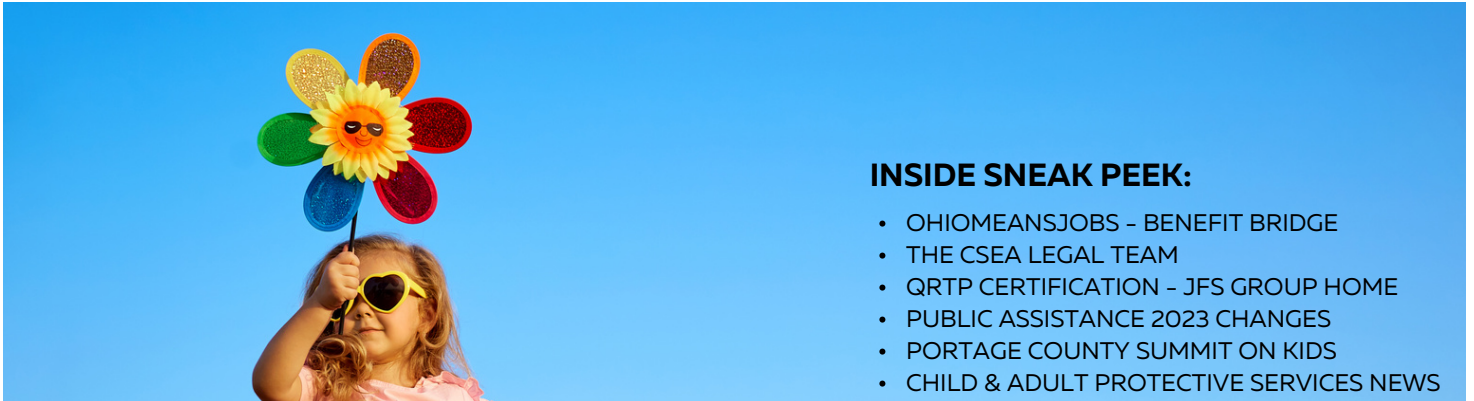




COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS

Providing children, adults, and families an effective support system to assist in obtaining self-sufficiency and a safe, stable, healthy, living environment



INSIDE SNEAK PEEK:

- OHIOMEANSJOBS - BENEFIT BRIDGE
- THE CSEA LEGAL TEAM
- Q RTP CERTIFICATION - JFS GROUP HOME
- PUBLIC ASSISTANCE 2023 CHANGES
- PORTAGE COUNTY SUMMIT ON KIDS
- CHILD & ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES NEWS

BRIDGING THE GAP... REDUCING THE CLIFF

BENEFIT BRIDGE

You may already know about Benefit Bridge, a pilot program funded by the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services, but do you understand the reason this program is so vital? Many low-income families often face what's called a "benefit cliff" when trying to transition from unemployment or low-income employment to a more self-sufficient level of earnings. A "benefit cliff" occurs when a small increase in earnings means a family suddenly is no longer eligible to receive a public benefit that was previously helping them to feed their families, afford medical care, access quality child care or balance their budget. When lost benefits overshadow a wage increase, many families simply stop moving forward or "fall off" the cliff's edge, which then stalls progression in their jobs and careers.



The purpose of the Benefit Bridge program is to support families when facing these reductions in previous benefits and give them a transitional bridge. Families in Portage County may obtain long-term self-sufficiency through a variety of supports and incentives that can bridge the gap between their earnings and the amount of money they need to make ends meet. Benefit Bridge is designed to make the path to self-sufficiency more easily accessible.

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(Benefit Bridge continued)

The supportive services of Benefit Bridge vary based upon a family's specific needs, but can include and are not limited to the following: employment incentives, rent or mortgage assistance, assistance with utilities, child care, car payments, and/or BMV fees. The Benefit Bridge program aims to better engage, prepare, and support our county's most vulnerable families for long-term economic independence.

To be eligible for the Benefit Bridge program, clients must file an application within 30 days of new employment, and this new employment must be impacting the client's public assistance benefits (loss or reduction in benefits). If the application is approved, participants attend monthly meetings with a collaborative team that offer assistance and direction with things such as case management, budgeting, time management, and more. Participation is tailored to the client's specific needs and journey toward self-sufficiency.

More information and applications for the Benefit Bridge program are available on the website: ohiomeansjobs.com/portagecounty or by calling 330-296-2841.

HIGHLIGHT: THE CSEA LEGAL TEAM

FULLY STAFFED, TRAINED & STREAMLINED

For the first time in over two years, the Child Support Enforcement Agency (CSEA) division of Portage County Job and Family Services (PCJFS) can say it is fully staffed. The division is now concentrating on finalizing training for its team members and getting legal processes streamlined for maximum efficiency going forward.



Last fall, with the passage of House Bill 648, there was a major shift in the jurisdiction of how child support cases are handled in Portage County. All cases were transferred from the Juvenile Court to the Domestic Relations Court, dramatically affecting the way the CSEA team operates and causing a backup of cases for a period of time. The goal of this shift in jurisdiction is to improve efficiency and case management for the families of Portage County.



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(CSEA Legal Team continued)

The effects of this shift for the CSEA legal team seemed insurmountable at times to Lead Attorney Lisa Lahrmer, who had just recently joined the team when the court merging had taken place. She was tasked with implementing all the new changes and restructuring of their processes, all while leading a team of mostly new employees - with some positions still vacant. Attorney Lahrmer tackled the changes, while working closely with the courts, to restructure the division over this past year. Patience and diligence, combined with her strong leadership were the keys to emerging with their heads above water. "My team and I are certainly moving in the right direction, and we are in good shape now," said Attorney Lahrmer of these challenges.

Here's an overview of the fully staffed, hardworking, and optimistic CSEA Legal Team:

Lisa Lahrmer, Esq.-Lead Attorney

April Keller, Esq.-Attorney

Melody Dugic, Esq.-Attorney

Becky Brown-Paralegal

Lisa Fay, MPA-PCJFS Division Administrator

Janeen DeLuca-Paralegal

Sylvia Kulcsar-Paralegal

Teresa Dillon-Modification Specialist

Jennifer Holt-Clerical Specialist 3

Even though this current legal team has many new faces over the past two years, it is working hard to build a framework of unity and consistency. The team feels poised and hopeful as it moves forward into the remainder of 2023.



COMMUNITY PARTNER CORNER:

REACH

Recovery, Empowerment,
and Action Creating Hope



Portage County Job & Family Services and Family & Community Services Inc. are partnering to provide families and children the REACH program. The overarching goal of REACH is to keep families together.

REACH promotes access to a wide array of programs at Family & Community Services including: behavioral health, addiction treatment, case management, parenting classes, parenting support group, anger management, domestic violence support, consumer credit counseling, and residential- and community-based recovery housing.





QRTP CERTIFICATION

JFS GROUP HOME

After much diligence and hard work by the staff, the PCJFS group home has recently received its Qualified Residential Treatment Placement (QRTP) Certification by the State of Ohio. These new QRTP standards in Ohio now require that all Public Children Services Association (PCSA) organizations come together with the juvenile court and an outside qualified mental health provider to decide if a child needs residential placement. Currently PCJFS has a partnership with Coleman Behavioral Health's Jessica Helbling.

When a child comes into the care of PCJFS, this now means a CANS Assessment is completed. CANS (Child and Adolescent Needs and Strengths) Assessments are designed to take a look at the each unique child's needs in a more trauma-informed lens. The group home staff is required to take additional trauma-informed trainings to ensure that they can recognize and address the adverse childhood experiences and, how these experiences can manifest in each of the children they serve.

The placement crisis is felt all across Ohio and beyond, with many PSCA organizations struggling to find placement for all children currently in care. The PCJFS group home is one small way the agency can try to combat this crisis and meet it head on. Teenagers in care often struggle with significant trauma histories and sometimes come from years of abuse and neglect. Currently, there is only one foster home licensed through Portage County that accepts teenage placements.

Because of QRTP standards, each child receives an ISP (Individual Service Plan) that allows the support team to develop realistic and obtainable goals for each child. Every ISP is developed with the first 30 days and is reviewed every 90 days. The team endeavors to give each child access to life skills and activities that will assist them as they move into adulthood and also strives to provide them with access to follow-up support after they move on from the group home. The PCJFS group home staff has worked tirelessly to implement these new standards, desiring to always keep the best interest of the children and families they serve at the absolute forefront of everything they do.

CONGRATS 2023 GRADS!

Portage County JFS celebrates five youth in agency care who are graduating from high school this year!

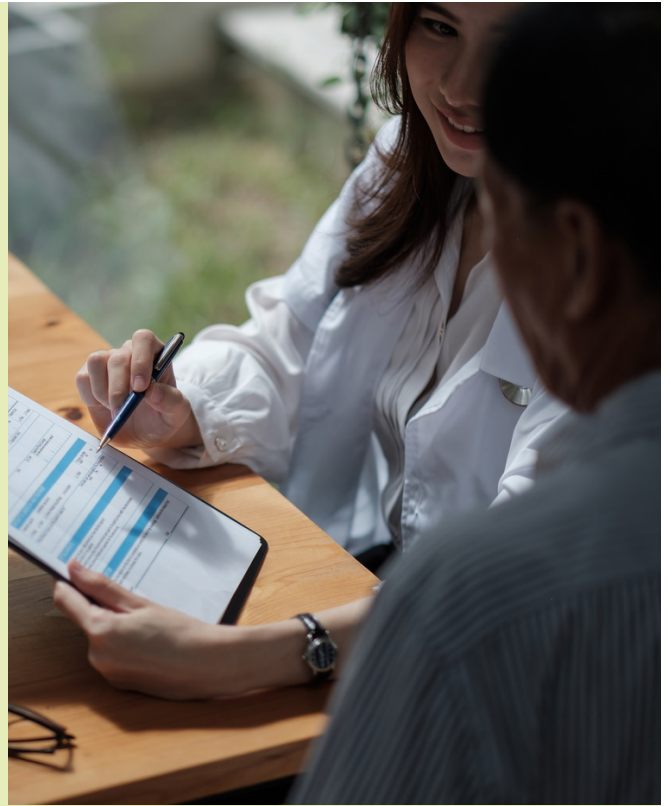
We are honoring these outstanding students with a graduation party in June and wish them all the best as they set out to follow their dreams.



CHANGES, UPDATES & REDETERMINATIONS

PUBLIC ASSISTANCE

The vast amount of changes that have taken place at the federal, state and county levels pertaining to public assistance since the onset of 2023 can seem overwhelming to just about anyone trying to keep up. Covid emergency operations and continuous coverage provisions ended this spring, meaning that a return to routine operations is bringing about many changes to those receiving assistance in the State of Ohio. However, the PCJFS Public Assistance Division has accepted the challenges these changes bring as the staff works with a sense of tenacity and dedication to ensure customers are receiving timely and accurate benefits.



In February 2023, the Federal SNAP (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) emergency allotments that had been supplementing regular monthly allotments ended, leaving a large population having to suddenly adjust to higher food costs and lower food assistance. Portage County recipients of SNAP were notified and kept updated of all changes. Redeterminations for Cash Assistance and SNAP eligibility will not require an interview through February of 2024. Customers will still need to complete and submit the request to reapply for Cash assistance, SNAP and/or Child Care (JFS 7204) as this form will be used to complete the redetermination. Contact by phone or mail will be made if additional information is needed.

Changes have also been seen in the ending of the temporary waiver assistance for Publicly Funded Child Care (PFCC) Co-Payment Waivers. The temporary assistance ends July 1, 2023, and all families receiving PFCC are required to begin paying their assigned provider beginning the service week starting July 2. Clients are encouraged to talk to their childcare providers prior to July 2 to ensure they have a co-payment agreement in place. Co-pay assistance may be available through the PRC program. Visit the website for more information: portagecounty-oh.gov/jfs.

Portage County clients have been notified and reminded to keep their phone numbers and addresses up to date to prevent losing health coverage. Contact information can be updated by visiting benefits.ohio.gov or by calling 1-844-640-6446. In addition, anyone receiving a letter in the mail, should follow the instructions.



PUBLIC ASSISTANCE: FRAUD AWARENESS MONTH

May was Fraud Awareness Month, and the Portage County Public Assistance Division aimed to raise awareness of benefit fraud by passing out tote bags, pens and stickers to the community that reminded residents that "Fraud Costs All of Us."

Each year, the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services disburses more than \$2 billion in Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits, more than \$200 million in Ohio Works First cash assistance and more than \$600 million in childcare provider subsidies. Individuals who mislead caseworkers or provide false information on an application for benefits account for a very small percentage of the funding disbursed, but the department takes even the smallest fraud cases very seriously. Residents of Portage County should report suspected public assistance fraud by calling the Fraud Report Line at 1-800-437-4344 or going to www.jfs.ohio.gov/fraud.

CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES

CHILD ABUSE PREVENTION MONTH

In April, PCJFS participated in Child Abuse Prevention Month by planting pinwheels and hanging a banner on our front lawn to raise awareness for child abuse and neglect. Additionally, the agency participated in Wear Blue Day on April 12. Wear Blue Day is a state-wide show of solidarity against child abuse and neglect.

As a final event for the month, we invited the community to join us for Family Fun Day on April 23. The event was held at Brown Middle School in Ravenna and brought out many families from our community for fun, family time with games, a bounce house, speakers, and food.



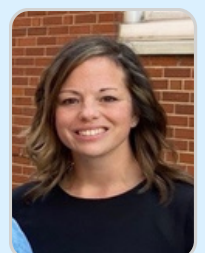
PORTAGE COUNTY SUMMIT ON KIDS 2023

In May, PCJFS celebrated Foster Care Appreciation Month by hosting the Portage County Summit on Kids 2023 at the NEOMED New Center. This banquet was a night to honor and appreciate all those who invest in the lives of our county's most vulnerable youth. Keynote speaker, Jessica Chandler from Los Angeles motivated and encouraged the guests and honorees with her own story of triumph, while State Representative Gail Pavliga and Judge Patricia Smith also spoke about the current issues and plans to address the emergency short-term placement crisis in Portage County. PCJFS recognizes and appreciates all those who selflessly and tirelessly serve our county youth! Thank you for helping our children bloom!

CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES WELCOMES NEW ADMINISTRATOR

Portage County JFS is proud to announce that Kaylyn Kane was promoted to Administrator of the Child and Adult Protective Services Division on May 1, 2023.

Kaylyn was previously a supervisor with the division and is passionate about serving the children and families of Portage County.





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CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTIVE SERVICES

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ADOPTION (330)297-3809

**PUBLIC ASSISTANCE AND
ADMINISTRATION**

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