September 2025

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PITTSBURGH MERCY
A HERITAGE OF HOPE

Serving Pittsburgh's Deaf Community

From left: Pittsburgh Mercy's Specialized Service Coordination Team, which includes Kyle Johnstein, Team Lead Yasmin Nelson, and Jamie Kitchen. (Photo by Alex Pool)

September is **Deaf Awareness Month**, a time to:

- honor the achievements, culture, and rights of Deaf individuals;
- encourage collaboration between Deaf and hearing communities;
- promote education through Deaf-led resources to recognize the significant contributions of Deaf individuals in all areas of life; and
- highlight the importance of the **Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)**, the federal law that protects the rights of Deaf individuals.

Overall, Deaf Awareness Month is about visibility, equality, and advocacy – a reminder of the need to build inclusive spaces for all.

Specialized service coordination

Pittsburgh Mercy's Specialized Service Coordination Team is uniquely positioned to help build a community that is inclusive for people who are Deaf, Deaf/Blind, and Hard of Hearing. The team is led by Yasmin Nelson and includes service coordinators Jamie Kitchen and Kyle Johnstein, all of whom are Deaf. Together, the specialized service coordination team currently serves 57 individuals who are Deaf, Deaf/Blind, or Hard of Hearing.

In order to apply for any type of service coordination assistance, clients must have a diagnosed mental health condition and the referral of a doctor. These are clients who can live independently but need help connecting with providers and services for things like SNAP benefits, handling medical insurance, getting legal assistance for landlord/tenant disputes, etc. A service coordinator then meets with the client to assess their strengths and needs and develop a service plan with attainable steps. A service coordinator is essentially a “go to” person on the treatment team, handling referrals to programming, resources, housing, benefits, and crisis support.

Working with one of Pittsburgh Mercy's specialized service coordinators is beneficial to Deaf, Deaf/Blind, and Hard of Hearing clients because it means clearer communication, familiarity with the challenges faced, and knowledge of contacts within the Deaf community. To demonstrate this, Service Coordination Supervisor Mary Smith, who manages the specialized service coordination team, learned American Sign Language (ASL) to more effectively work with her Deaf colleagues and their clients.

Communication tools

ASL is the key communication tool used in the U.S. and parts of Canada. While not universal (there are actually more than 300 different sign languages worldwide), ASL is a fully recognized language with a unique visual grammar that differs significantly from English, making it more concise and expressive. International Sign Language (ISL) exists for global communication, but it is simplified and based more on gestures.

If a hearing person wants to learn ASL, it’s advisable to seek guidance from Deaf individuals or certified interpreters. There are several Deaf-developed resources like ASL Bloom, Lingvano, and Handspeak, as well as local ASL classes at CCAC and Center for Hearing & Deaf Services (HDS). You also can attend Deaf community events that immerse you in environments where ASL is actively used.

If you don’t know ASL, you can still communicate effectively via text, writing, or gesturing. The Pittsburgh Mercy staff stressed the importance of patience and respect, and offered these tips:

- Make eye contact and tap gently to get attention.
- Be cautious with gesturing since comfort levels vary by culture and individual.
- Understand that not all Deaf people lip-read, and abilities vary widely.

Challenges and looking ahead

Deaf individuals often encounter communication barriers and challenges at work, at home, and in the community at large. Unlike hearing people who can multitask by using their visual and auditory senses to pick up various pieces of information at once, Deaf individuals must stay locked into their visual surrounding to avoid missing information. It helps to avoid placing interpreters in front of windows, as shadows can make signs hard to see. Most importantly, ask Deaf community members what

they need since everyone's communication preferences and access needs are different.

"Our hope for the future is true equality, especially in employment," says supervisor Mary Smith. "People who are Deaf, Deaf/Blind, and Hard of Hearing want to be recognized for their skills, intelligence, and abilities, not judged by how they communicate or appear. Inclusion means valuing people for who they are and ensuring equal opportunities in all areas of life."

To learn more or donate to this important work, visit**Pittsburgh Mercy's website**.

Volunteer Spotlight: CBRE Cares Superheroes

A big thank-you to our partners at CBRE Care's Pittsburgh office for making Pittsburgh Mercy's superhero-themed 2025 Fall Picnic for intellectual and developmental disabilities services (IDDS) clients such a success! On a beautiful fall Friday, after months of planning and collaboration, CBRE Cares staff in colorful superhero capes volunteered for event set-up, serving super-tasty food, and facilitating various games, crafts, and activities for our IDDS clients. Check out some photos of the fun below!

Interested in sponsoring and/or volunteering at Pittsburgh Mercy's intellectual and developmental disabilities service? Let us know by contacting Volunteer and Engagement Coordinator Brendan Copp at **Brendan.Copp@pittsburghmercy.org** or by calling **412-897-8822**.

Out and About with Pittsburgh Mercy's Homeless Services Continuum of Care

Pittsburgh Mercy continues to demonstrate its commitment to serving individuals experiencing homelessness and mental health challenges through impactful community engagement and leadership.

At a recent PATH (Projects for Assistance in Transition from Homelessness) conference, Jacqueline Hunter, Senior Manager of Homeless Services, and Danielle Schnauber Jones, Nurse Practitioner with Pittsburgh Mercy's Operation Safety Net, served as keynote speakers.

They highlighted the organization's growth within the PATH program and the successful opening of Second Avenue Commons and its Engagement Center. This facility plays a vital role in connecting PATH Outreach and Medical Outreach services across Allegheny County, strengthening Pittsburgh Mercy's ability to provide integrated, compassionate care to those most in need. Conference attendees also toured Second Avenue Commons to see this collaborative model in action.

In another powerful demonstration of community leadership, Operation Safety Net team members Dr. Jim Withers, founder and medical director; Maisie Taibbi, behavioral health registered nurse and outreach team lead; and Danielle Schnauber Jones recently presented at Carlow University's Impact Event.

In partnership with Shepherd University, the team explored and compared the challenges of homelessness and addiction in both urban and rural settings. Their discussion emphasized the shared need for informed, compassionate care and accessible resources for affected individuals and families, regardless of geography.

Together, these events underscore Pittsburgh Mercy's unwavering dedication to advancing health, hope, and healing in our community.

Volunteer at Pittsburgh Mercy

At Pittsburgh Mercy, our volunteers provide a truly meaningful and enriching experience for community members in need. ***Thank you to our compassionate and inspiring volunteers!***

Would ***you*** like to make a difference in the lives of the thousands of people served by our programs? Pittsburgh Mercy offers numerous ways to get involved.

Consider these volunteer opportunities:

- Serving food at Second Avenue Commons.
- Hosting a sporting event watch party at a behavioral health residential program.
- Making arts and crafts at our adult day programs for people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.
- Making PB&J sandwiches for persons served at Pittsburgh Mercy's Engagement Center at Second Avenue Commons.
- Sorting donated clothing and basic hygiene supplies for people experiencing homelessness, housing insecurity, or other crises.

For more details or to sign up, contact Pittsburgh Mercy’s Volunteer and Engagement Coordinator Brendan Copp at **Brendan.Copp@pittsburghmercy.org** or 412-897-8822.

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