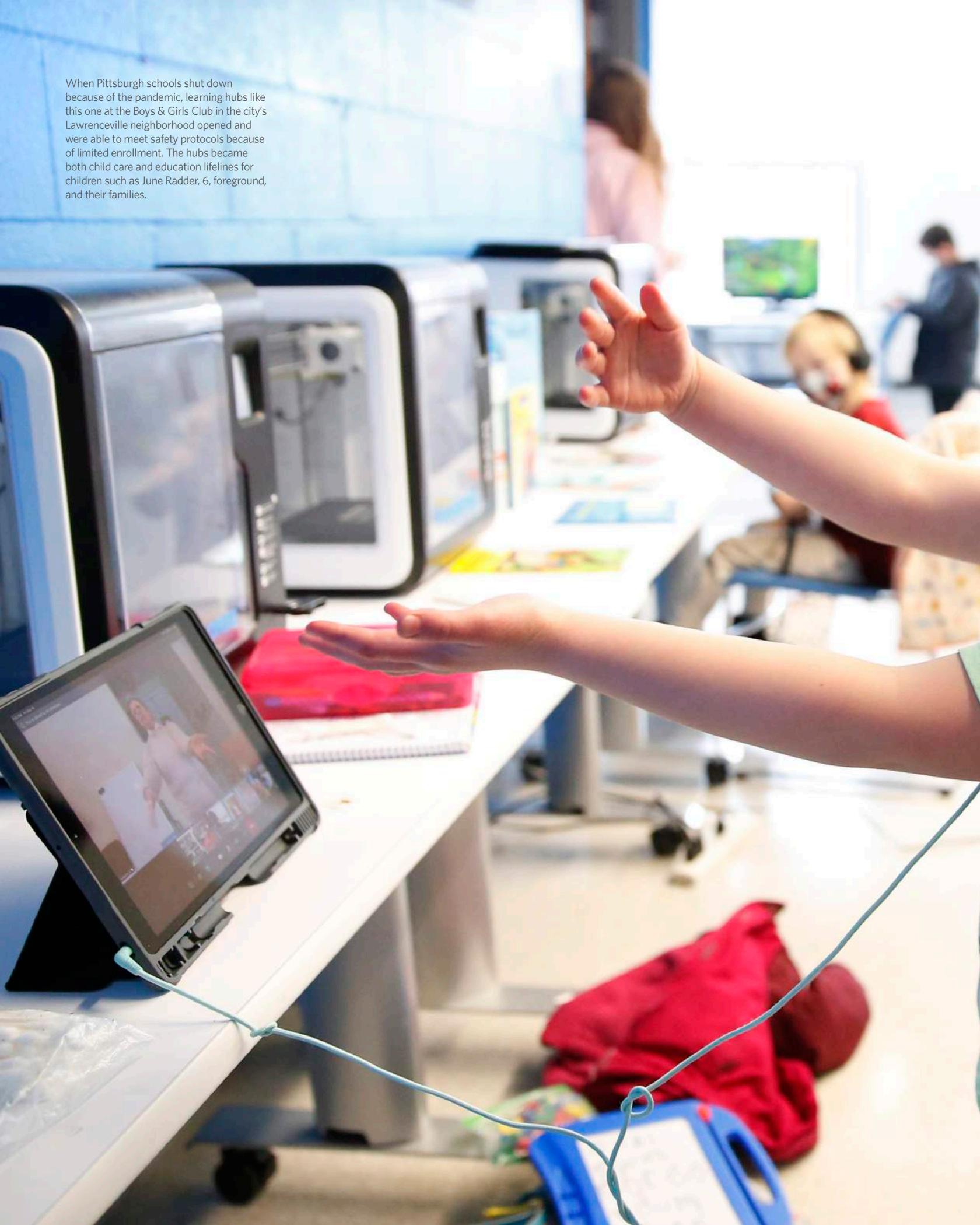


When Pittsburgh schools shut down because of the pandemic, learning hubs like this one at the Boys & Girls Club in the city's Lawrenceville neighborhood opened and were able to meet safety protocols because of limited enrollment. The hubs became both child care and education lifelines for children such as June Radder, 6, foreground, and their families.





CHILD CARE INGENUITY

As working families in the Pittsburgh region struggled with child care during the pandemic, local nonprofits and government agencies partnered, with foundation support, to provide a variety of innovative solutions to meet the need. By Cristina Rouvalis

I inside her Hill District home

Danielle Miller taught preschoolers through a computer screen, a daunting task for the Head Start teacher. Even more frustrating, she couldn't do her job during the pandemic without ignoring her own child — 8-year-old Erin.

As Erin's third-grade year started remotely at Pittsburgh Dilworth in September, the little girl wanted to work alongside her mother, but that was impossible because of the dueling sounds of their respective lessons on separate computers. Ms. Miller, 48, was racked with maternal guilt as she sometimes shushed her daughter or told her to wait while she finished a lesson with one of her students.

"It was so frustrating, and I felt horrible," said Ms. Miller, who works at the Head Start program serving students and staff at Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy 6-12. "How can I help everyone else's children and not my own? You want to do better, but how do you do better?"

What saved her was when a friend told her about the opening of the Allegheny County Learning Hub at the Thelma Lovette YMCA in the Hill District. Learning hubs, scattered throughout the county, allowed a set number of children from a variety of schools and grades to work together in a safe space. The hubs provided free earphones, WiFi, adult supervision and socialization with other kids while maintaining pandemic protocols such as mask wearing, social distancing and regular disinfecting of surfaces.

The hubs' ability to limit the number of students participating made it possible to maintain social distancing guidelines. Local public schools could not implement such attendance restrictions, along with the associated protocols,

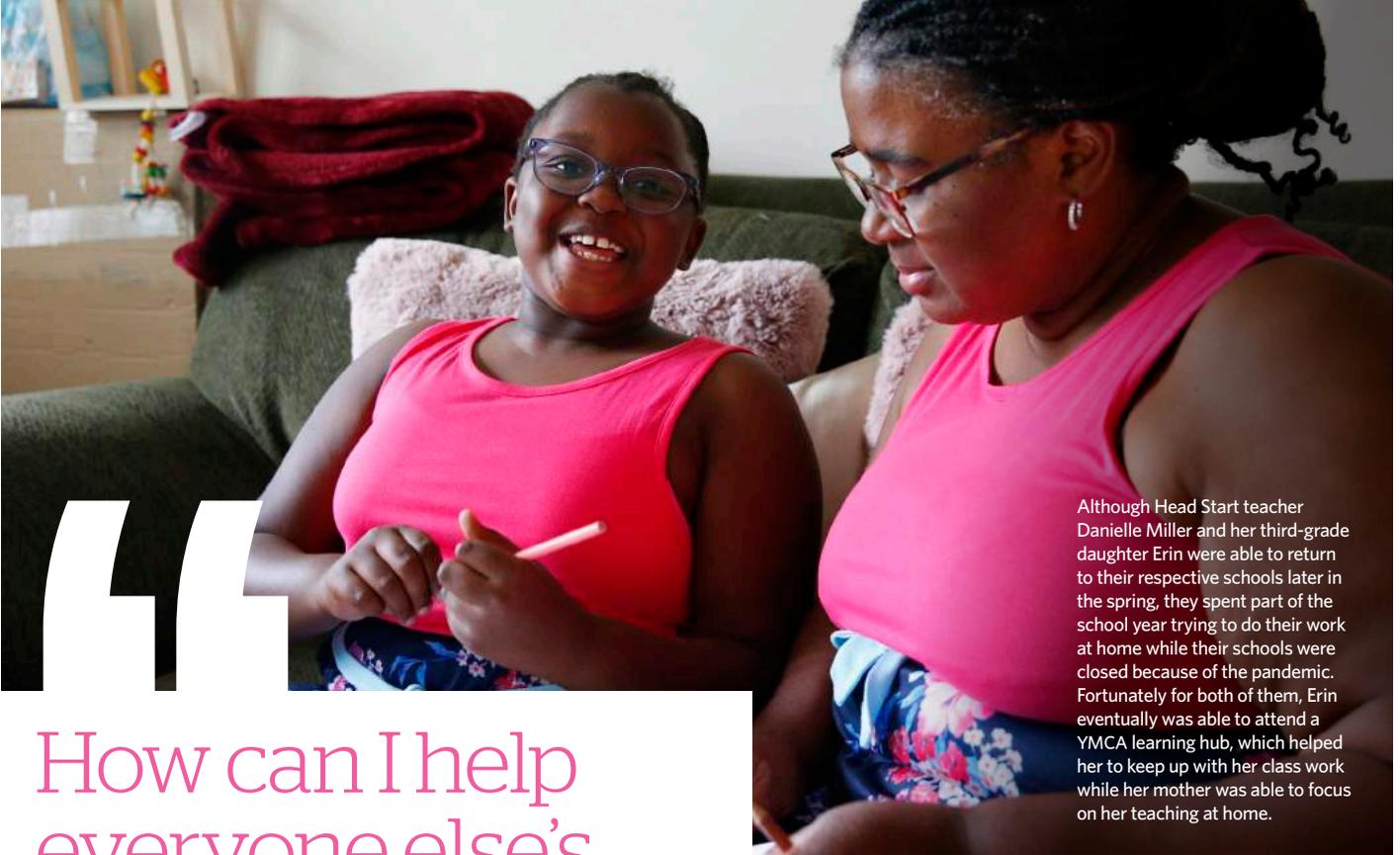
as quickly and easily. That's why schools in the Pittsburgh district were closed until April, when officials began phasing in students' return to the classroom based on factors such as their ages and the degree of challenges they faced with online learning at home.

Erin started going to the YMCA learning hub in October and continued attending part time after schools reopened to the end of the school year. Both mother and daughter appreciated the time that the hub provided Erin for learning while giving each of them breathing space to get their work done.

"She's an only child, and it gave her an opportunity to socialize with other kids," Ms. Miller said. The learning hub staff also communicated regularly with her teachers at Pittsburgh Dilworth and taught her the computer skills needed for remote learning. "It took a lot off my plate," Ms. Miller said. "It's awesome."

The learning hubs were produced through a partnership between Allegheny County government, Allegheny County Partners for Out-Of-School Time (APOST) and Trying Together, a nonprofit that advocates for high-quality care and education programs for young children and quality supports for their caregivers.

With support from local funders, including The Heinz Endowments, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services has been working with other organizations to come up with a variety of innovative solutions for child care and early childhood education during the pandemic. From emergency financial assistance to caregivers to research on child care to interventions for vulnerable parents, the collaborations have



“How can I help everyone else’s children and not my own? You want to do better, but how do you do better?”

Danielle Miller, teacher, Head Start program serving Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy 6-12

Although Head Start teacher Danielle Miller and her third-grade daughter Erin were able to return to their respective schools later in the spring, they spent part of the school year trying to do their work at home while their schools were closed because of the pandemic. Fortunately for both of them, Erin eventually was able to attend a YMCA learning hub, which helped her to keep up with her class work while her mother was able to focus on her teaching at home.

Jared Wickert

been helping families that have been experiencing extreme levels of stress because of the shutdowns.

In fact, the global health crisis spurred new cooperative efforts among local foundations, which stepped up their commitment to child care. When The Pittsburgh Foundation announced in August that \$9 million had been raised through its Emergency Action Fund to assist 313 organizations during the pandemic, President and CEO Lisa Schroeder cited child care as one of the highest priorities. The four largest foundations in the region—The Pittsburgh Foundation, Richard King Mellon Foundation, and Hillman Family Foundations and the Endowments—had seeded the Emergency Action Fund with \$1 million each.

“We were all particularly concerned about the pressures and impacts on families with children,” Ms. Schroeder said. “It was clear then that economic recovery for hundreds of thousands of families would be impossible without a functioning child care system, so it was essential to hold it together.”

The pandemic has exposed weaknesses in the child care system, which was fragile even before COVID-19 changed the way people live and work. Now the system has been stretched almost to the breaking point, with child care centers closing, women quitting their jobs, and parents in need of immediate support.

“COVID has not only ripped the Band-Aid off the problems of child care but the stitches too,” Endowments Learning Vice President Michelle Figlar said. “We can no longer ignore that if we want families working, we need to think about how we publicly support the child care sector.

“Child care is essential for the economy to bounce back during and after COVID. It’s everybody’s issue.”

Unexpected Deliveries

The \$500 checks arrived in the mailboxes of some caregivers who had been watching their grandchildren, nephews, and nieces during the pandemic.

The family caregivers eyed the checks suspiciously. Was this a scam? Was there a catch?

Afraid it was one of those too-good-to-be-true offers, they called the number on the letter from Trying Together. The staff reassured them that the money was theirs. No strings attached.

The foundation-funded emergency payments had been distributed to approximately 500 family caregivers who had taken on the increased financial and emotional burden of caring for children whose parents had to work. Many parents had stepped back from using larger child care centers, either for health reasons or because their work needs had changed.

“What we saw early in the pandemic was a greater reliance on familial support for care. More people were leveraging their informal network: a grandma, grandpa or an aunt taking care of a related child,” said Cara Ciminillo, executive director of Trying Together.

While the government has provided financial assistance to licensed child care providers, family caregivers were largely overlooked. “This was our way of acknowledging that they too, were carrying a heavier load,” Ms. Ciminillo said.

The family caregivers who received checks were those watching the children whose families were given state child care subsidies based on their incomes. (To be eligible, a family of four could not make more than \$53,000.) Often, their relatives were on tight budgets too, and the extra expense of caregiving was a burden.

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Cara Ciminillo, executive director of Trying Together

“They might have lost their job prior to the pandemic,” Ms. Ciminillo said. “The school-aged children were home all day, so their utility bills probably went up. They had breakfast and lunch costs. Maybe they needed to get internet service.”

After they were convinced that the checks were legit, the caregivers were effusive with their gratitude. One woman said she would be able to pay her overdue utility bills. Another said, “This will put food on the table.” A grandfather said the check enabled him to fulfill a simple wish: a new pair of pajamas for his grandchildren.

Gender Economics

Though learning hubs and family caregivers have allowed some women to keep working, many other women have left the workforce. From February 2020 to January 2021, some 2.3 million women nationwide left their jobs versus 1.8 million men, according to a study by the National Women’s Law Center.

“This is largely because of child care issues,” said Megan Nestor, a data analytics and research strategist for Fourth Economy, a national community and economic development consulting firm. “Then there’s remote learning and all of the complications that come along with having to care for children when there is no infrastructure set up for that.”

Even before the pandemic, there was a scarcity of child care spots in Allegheny County—a gap of 8,640 for children under the age of 5, according to a report by Fourth Economy. And the financial survival of many child care centers was often tenuous, operating on razor-thin margins and with uncertain revenue streams, Ms. Nestor said.

The pandemic made matters much worse. Many centers closed permanently or decreased the number of spaces to allow for social distancing, she said. Unemployed parents stopped sending their kids, further eroding the already fragile finances of child care centers.

“What happens when things return to somewhat normal, and people want to reenter the workforce and send their kids to child care, but there is all of a sudden this dearth of quality care?” Ms. Nestor asked. She contended stable public and private funding of child care centers are needed to provide a reliable revenue stream.

What happens when things return to somewhat normal and people want to reenter the workforce and send their kids to child care, but there is all of a sudden this dearth of quality care?”

Megan Nestor, data analytics and research strategist, Fourth Economy

Another issue is the low pay of child care workers and high staff turnover. The average salary for a child care worker in the Pittsburgh area is \$24,200, according to Fourth Economy. Many of them are women of color, Robyn Tedder, an Endowments Learning fellow, said.

“There are a lot of people working at poverty level,” she said. “Some realize they can make more money doing gig economy work,” such as driving for Uber.

At the same time, the cost of child care was breaking the budget of many families: The average cost of child care for an infant and toddler in Allegheny County is 39 percent of the budget for a family of four making \$54,000 a year, Fourth Economy found.

As Congress debated the specifics of the American Rescue Plan, which President Joe Biden signed into law in March, the Bipartisan Policy Center advocated for specific language regarding the \$40 billion allocated to child care.

“We also have been working to make sure that child care is included in any infrastructure package,” said Suzann Morris, an early childhood fellow at the Bipartisan Policy Center. “Right now, there isn’t any federal money that’s available to child care facilities for their brick and mortar.”

Parenting Support

Fourth Economy has compiled a toolkit for businesses looking for ways to support parents who need to continue working through the pandemic and beyond. The suggestions range from offering more flexible schedules to providing subsidies for child care to employees.

Researchers at UPMC Children’s Hospital of Pittsburgh and the University of Pittsburgh have initiated The Pittsburgh Study and partnered with the Allegheny County Department of Human Services to begin a program that supports vulnerable parents who have a new baby. Hello Baby aims to strengthen families and improve family outcomes by connecting parents to a variety of resources.

Parents who agree to participate are compensated for a 30-minute screening, every six months from their child’s birth to age 3. They are offered preventive parenting programs that have demonstrated a track record of promoting school readiness, said Daniel Shaw, a distinguished professor of psychology who leads the Early Childhood Collaborative of The Pittsburgh Study. Hello Baby is offered in

locations that parents with young children already frequent, such as pediatrician offices, family support centers, and Women, Infant and Children (WIC) centers.

An example of an intervention that is part of the initiative is the Video Interaction Project, which occurs while parents are waiting in pediatric care for their infant’s well-child visits. Parents are filmed interacting with a developmentally tailored toy, then offered suggestions about using the toy in ways that promote their child’s development.

“Importantly, families get to keep the new toy that is introduced at each visit,” Dr. Shaw said.

The intervention programs for families range in intensity from interactive apps to NurturePA, a text-based advice service between new mothers and experienced ones, to more intensive programs such as Healthy Families America, which involves regular in-home visits.

In addition to these initiatives, Allegheny County has hired Rebecca C. Mercatoris as the new director of Children’s Initiatives, a move Ms. Figlar applauds as a great step forward in addressing the complex issues of child care and early childhood education.

“It’s an opportunity for a universal approach to supporting families and children,” she said. “It’s an opportunity to leverage what we’re going to need to do for our economy to bounce back.” **h**