
Onondaga County

Social Services-Economic Security

2020

Annual Report



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A 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) 2020 Annual Report.

2020 was a year of unprecedented and unique challenges. The immediate challenge was twofold, providing vital services to the public while keeping Social Services-Economic Security employees safe. At the start of the pandemic, Social Services-Economic Security was deemed essential which necessitated creative solutions to a myriad of issues, first and foremost, how to serve the vulnerable in Onondaga County.

Creative solutions included but were not limited to informing the clients and public through vigorous means including robo calls, mailings, and our website, that the building access was limited but that services were available via phone and the DSS-ES website. In addition, through negotiation with CSEA, a policy which shifted staff from the Civic Center to working remotely was implemented. Emphasis was also placed on employee support during the uncertain days of 2020.

On the following pages, I share volumes and additional information key to 2020. Also included is the effect the pandemic had on departmental operations. I hope this report provides you with a thorough overview of Social Services-Economic Security. At this time however, I would be remiss not to thank the approximately 350 DSS-ES employees who did not miss a beat but instead continued to serve the public while at the same time caring to keep their own loved ones safe.

Sarah G. Merrick, M.P.A.

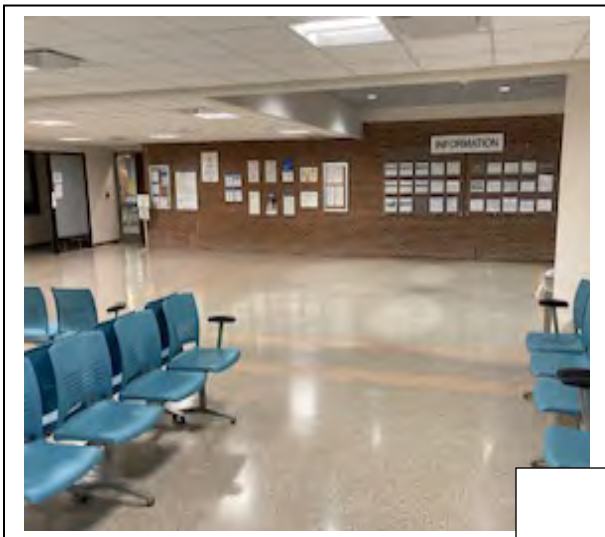


Onondaga County Legislature

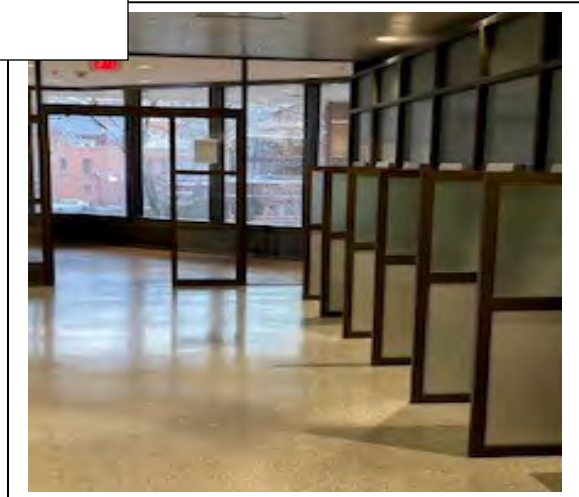
2020 Health & Human Services Committee

Julie Abbott-Kenan, Chair
Peggy Chase, Vice Chair

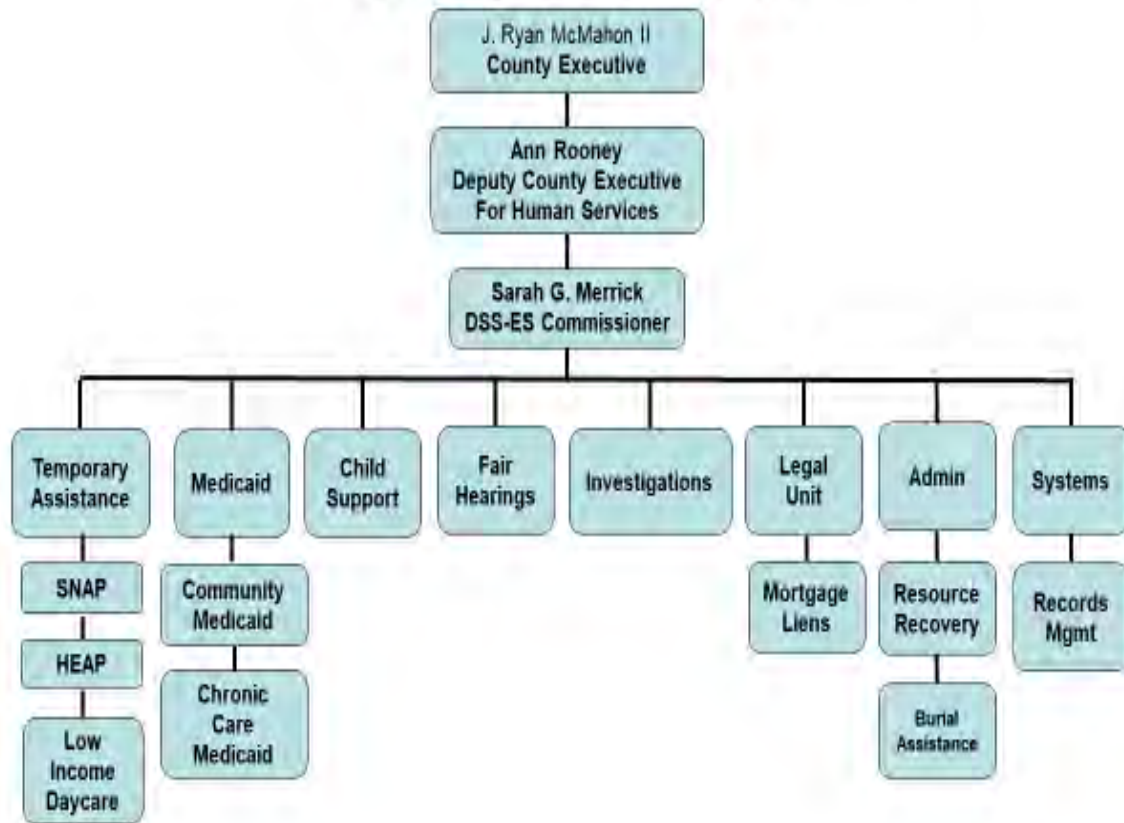
Deb Cody
Ken Bush
Bill Kinne



**The
newly
renovated
DSS-ES
reception area**



Onondaga County Department of Social Services-Economic Security 2020 Organizational Chart



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.

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE

Temporary Assistance is an inclusive term which includes temporary help for needy men, women and children who are unable to work, can't find a job, or have a job does not pay enough.

The Department of Social Services-Economic Security is the local administrative entity that administer benefits contingent on Federal guidelines.

There are two types of Temporary Assistance: Family Assistance (FA) and Safety Net (SNA).

The **Family Assistance** program (FA) helps **families** with dependent children and the **Safety Net Assistance** program (SNA) helps people who are not eligible for FA benefits.

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 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 such as landlords).

All FA and SNA applications are also considered for Medicaid Medical Assistance as well as the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance (SNAP) program.

In addition, the Temporary Assistance umbrella also includes Emergency Assistance to Adults (EAA) and Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF). EAA provides assistance to individuals receiving Social Security income who are facing emergency situations such as homelessness, utility or fuel emergencies or other items of critical need. EAF aids families who have sudden emergency needs that were unforeseen and beyond their control such as homelessness etc.

ANNUAL DATA	2018	2019	2020
Family Assistance (FA) Applications	18,624	16,899	11,058
Safety Net (SN)Applications	13,855	12,459	7,852
Emergency Assistance to Adults (EAA)	1,675	1,264	462
Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF)	1,030	851	433

Pandemic Effect on Temporary Assistance Operations

Prior to March 2020 all Family Assistance and Safety Net Assistance applicants went through the screening process which included a face to face application review, interview in a group setting and interview with an eligibility worker.

Commencing March 2020, the in-person interview requirement was waived by New York Office of Temporary and Assistance which allowed applicant interviews to be held over the phone. However, accommodations were made for applicants who did not have access to a telephone or who requested a face to face interview.

Even though the building access was limited and that 75% of the DSS-ES staff was working remotely, Temporary Assistance Staff served 43,180 visitors at the 2nd floor reception desk.

A requirement of receiving TA benefits is that clients actively seek work, are working or are involved in work-like activities. As expected, employment significantly decreased during the pandemic. 1,096 clients found employment, a 56% drop from the previous year of 2019.

The CDC and NYS moratoriums on evictions, resulted in a 14% reduction in the Temporary Assistance (TA) caseload.

EMPLOYMENT (JOBSplus!)

DSS-ES contracts with JOBSplus! to administer its temporary assistance employment program. The JOBSplus! staff works with the entire public assistance caseload, including those who are exempt from work requirements due to medical or mental health issues, excluding child-only cases.

Assistance Includes:

- Full-time job search workshops for applicants.
- Individual assessment, case management and tracking.
- Unpaid work experience at public or not-for-profit sites.
- Structured, supervised job search.
- Computer skills training and English as a Second Language courses.
- Referral to and authorizations for support services (childcare, transportation).

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
Number Employed	2,412	2,481	1,096

Pandemic Effect on JobsPlus Operations

The Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance waived negative action for non-compliance with any employment requirement that required in-person contact. Also waived was mandatory work activity assignments that could not be completed at home.

In addition, mandatory job search assignments were suspended. As a result, JobsPlus! pivoted from 100% in-person appointments to working remotely with clients through a mix of phone calls, emails, and mail to accomplish assessments, workshops, and orientations. Clients were encouraged to utilize online skill building tools developed with local workforce partners and the State of New York.

The above, in conjunction with businesses closed due to Covid, clarifies the drastic drop in the number of people employed in 2020.

SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITIONAL and ASSISTANCE PROGRAM(SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low income working people, senior citizens and the disabled buy nutritious food and feed their families. Eligibility and benefit levels are based on household size, income, and other factors. The SNAP program issues electronic benefits used to buy food in the same manner a bank debit or credit card is used.

All Temporary Assistance recipients receive SNAP benefits as part of their overall assistance grant.

Under federal rules, to be eligible for benefits a household's income and resources must meet 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 higher for bigger families and lower for smaller families.
- Net income, or household income after deductions are applied, must be at or below the poverty line.
- Assets must fall below certain limits. Generally, resources that could be available to purchase food, such as amounts in bank accounts, count as assets.

ANNUAL DATA	2018	2019	2020
SNAP Applications	21,861	19,980	25,105
SNAP Open Cases	30,937	30,880	31,946
Individuals Receiving SNAP	56,587	55,850	58,921

Pandemic Effect on SNAP Operations

As unemployment surged during Covid, the applications and caseloads for SNAP rose quickly. SNAP processed over 25,000 applications, a 26% increase from 2019.

Open cases totaled 31,946 (or 59,000 individuals), a 4% increase from 2019.

This surge also affected telephone volumes. The SNAP department received over 121,000 calls from April – December, an 23% increase from 2019.

HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HEAP)

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program administered by New York state which provides assistance with home energy bills to those eligible. This onetime benefit is applied directly to the clients' utility bill or bulk fuel bill. Additionally, households with a heating emergency may also be eligible for an emergency benefit or a heating equipment repair/replacement benefit. The HEAP year typically begins in mid-November and closes in mid-March or when the program funding is exhausted, whichever comes first.

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
HEAP open cases	42692	38,059	39,996
Total Payments	\$11, 660,840	\$10,718,966	\$10,299,126

Pandemic Effect on HEAP Operations

The New York state Office of Temporary Assistance (OTDA) authorized a 3rd emergency HEAP grant for the 2019-2020 season.

The HEAP season, which typically ends mid-March was extended through 8/31/20.

SUBSIDIZED DAY CARE PROGRAM

Daycare subsidy is paramount in achieving to self-sufficiency through maintaining employment.

Block grant allowance from the federal and state government predicate the availability of subsidies issued to Onondaga County residents.

Child day care assistance is authorized for eligible individuals through a variety of programs outlined below. Each program determines method of payment, required paperwork and who to contact with questions and problems.

- Temporary Assistance Child Care: available to recipients of cash benefits who are employed or engaged in an approved work activity, vocational or educational training program.
- Transitional Child Care Assistance: available to recipients of Temporary Assistance who become ineligible for cash benefits due to earned income. Transitional Child Care is guaranteed for 12 months after case closing if the working family earns less than or equal to a designed percentage of the State Income Standard (which is based on the Federal Poverty Level and subject to change). Parents contribute to the cost of care according to a sliding scale based on their household income.
- Non-Temporary Assistance Child Care (Subsidy Program): available to working families who earn less than or equal to a designated percentage of the State Income Standard. Parents contribute to the cost of care according to a sliding scale.

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
Daycare Applications	3099	2778	1829
Daycare Open Cases	2718	2622	1852

Pandemic Effect on Daycare Operations

Providing childcare for essential workers, was a key aspect of the County Executive's COVID plan. The Department worked with Child Care Solutions (an independent, community-based, not-for-profit organization to coordinate and support childcare in Onondaga County.) to secure an average of 1800 free childcare slots available for these workers' children. Over 1,000 slots were utilized.

In addition to funding childcare for essential workers, Onondaga County expanded childcare subsidy services by utilizing waivers approved by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to better serve the changing needs of community members impacted by COVID-19.

The waivers included the following:

Extension of recertification periods allowing families additional time (30 days) to complete the recertification process during the first 6 months of the pandemic

- **Family Share Fee Waived:** The Family Share, a parent/caretaker's contribution toward the cost of care, was waived for those families who were impacted by COVID-19. The family share was covered by the childcare subsidy grant for the first 6 months of the pandemic, March 16th through August 31, 2020.
- **Income Guidelines were extended up to 85% of the State Median Income Level (Essential Personnel):** The income guidelines used to determine family eligibility for the subsidy program was increased from 200% of the Federal Poverty Level up to 85% of the State Median Income allowing more families to be eligible for childcare subsidy and continue to work.
- **Expansion of the Number of Allowable Absences and Program Closures:** Subsidy payments were made to eligible providers remaining operational during the recovery period for a child temporarily absent from childcare due to the child or parent being quarantined. This included families self-quarantined to slow the spread or no longer working because the employer had temporarily closed.

Up to 20 allowable absences were paid to the following types of providers: Day Care Center, Group Family Day Care, Family Day Care, and School Age Child Care. The period of absences coverage ran from March 16, 2020 through August 31, 2020.

In addition to covering allowable absences, childcare services were expanded to cover allowable closure days when a provider needed to shut down or partially shut down due to a COVID positive exposure. Up to 20 days could be paid for active recipients of the childcare subsidy to providers that were open and operating in the last 90 days prior to the closure to due COVID positive exposure. The program closure expansion waiver was initiated December 1, 2020 due to changing needs in the community.

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 is medical care for people with low incomes not in need of long term institutional or home care. Community Medicaid has changed as a result of the Affordable Care Act. Individuals applying for community coverage must now be screened to determine if they need to apply through the NYS Health Exchange or through the local district. Individuals eligible to apply through the Health Exchange may do so on-line, over the phone, or in person with a navigator.

Medicaid Chronic Care Medicaid is a program that is designated to provide long term care benefits such as Nursing home, Assisted Living programs, home care services etc. Medicaid Intake determines initial eligibility for nursing home and home care applications. There are 23 Chronic Care Specialists who have the responsibility of determining initial eligibility. This involves a very detailed and complex review of resources looking back 60 months from the date of application and looking for any transfer of resources. These applications often involve lawyers and estate planners and very large amounts of resources.

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
Medicaid Chronic Care Applications	1750	1794	1514
Medicaid Community Applications	6650	6322	4402
Medicaid Open Cases (total)	31299	30759	33412

The above numbers reflect cases at the local district but do not include cases that active with the state. Responsibility for Medicaid eligibility and ongoing maintenance at the Local District consists of the more complex categories and budgeting methodologies. Such as:

Individuals aged 65 or older, disabled, or who request coverage for long term care, Medicaid Spend Down, Program, Medicare Savings Program, Medicaid Buy-In for Working People with Disabilities Program, Residential Treatment/Community Residences operated by the Office of Mental Health and Presumptive Eligibility for Pregnant Women.

Pandemic Effect on Medicaid Operations

As the pandemic grew, so did the need for health insurance. The local Medicaid (MA) caseload in 2020 increased to over 33,000 (or 38,000 individuals) cases, a 9% increase from 2019. There are nearly 128,000 county residents on MA, approximately 28% of the population.

Child Support

The Office of Child Support Services assists custodial parents seeking child support services in obtaining court ordered child support for their children. The program will establish paternity, as well as obtain and enforce financial and medical support orders. Once support orders are issued by the Family Court or Supreme Court, accounts are established, payments are monitored and enforcement actions are initiated when nonpayment occurs.

The child support enforcement program helps to strengthen families and reduces temporary assistance spending by placing the responsibility for supporting children on those parents with the financial resources to provide such support. For families receiving temporary assistance, the establishment and enforcement of support obligations provides a step toward self-sufficiency.

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
Support Monies Collected	\$4,580,0455	\$45,086,889	\$53,050,108
Number of Cases	12, 628	13, 705	14,819

Pandemic Effect on Child Support Operations

Child Support handled nearly 32,000 open cases. Child Support collections and redistributions set a record of over \$53 million. The increased collection amounts reflect Covid Unemployment Insurance benefits as well as the first round of stimulus payments being applied toward child support arrears.

In house paternity testing was suspended through July.

Investigation Unit

The Investigations Unit is responsible for ensuring the integrity of DSS-ES programs by conducting investigations of recipients/applicants to verify that their eligibility is determined correctly. Most of the referrals come from within the Agency, however, they also receive calls/reports from the public reporting allegations of fraud.

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.

ANNUAL DATA	2018	2019	2020
Fraudulent/Improper Payments	\$768,532	\$669,806	\$442,481
Recovered	\$6,370,710	\$4,685,298	\$3,466,986

Pandemic Effect on Investigations Unit Operations

Investigating fraud referrals, in most cases requires a home visit by the investigator to the client’s home or a face to face office appointment. The ability to do these activities was suspended for a five-month period and negatively affected the outcomes of investigations related to the verification of household composition and residence. As a result, this either caused a delay in the investigation being completed until a home/office visit could be conducted or forced the investigator to close out the referral without a thorough investigation.

Fair Hearing Unit

The Fair Hearing Unit represents Onondaga County in administrative hearings requested by applicants or recipients who are not satisfied with the actions of Onondaga County Department of Social Services-Economic Services. The Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) and located in Albany is responsible for administering the hearings and the Onondaga County Fair Hearing Unit represents the County at the hearings.

<u>ANNUAL DATA</u>	<u>2018</u>	<u>2019</u>	<u>2020</u>
Case Requests	1660	1453	1371
Cases Heard	760	580	482
DSS-ES Affirmation Rate*	90%	89%	85%

* the percentage of OAOH rulings in DSS-ES favor

Pandemic Effect on Fair Hearing Unit Operations

In January 2021, Fair Hearings had a backlog of 316 cases compared to 146 at the same time in January 2020. This increase can be attributed to the OAH’s March suspension of in person hearings. Commencing in April, Fair Hearings were conducted via the telephone, but this was a difficult process as Appellant’s were difficult to contact in this manner.

Resource Unit

The Resource Unit receives, processes, and allocates monies for indigent burials. In addition, it is charged with generating revenue enhancements. This can take the form of actual income received from programs or savings generated from cost avoidance. Additionally, this unit acts as a resource to the program areas by assisting Medicaid and Public Assistance in areas that may involve the recovery of revenue or the avoidance of program expenses.

ANNUAL DATA	2018	2019	2020
Burial Costs	\$759,757	\$944,017	\$1,067,281
Number of Burials	353	425	480

Pandemic Effect on Resource Unit Operations

In 2020, the number of burials that Onondaga County subsidized increased by 13%.

Systems

The Systems Department provides computer support and account creation/maintenance for four departments: The Department of Social Services – Economic Security; Children and Family Services; Adult and Long-Term Care Services (Aging/Mental Health/NY Connects/Protective Services/Veterans) and Financial Operations.

The Systems Department supports over 900 State networked PC users and is responsible for seven State member servers that host both State and locally developed case management applications.

Pandemic Effect on Systems Operations

The switch to a 75% remote work staff demanded:

- staff training
- on demand support for those working remotely
- purchasing and providing appropriate equipment for remote staff
- assisting with mailings informing the public of operational changes

SOCIAL SERVICES-ECONOMIC SECURITY'S RESPONSE TO THE PANDEMIC

At the immediate onset of the pandemic, DSS-ES operations and employees were deemed essential. Rapid adaptation to the pandemic necessitated employment of necessary measures to maintain service while supporting both the physical and mental safety of staff.

Measures taken to maintain service to clients

An aggressive campaign was utilized via telephone calls, email, and the DSS-ES website to advise clients that access to the Onondaga County Civic Center was limited but that phone calls and technology could be utilized including:

- Self-service kiosk machines remained operational allowing clients to enter information necessary for their application and or case.
- A Mobile Document Upload smartphone application was implemented by the state allowing clients to upload documents. From its inception in March 2020 until 12/31/2020 2515 documents were uploaded.
- DSS-ES worked with area homeless shelters to develop and implement a process to avoid COVID spreading throughout the shelter population. To date, wide spread of the virus within the homeless population has been contained. The department worked with two hotels to quarantine 88 COVID positive homeless clients and area non-profits to provide immediate need services.
- Even with continued demand for DSS-ES essential services, approximately 20% of DSS-ES employees assisted with contact investigating, testing and vaccination sites and the taskforce to monitor business compliance with COVID restrictions.

Measures taken to support and protect Social Service staff

From the start, focus was on three areas: transparency, flexibility, and mental health. The following measures were taken:

- ❖ Initially it was clear that transparency could be achieved through clear and continuous communication. As the pandemic unfolded, and as a vehicle to keeping staff informed, regular updates were sent from the Commissioner's office.
- ❖ Staff safety moved to the forefront. Prior to COVID, DSS-ES was a 100% on site operation. Within a matter of weeks, upwards of 80% of the workforce was working remotely. As previously mentioned, this was accomplished through negotiations with CSEA to establish and implement a telework procedure.
- ❖ Staff with school aged children could flex and or change schedules according to their needs
- ❖ Trained staff and utilized Zoom & teleconferencing for staff meetings
- ❖ Through rigorous sanitation methods implemented by the county, employees who remained in house were not for the most part affected by COVID. Although 35% of the workforce was directly impacted by COVID, few cases originated at the workplace.
- ❖ Staff mental health was a priority. Keeping both onsite and remote workforce connected and supported was instrumental. Through Zoom weekly sessions the department offered:
 - weekly self-care sessions
 - bi-weekly staff success meetings
 - monthly support group sessions
- ❖ A newsletter named "Quarantine Chronicles" was born and disseminated weekly. Information within contained County Covid updates but the content primarily centered on upbeat and fun information i.e. employee contests (complete with prizes), recipes, self-help tips etc.

- ❖ Food was occasionally provided courtesy of the management staff to in-house staff

- ❖ Despite the Pandemic, DSS-ES employees were encouraged to participate in trainings offered by New York state. Staff participated in approximately 90 various training sessions, ranging from effective supervision to Excel courses.