Medicaid-A program designated to provide long term care benefits such as Nursing Home, Assisted Living Programs, Home Care Services, etc.



HIGHLIGHTS

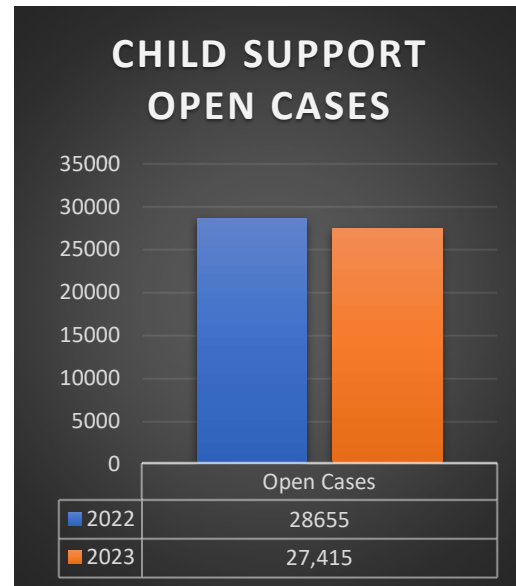
- ❖ Began the Public Health Emergency Unwind on 6/1/2023 and were in line with the average renewal production statewide.
- ❖ Maintained and average of 33,937 cases.
- ❖ Completed approximately 6,908 renewals with an overall completion rate of 73%.

NOTE: Cases highlighted do not include approximately 117,000 cases managed directly by NYS Health Exchange for Onondaga County residents.

CHILD SUPPORT SERVICES

The office of Child Support Services provides custodial parents with assistance in obtaining financial support and medical insurance coverage for their children by locating parents, establishing parentage, establishing, or modifying support orders and collection and distributing child support payments.

The Child Support program helps to strengthen families and reduce Temporary Assistance spending by placing the responsibility for supporting children on those with the financial resources to provide such support. For families receiving Temporary Assistance, the establishment and enforcement of support obligations provide a step toward self-sufficiency.



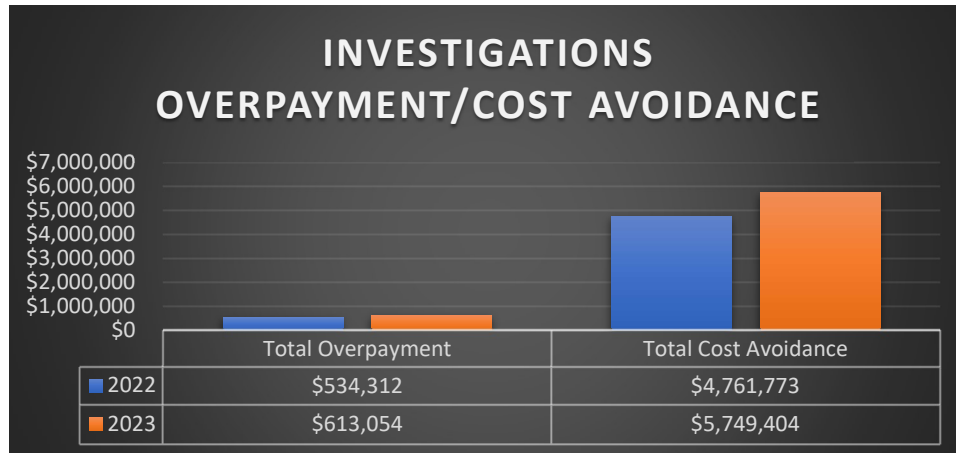
HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Collected payments for approximately 11,400 households in Onondaga County.
- ❖ Paternity Establishment Percentage (PEP) average was 96.27%, which was 4.96% above the state average of 91.31%.
- ❖ The Support Establishment Percentage (SEP) average was 92.60%, which was 5.27% above the state average of 87.33%.

Investigations

The Investigations Unit is responsible for ensuring the integrity of DSS-ES programs by conducting investigations of recipients/applicants to verify that eligibility is determined correctly. Most of these referrals come from within the Agency, however, allegations of fraud/misuse are also received from other Agencies as well as the public.

When the Investigations Unit finds that an individual has committed an Intentional Program Violation it seeks both civil and criminal penalties, which may include case closing/reduction, repayment agreements, sanctions, and/or criminal prosecution.

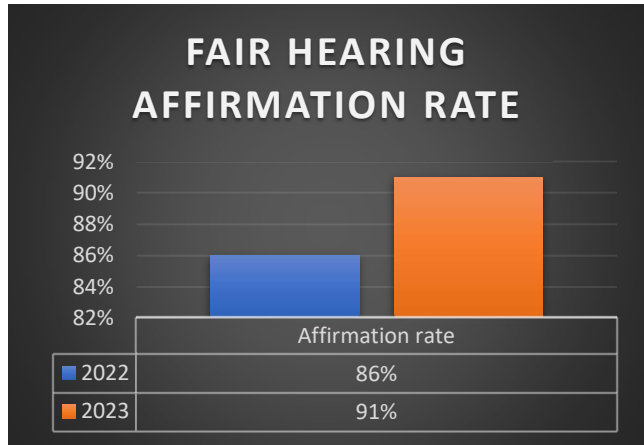
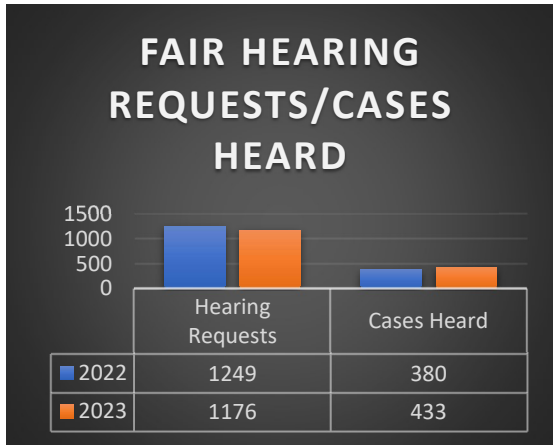


HIGHLIGHTS

- ❖ Investigations completed 3,632 referrals from the public benefits program areas, Temporary Assistance, SNAP, HEAP, Child Care and Medicaid. Forty-one of these referrals lead to the DA pursuing prosecution for welfare fraud.
- Intentional (client) program violations resulted in cost avoidance of \$111,504. Note the State has not fully reactivated this program since the pandemic, resulting in limited cost avoidance.
- The State authorized the replacement of stolen benefits in August. That unit is handling the process.

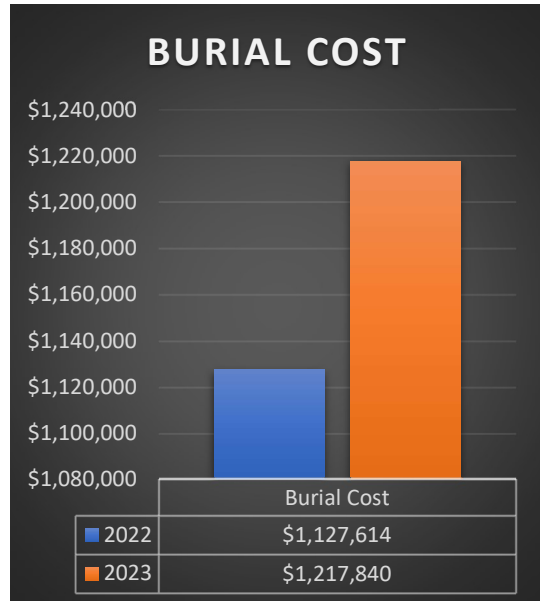
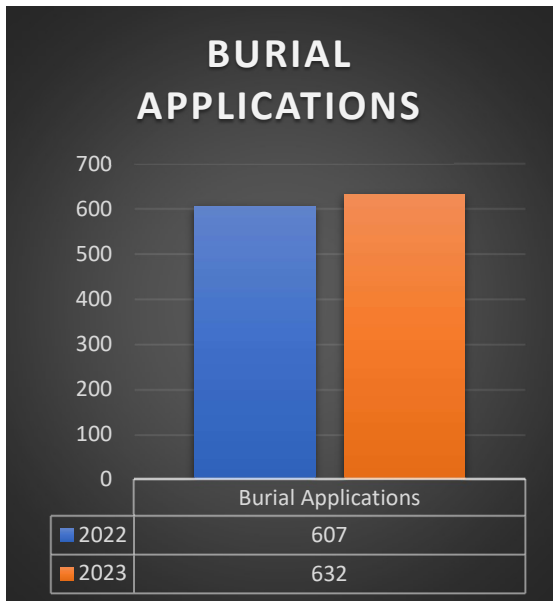
Fair Hearings

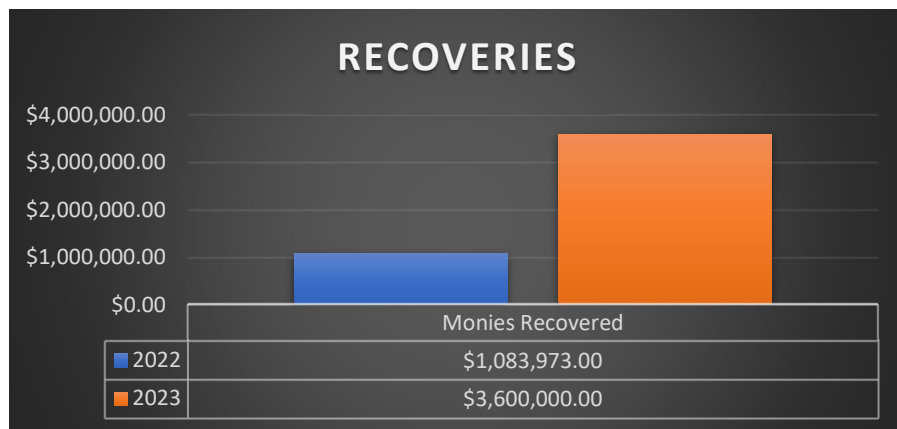
A fair hearing is a formal procedure provided by the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH), a division of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA.) Fair Hearings are requested by an applicant or recipient of benefits who are not satisfied with the actions of Social Services-Economic Security. Specific departments include SNAP, Medicaid, HEAP and Day Care.



Resource Unit

The Resource Recovery Unit is responsible for taking and processing mortgages and liens for applicants and recipients of some social service programs. It is also responsible for paying for and assisting in the scheduling of burials for residents of Onondaga County who die without funds or family to arrange and pay for burial. When applicable The Resource Unit also coordinates claims against personal injury defendants and estates for the recovery of some benefit payments.





SYSTEMS

The Systems unit provides computer support and account creation/maintenance for four Onondaga County departments: Social Services-Economic Security, Children and Family Services, Adult and Long-Term Care Services (which includes Aging/NY Connects/Protective Services/Veterans) and Financial Operations.

Systems includes the Records Management Unit which is responsible for the maintaining and storing of closed and some active cases, the case and individual clearance procedure, the Client Identification Number (CIN) reconciliation process, and responding to case record inquiries from within the Department and from agencies in the community. The Records Unit maintains two off-site storage facilities and sends and retrieves case records to and from these facilities as required by program staff. The Records Unit is also responsible for the destruction of case records in accordance with the State Records Retention and Disposition Schedule.

Highlights

- ❖ Perform daily duties - moves, new installs, new accounts, answer help desk calls and emails.
- ❖ Answered 4,4666 Help Desk calls and 8,931 Help Desk Emails.
- ❖ Cleared 66,677_applications for both Services and Non-Services program areas.

Operational Activities

- ❖ Developed and conducted an employee recruitment/marketing campaign. Able to onboard 86 new employees. Unfortunately, 60 employees left due to retirement, not the right fit or other employment.

- ❖ In September 2023, NYS Civil Service approved multiple DSS-ES titles as H.E.L.P. (Hiring for Emergency Limited Placement) which enabled the hiring individuals who were not required to take a civil service test.

- ❖ 2023 marked the third year in a row with an average vacancy of 40 to 45 positions.

- ❖ Focused on staff retention efforts:
 - On-boarded 86 new hires through a 3-hour session where we introduce our Mission, Vision and Values, and an overview of our policies and procedures.
 - Warm Welcome was also introduced in 2023 - A 1hour session the Wednesday after County Orientation, to help new hires acclimate to DSS and address immediate needs such as supplies/parking

- ❖ Conducted leadership trainings for supervisors as DSS-ES had 26 supervisors with 2 years or less supervisory experience and 23 supervisors with 2 years or more. Research indicates staff stay in their job if they have strong positive relationships with their supervisors.
 - Leadership topics were developed with input from supervisors. Group sessions covered specific topics including effective supervision through effective communication, monitoring, and providing feedback and lastly, having difficult conversations.
 - Group sessions were interactive and based on specific supervisory experiences. Brainstorming and problem-solving from peers w/in the group was encouraged.

- ❖ Developed an Electronic Employee Leave System, similar to SharePoint, to work within the State network DSS-ES is required to use. In addition, transitioned Payroll (Kronos) functions to County Personnel.

- ❖ Launched an employee fun committee that assisted with wellness week, hot cocoa day, lemonade day, ice cream day with games, Halloween contest, Employee Craft Fair, and interactive topic broads throughout the floors. All of these events brought some important fun and cheer to the department and helped improve staff morale.

- ❖ Launched a Community Outreach/Recruitment team. Over thirty employees have been trained to represent DSS-ES at community events.

2024 GOALS

- ❖ Staff recruitment is a top priority. Will be launching a new marketing campaign. An RFP has been released looking for a recruiting firm to contract with. The hope is both the marketing campaign and dedicated recruitment can fill our 10% vacancy gap.
- ❖ Continue to navigate the pressure the Federal, State and Advocacy agencies are putting on our staff to meet mandated application timeliness requirements.
- ❖ Continue to meet the demands of family and individual homelessness.
- ❖ Anticipating 1,800 refugees being added to the benefits programs.
- ❖ Previous to NYS ITS forcing DSS-ES to decommission the kiosk machines clients were able to scan their documents and receive a receipt. Kiosk submissions averaged 250 daily and the elimination of these machines has negatively affected both efficient customer service while increasing the DSS-ES workload as workers now have to accept the documents manually. The goal is to serve the clients more effectively by creating a client self-check through repurposing the former 2nd floor Civic Center.
- ❖ Ventek has been working over a year to build a TA Employment platform to integrate with the department's case management system. This new platform will be launched in March.
- ❖ Will be testing the effectiveness of using BOTS in SNAP. Client will be able to get answers to their top ten questions by BOTS on our website and a dedicated phone number. If this works in SNAP, we will expand it throughout DSS-ES.
- ❖ An expanded childcare assistance marketing campaign will run from January - June 2024.
- ❖ Partnership with Child Care Solutions for executing the County Executive's Child Care Capital Improvement project targeted to assist existing childcare providers.
- ❖ The Director of Quality Assurance is developing program dashboards that visualize data. This will allow all staff to view and understand data to become more proactive and effective.