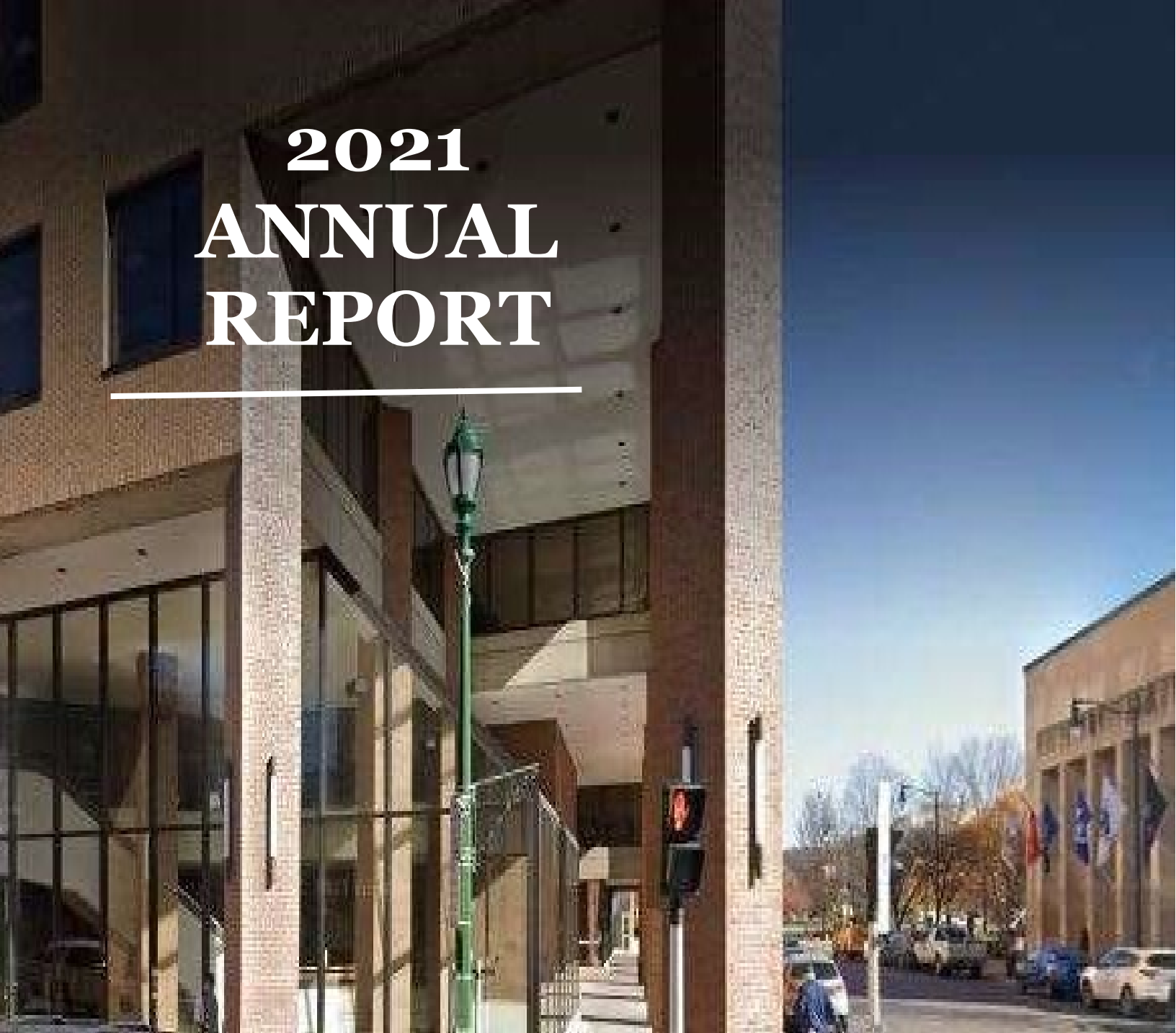


2021 ANNUAL REPORT



ONONDAGA COUNTY SOCIAL SERVICES- ECONOMIC SECURITY

**J. Ryan McMahon II, County
Executive**

Sarah G. Merrick, Commissioner





**Onondaga County Legislature
2021 Health & Human Services Committee**

Julie Abbott-Kenan, Chair

Peggy Chase, Vice Chair

Ken Bush

Bill Kinne

Deb Cody

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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) 2021 Annual Report.

The challenges present in 2020 rolled into 2021. The year commenced with most DSS-ES staff working remotely and limited client face to face contact; the end of the year culminated with most staff returning to the Civic Center and continued limited client face to face contact. The 2020 challenge remained; serving Onondaga County's most vulnerable as effectively and efficiently as internal and external forces allowed.

Constant adaptation and consistent strategic planning continued to be key.

Accomplishments that quickly come to mind include implementation of a new call center which enabled proficient handling of increased telephone volumes incurred due to limited face to face client interaction as well as expedient implementation of a unit dedicated to the US Treasury Rental Assistance program borne out of tenant income loss due to the pandemic.

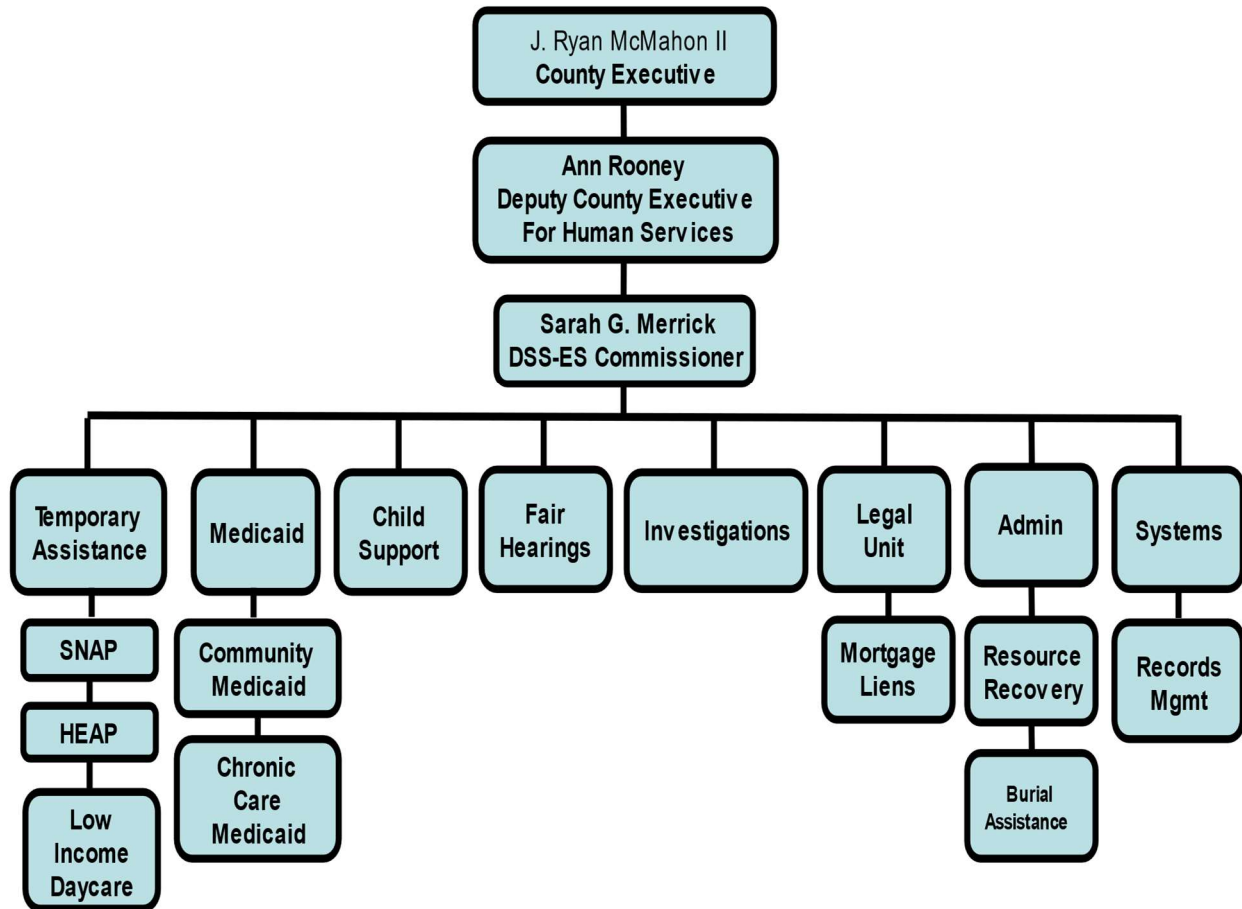
All accomplishments are preceded by challenges and the forementioned were no different. Rigorous staff training, database updating and stringent deadlines were essential to implement these changes. Simultaneously, DSS-ES volumes coupled with staffing shortages presented additional changes.

In addition, this report highlights specific program information, 2021 volumes as well as additional accomplishments and challenges. I hope it provides you with a thorough overview of Social Services-Economic Security. In addition, I offer gratitude to the approximately 350 DSS-ES employees who served the public despite constant barriers.

Sarah G. Merrick, M.P.A.



Onondaga County
Department of Social Services -Economic Security
2021 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

Vision

The Department will be represented by 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.

- ❖ Function as facilitators and/or problem solvers taking personal accountability to be responsive.
- ❖ Provide clear and consistent information.
- ❖ Address a range of customer needs while treating the individuals we serve as equals.
- ❖ 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.

2021 Department of Social Services- Economic Security highlights

- ❖ Although COVID continued to impact our community and our workforce, DSS-ES remained a fully operational department
- ❖ The 2nd floor's renovation was completed and became the central reception area hub for all department programs. Even though clients were encouraged to contact us by phone and/or email to reduce possible COVID spread, 44,828 visitors were served in person on the 2nd floor
- ❖ In an effort to handle the influx of calls due to Covid, a new Call Center was implemented. The most significant feature of this system is the callback option which allows a caller to request a call back, thus negating the necessity to remain on hold. Although the volume of calls increased by 20% over 2020, the call abandonment rate decreased over that same period by 19%
- ❖ In addition to the Civic Center kiosks, clients now have the capability to submit documents electronically. This negates their need to come to the Civic Center. This was made possible through working with service provider VenTek.
- ❖ Onondaga County was a direct recipient of US Treasury Emergency Rental Assistance funds. Over \$26.4 million in rental arrears payments were made to landlords on behalf of 5,200 tenants
- ❖ Over \$750,000 was recovered through Personal Injury Liens, TA Estate Liens, Medicaid Property Liens, Supplemental Needs, 2nd Mortgage Liens, Burial Reimbursements, and Irrevocable Trusts
- ❖ Staff participated in approximately 146 various training sessions, ranging from effective supervision to Excel courses
- ❖ Through Zoom sessions the Department offered weekly self-care sessions, bi-weekly staff success meetings and monthly webinars

TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE

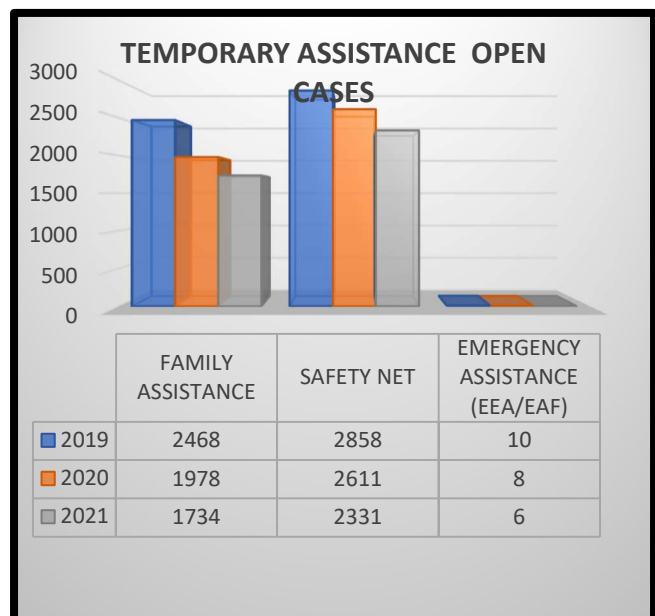
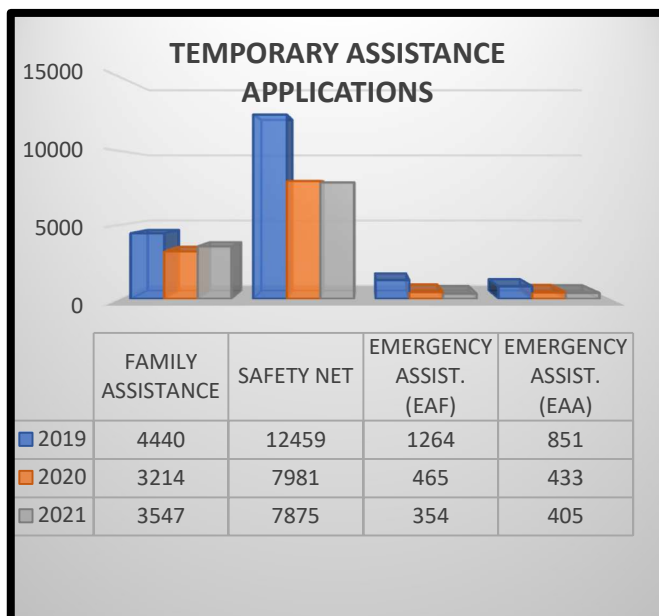
Temporary Assistance is an inclusive term which includes temporary help for needy men, women and children who are unable to work, can't find a job, or have a job does not pay enough. The Department of Social Services-Economic Security is the local administrative entity that administer benefits contingent on Federal guidelines.

There are two types of Temporary Assistance, Family Assistance (FA) & Safety Net (SNA):

- The **Family Assistance** program (FA) 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.
- The **Safety Net Assistance** program (SNA) 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 such 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)** 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.
- **Emergency Assistance to Families (EAF)** aids families with unforeseen emergency needs beyond their control such as homelessness etc.

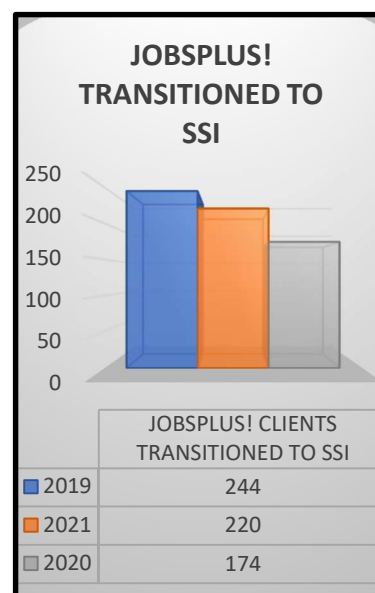
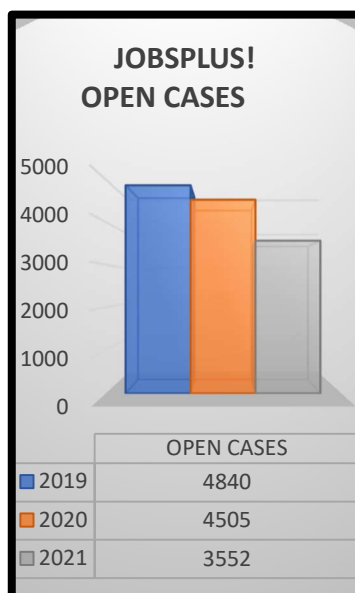
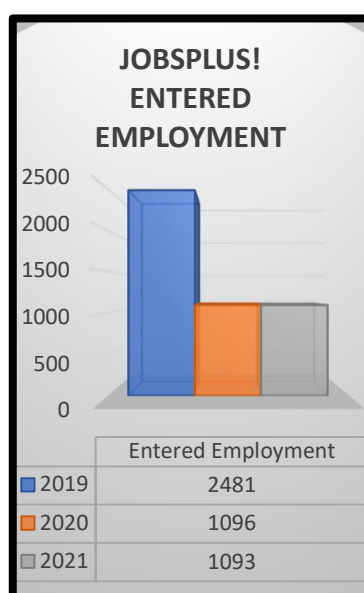


EMPLOYMENT (JOBSplus!)

DSS-ES contracts with JOBSplus! to administer its mandatory 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).

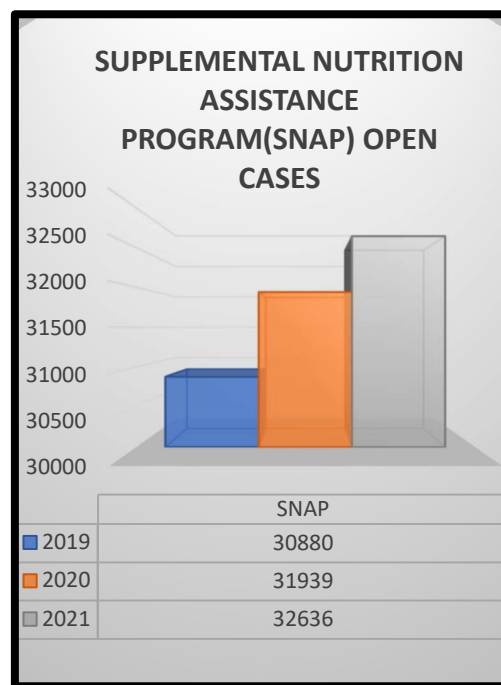
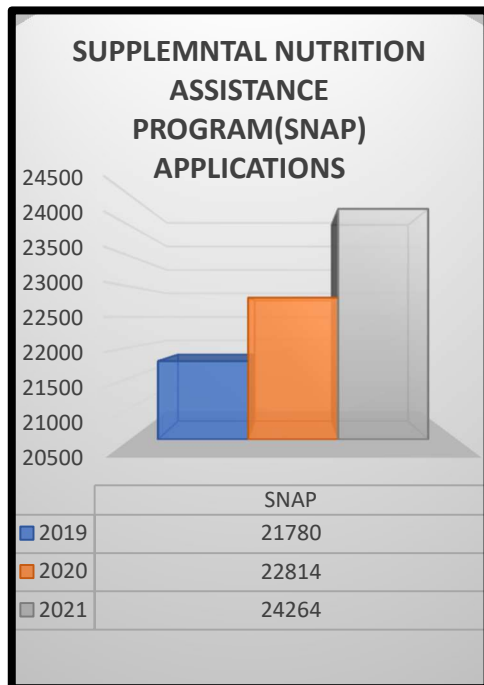


SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITIONAL and ASSISTANCE PROGRAM(SNAP)

The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) helps low income working people, senior citizens and the disabled with food purchase. 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 benefit eligibility is determined by household income, resources & 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.

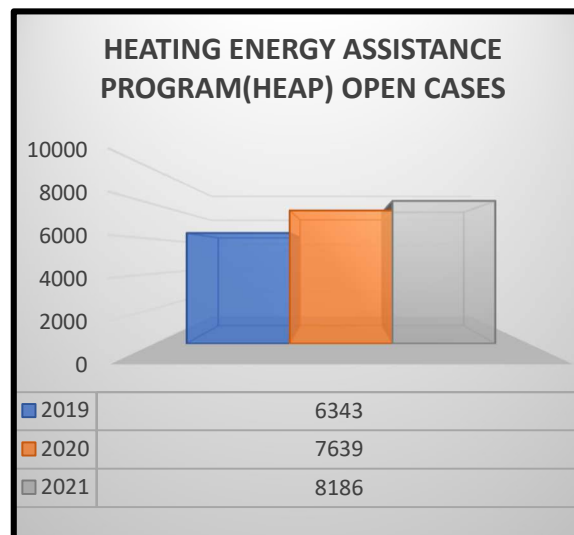
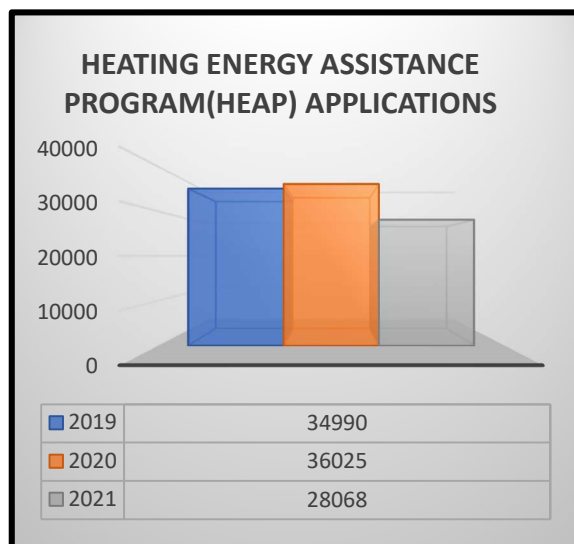


HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HEAP)

The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program administered by New York state providing 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 an or 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.



In 2021, OTDA established a new program to address the large problem of utility arrears caused by the Pandemic. OTDA required local Social Service departments to administer this program without any additional resources. The program named Regular Arrears Supplement (RAS), is a one-time benefit based on the actual amount of current utility arrears & allowed up to a maximum of \$10,000 per applicant household. Benefits are paid directly to the household's gas and/or electric utility vendor(s).

\$20, 093,661 in regular HEAP and RAS payments were made to utilities on behalf of eligible clients.

SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE PROGRAM

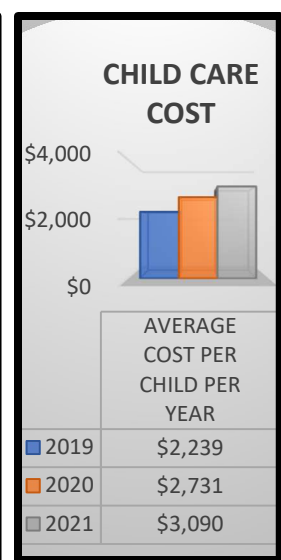
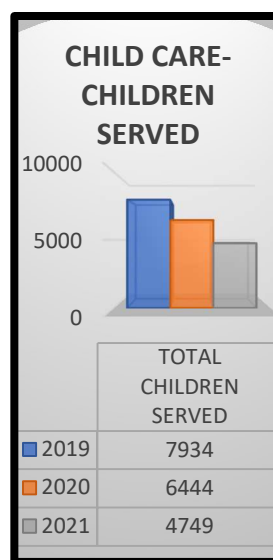
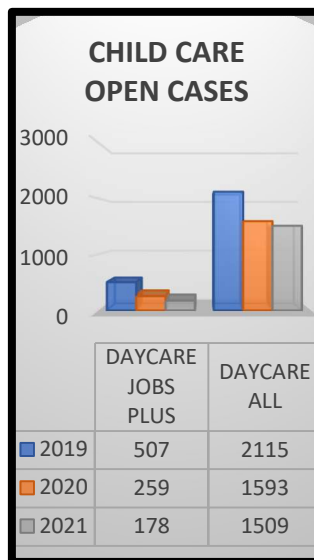
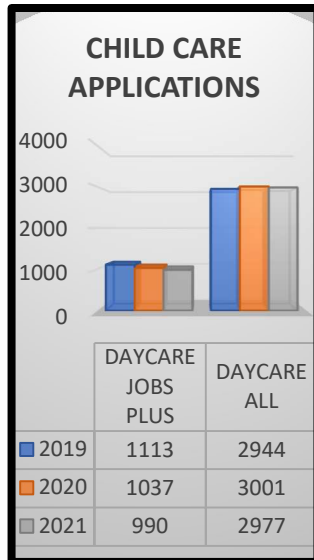
Child Care subsidy is paramount in achieving self-sufficiency through maintaining employment. Child

Block grant allowance from the federal and state government predicate the availability of subsidies issued.

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. Programs are:

- **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.
- **Preventive/Protective Child Care:** available to families with an open child protective services investigation or family assessment response, families with a current preventive services case as a result of an indicated child protective services investigation, cases where a child(ren) is placed with a relative or other significant caretaker under an Article 10 Family Court Order as well as foster care families caring for a child(ren) named in such cases. These cases are programmatically eligible based on the child's need to be protected and are not subject to work, training, or educational activities to establish eligibility. The care authorized pursuant to this provision must be related to the protection of the child(ren) as established by the district. The 12-month eligibility period begins with the subsidy start date, which, once approved, can be backdated as far as the date the application was received, including when the family is using an enrolled legally exempt provider.

SUBSIDIZED CHILD CARE PROGRAM STATISTICS

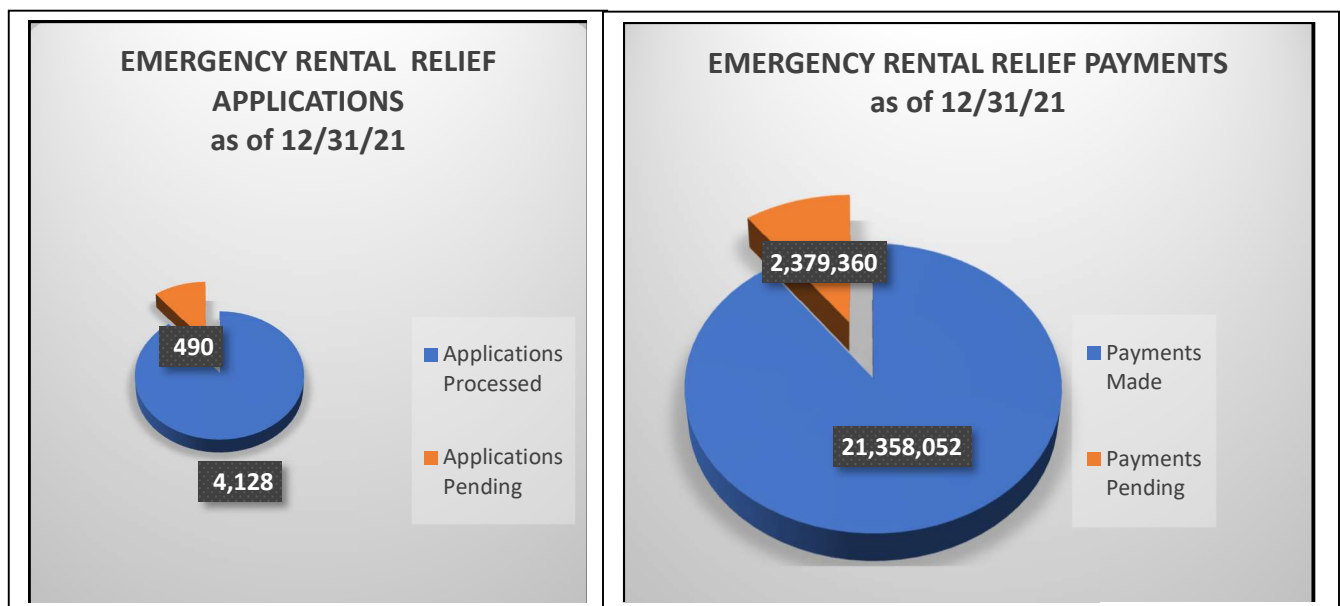


EMERGENCY RENTAL ASSISTANCE PROGRAM

The Emergency Rental Assistance Program (ERAP) is an economic relief program funded by the U.S. Treasury developed to help eligible tenants residing in Onondaga County who owe rent as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. The program provided significant economic relief to low-and moderate-income tenants and will help landlords obtain rents due. Payments were and will be made directly to the landlord/property owner and utility company on behalf of the tenant.

Approved applicants were allowed up to 12 months of **rental arrears payments** for rents accrued on or after March 13, 2020.

Payments were and will be made directly to the landlord/property owner on behalf of the tenant.



Temporary Assistance/SNAP/HEAP/Day Care JOBSplus! 2021 Takeaways

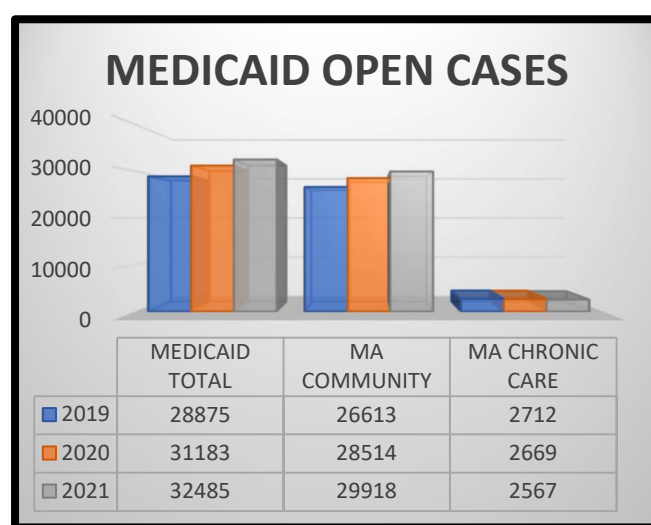
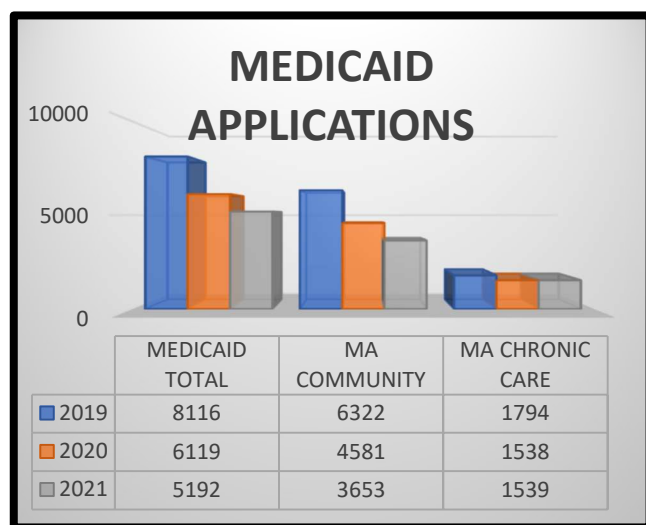
- ❖ COVID continued to impact Temporary Assistance in two ways:
 - ❖ The NYS Moratorium on Evictions resulted in less households seeking rent assistance resulting in a Temporary Assistance record low caseload of 4,065.
 - ❖ Temporary Assistance clients were reluctant to seek employment; only 1,194 TA clients entered part- or full-time employment.
- ❖ COVID impacted the utilization of day care subsidies. Only 1,500 households received subsidies or nearly 50% less of pre-COVID levels.
- ❖ 2021 saw an increase in refugees, particularly Afghan evacuees.
- ❖ SNAP applications and opened cases remained high, 23,300 and 32,636 respectively.
- ❖ Continued to work with emergency homeless shelters operated by Rescue Mission, Catholic Charities and Salvation Army to shelter the homeless and place COVID positive homeless in hotels to assist in mitigating the spread of COVID throughout these congregated care settings.

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 because of the Affordable Care Act. Individuals applying for community coverage must now be screened to determine eligibility for 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 is a program designated to provide long term care benefits such as Nursing home, Assisted Living programs, home care services etc. Eligibility determination involves a very detailed and complex review of resources with a “lookback” of 60 months from the date of application. In addition to reviewing an applicant’s current finances, the process includes review of any resource transfer. The application and eligibility process can often include involvement with an applicant’s lawyer and or estate planner.



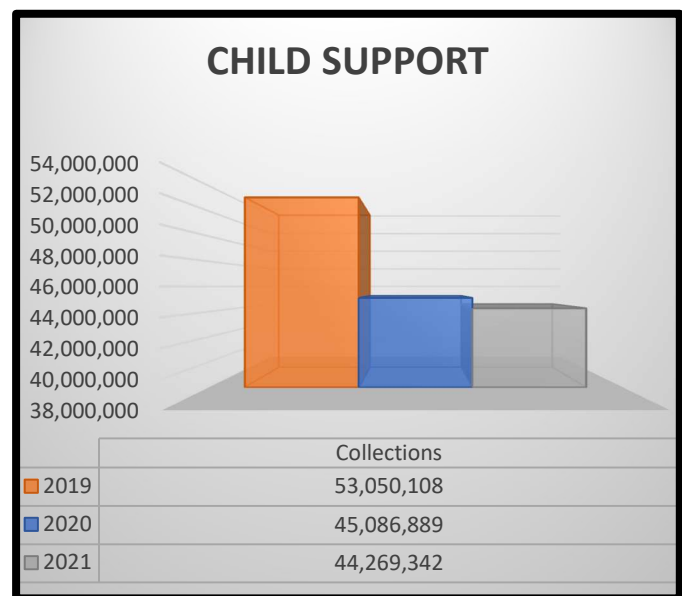
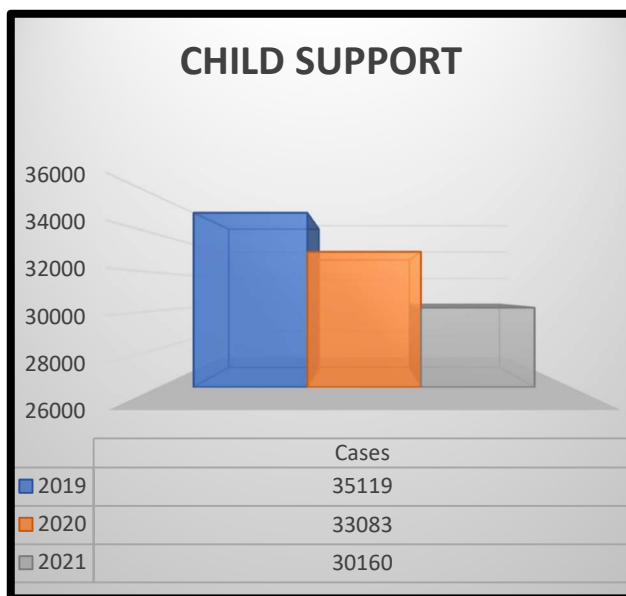
Medicaid 2021 Takeaways

- ❖ The 2021 Medicaid caseload increased to over 34,000 cases or a 10.5% increase from the start of the pandemic. “The Families First Coronavirus Response Act” was a pandemic moratorium allowing for the waiving of obtaining pertinent information related to case eligibility. Under these same guidelines, active cases have been automatically extended by the NYS DOH with no annual recertification requirements. The only way to close a case is by recipient request, death or an out of state relocation. All the above has contributed to an increase in the Medicaid caseloads. In addition, to date Medicaid has not received guidance from Centers for Medicare and Medicaid with respect to how moratorium cases will be handled post pandemic.

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.



CHILD SUPPORT 2021 Takeaways

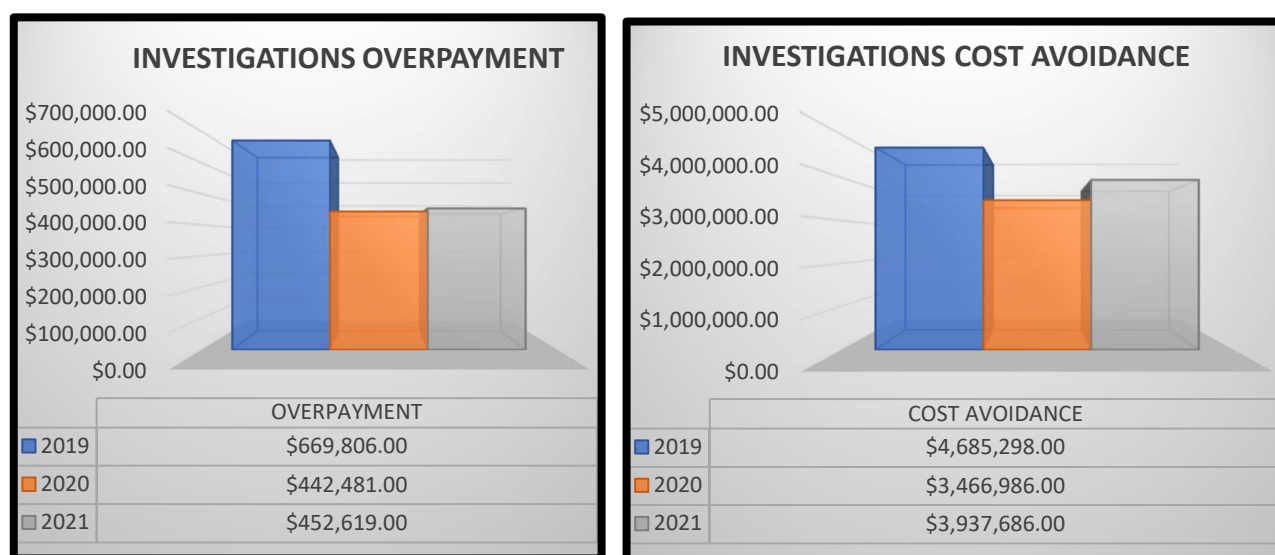
Between August and December, the volume of cases dropped due to implementation of more sophisticated reporting mechanisms that identified inactive cases. Identified cases were closed and removed from the case count.

- ❖ Collected monies for approximately 12,211 households in Onondaga County.
- ❖ The Paternity Establishment Percentage (PEP) at 95.65%, or 1.85% above the state average of 93.80%
- ❖ The Support Establishment Percentage (SEP) at 91.80%, or 1.11% above the state average of 90.69.

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.



INVESTIGATIONS 2021 Takeaways

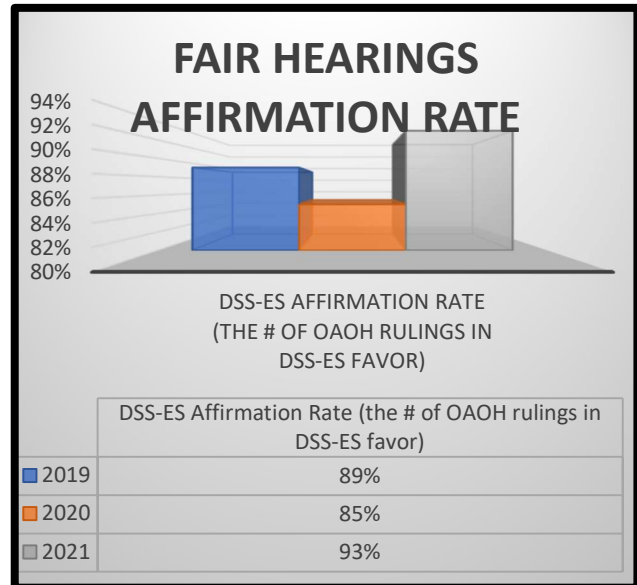
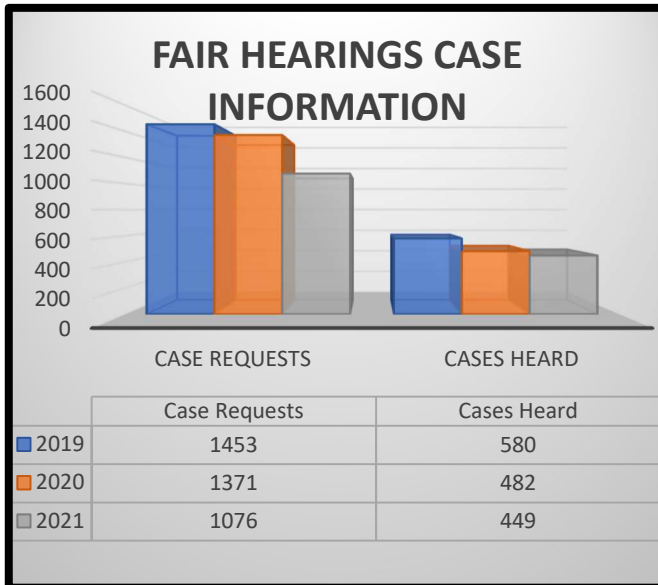
- ❖ Due to the pandemic, Administrative Disqualification Hearings were suspended effective April 2021 and have not resumed. As a result, those fraud cases continue to go unresolved with no overpayments being established or IPVs (Intentional Program Violations) obtained.
- ❖ Investigators reported that meeting with clients was more difficult. Clients stated that they or family members had COVID and would not allow investigators into the homes for unscheduled appointments. Scheduled appointments had to be rescheduled for the same reason. Both delayed the completion of investigations as well as eliminated the effectiveness of an unannounced home visit.
- ❖ The continued waiver of the telephone interview for SNAP applications/recertifications eliminated a key piece of evidence in determining if an IPV had occurred. For this and all the above-mentioned reasons, numbers have not returned to pre-covid.

-
- ❖ The number of self-employed clients (driving for Uber, Lyft, Door Dash, Instacart etc.) has increased. Attempting to establish income reporting has become more time-intensive and challenging as the above-named companies are based out of California and will not honor New York subpoenas for records.

 - ❖ Coordinated with County Financial Operations the receipt of lottery intercepts to check for resources/lump sums on TA clients.

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.

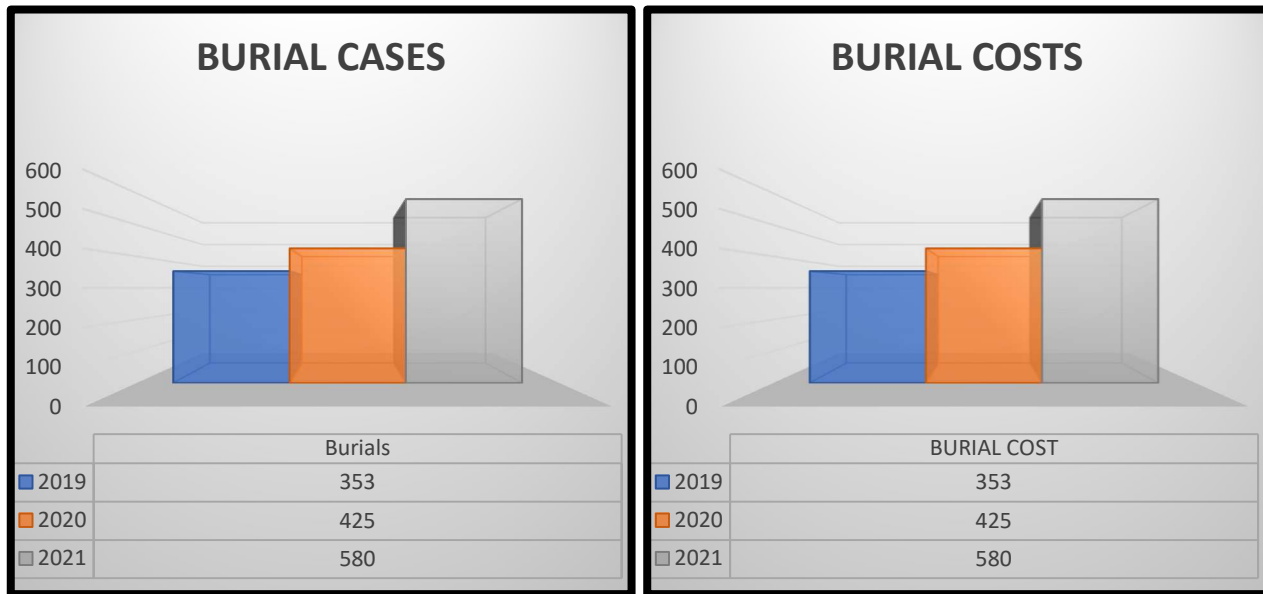


FAIR HEARINGS 2021 Takeaways

- ❖ In May, the Office of Administrative Hearings(OAH) stopped Aid Continuing(AC) hearings. This has caused an increase in the backlog of cases. There is no indication from them as to when they will begin to schedule AC hearings again.

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.



RESOURCE UNIT 2021 Takeaways

- ❖ Over \$750,000 was recovered through Personal Injury Liens, TA Estate Liens, Medicaid Property Liens, Supplemental Needs, 2nd Mortgage Liens, Burial Reimbursements, and Irrevocable Trusts

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.

SYSTEMS 2021 Takeaways

- ❖ Continued to support two workforces (onsite and remote workers)
- ❖ Answered 5,815 Help Desk Calls; responded to with 6,428 Help Desk Email
- ❖ Cleared 52,441 applications for both Services and Non-Services program areas