

# 2024 Annual Report

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**Onondaga County  
DSS-ES**



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



**Sarah G. Merrick, Commissioner**

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# Meet Our Team



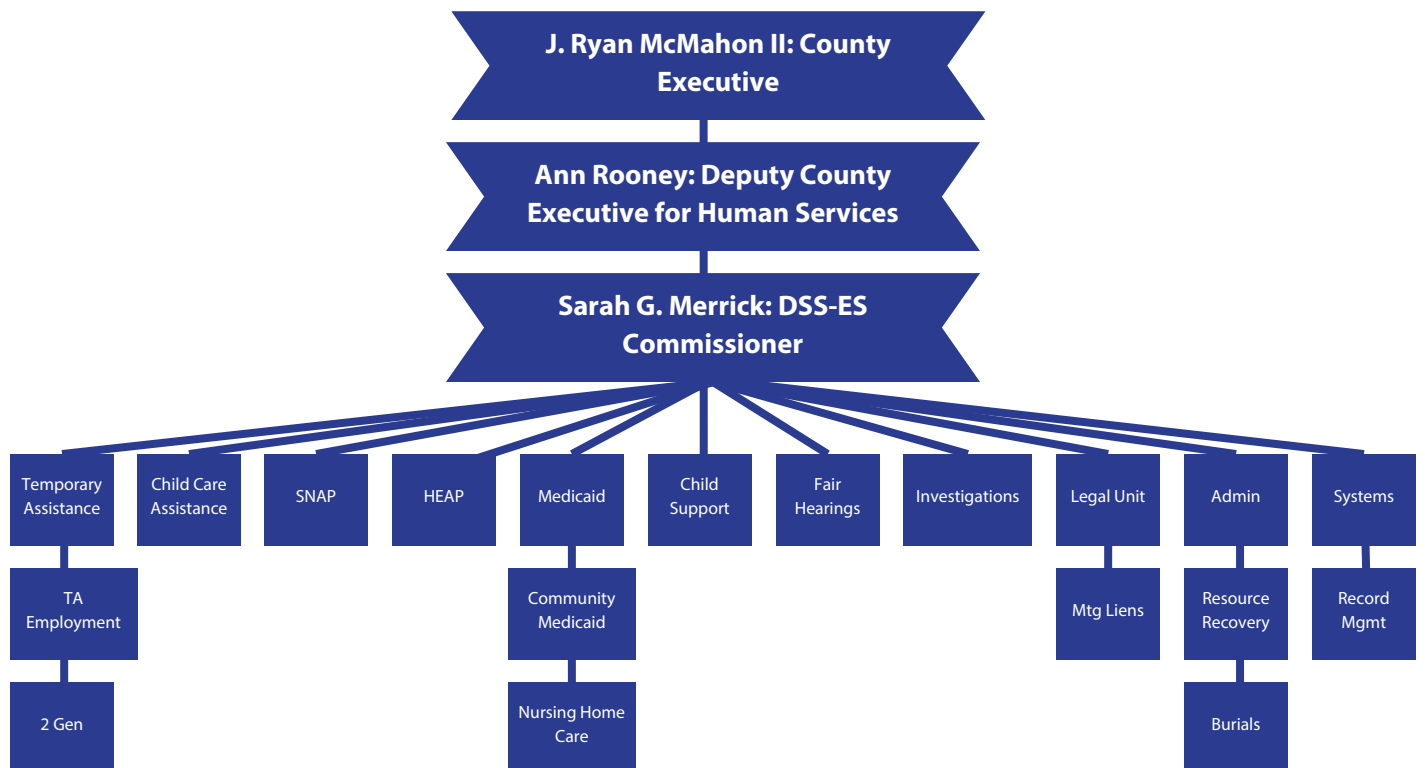
## SARAH G. MERRICK

COMMISSIONER, DSS-ES

I am pleased to present the Onondaga County's Department of Social Services-Economic Security's (DSS-ES) 2024 Annual Report. During 2024, DSS-ES served 140,000 plus Onondaga County residents who utilized one or more of our programs. Program highlights, volumes and additional information are shared on the following pages. Included as well are the 2025 goals. As the report illustrates, most of Social Services- Economic Security program volumes increased. At the same time, the staff vacancy rate hovered at 11%. Despite these challenges, employees demonstrated continued commitment through their dedication and hard work.

## Onondaga County Department of Social Services - Economic Security

### 2024 ORGANIZATIONAL CHART



### Onondaga County Legislature Health and Human Services Committee

Chair Cody Kelly

Rich McCarron

Palmer Harvey

Ken Bush

# Vision

- The Department will be represented by trained, respectful and proficient staff that will:
  - 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.

# 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.

# 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 openminded, dedicated, and cooperative.
  - **Communication** Communicate information appropriately, clearly, concisely, and accurately.

# Program Highlights

## **SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM** (SNAP)

- SNAP continues to be the largest DSS-ES program.
- Nearly 25,000 applications were processed in 2024, reflecting a slight decline from the previous year.
- Open cases remained flat at just over 31,000, indicating stabilization in program demand.

## **TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE** (TA)

- TA handled a slight increase in application processing but experienced a 13% increase in open cases. This is an indication that more county residents need help with paying rent.
- TA Housing Unit: The housing unit addressed a continued rise in family homelessness. In December 2024, 102 families were in shelters, up from 20 families in July 2024, reflecting ongoing affordable housing shortages.
- A total of 3,484 homeless were assisted by DSS-ES. 45% included family or households.

## **CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE**

- Applications increased by 22%, with open cases rising 21%—consistent with 2023 trends.
- Growth is attributed to expanded childcare eligibility standards and the success of the County's awareness campaign.
- Average household benefit was \$13,500.

## **CHILD SUPPORT UNIT**

- Continued participation in the SAVES project, a federally funded pilot program supporting custodial parents who have experienced domestic violence.
- New partnership with Northeast Community Center to administer the Parent Support Program.

## **FAIR HEARING UNIT**

- Once again, the only county in New York State to receive a Gold Star Award from the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance/Office of Administrative Hearings for Pre-Hearing Disposition submissions.

## **PROGRAM CALL CENTERS**

- Call centers handled over 254,700 client calls, with an average wait time under 5 minutes.
- Transition from the CISCO phone system to Amazon/RingCentral phone system in 2023 resulted in improved functionality.

# Temporary Assistance (TA)

Temporary Assistance (TA) is New York State's term for public assistance programs commonly known as welfare. Temporary Assistance (TA) offers temporary help for those in need. The Department of Social Services-Economic Security is the local administrative entity to administer benefits contingent on Federal guidelines.

## Types of TA

### **FAMILY ASSISTANCE (FA)**

This program 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.

### **SAFETY NET ASSISTANCE (SNA)**

This program 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 as landlords).

### **EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO ADULTS (EAA)**

This helps individuals receiving Social Security income who are facing emergency situations such as homelessness, utility or fuel emergencies, or other item of critical need.

### **EMERGENCY ASSISTANCE TO FAMILIES (EAF)**

This aids families with unforeseen emergency needs such as homelessness, etc.

## TA Highlights

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 19,000 TA applications reviewed, and determinations made. TA open cases increased from 4,473 to 5,065. Last time we had over 5,000 open TA cases was in 2019.

### TECHNOLOGY & INNOVATION

- Translation Live (AI) for in-person interpretation
  - 900+ translation sessions conducted in Q4 of 2024.
- AI Pilot Programs
  - EVA AI tool tested for automating client notifications and case inquiries.
  - Companion AI system being developed to assist staff with program rules and regulations.

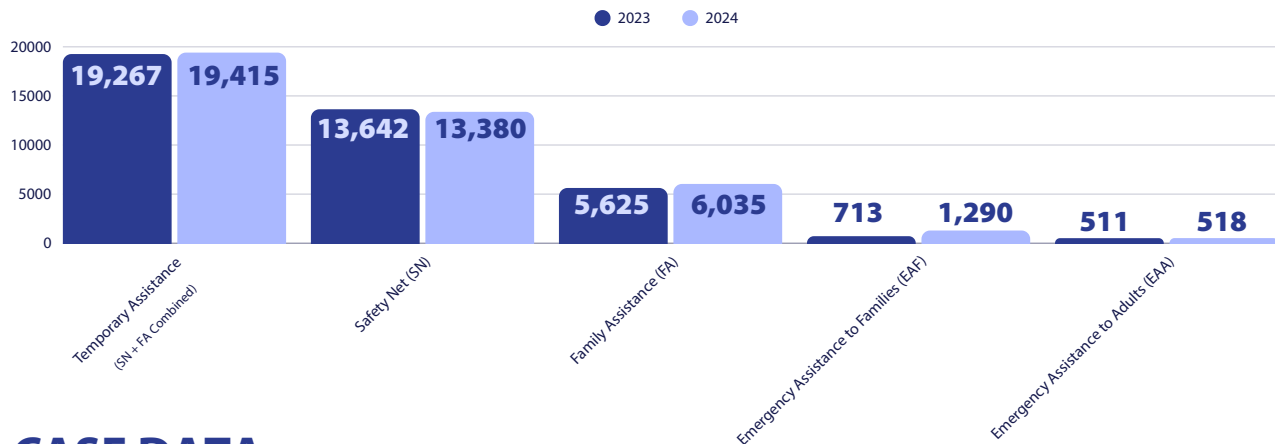
# TA Highlights

## NEW INITIATIVES

- Rental Supplement Program (RSP)
  - Assisted 142 households with \$1.3M in rental aid (avg. rent: \$912/month).
- Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment (SAEF)
  - Launched in October 2024; helped 25 households avoid eviction.
  - \$60,000 in emergency rental aid disbursed.
  - SAEF has issued 42 payments to date.
- Shelter Supplement Plan (SSP)
  - Expanded to 500 families in 2024.
  - 120 families (mostly in 2Gen program) received higher rent allowances for stability.
- Housing Caseworker Team
  - Funded by \$660,000 OTDA grant.
  - Provides intensive case management for homeless families (3,484 individuals served).
  - 417 homeless families supported through shelters and hotels.
  - Case management includes daily contact, crisis intervention, school support, and referrals.

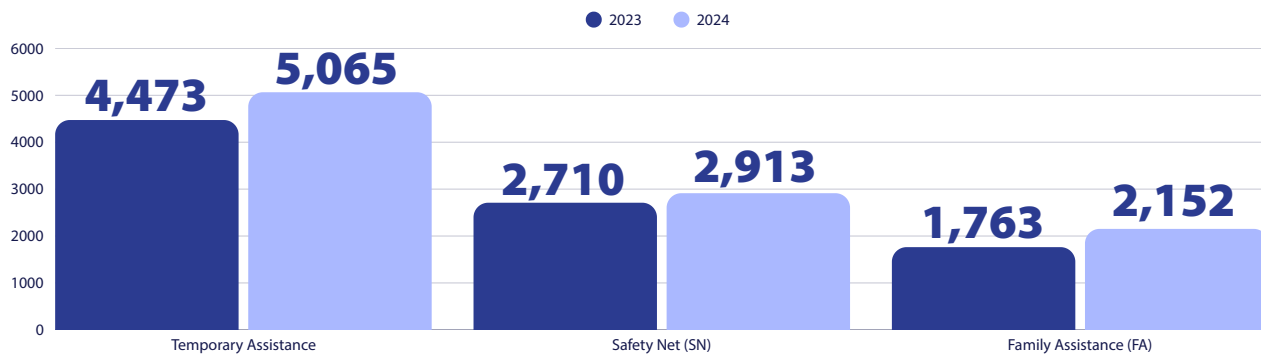
## APPLICATION DATA

Applications increased in virtually all areas.



## CASE DATA

An increase in open cases indicate more county residents need help paying rent. Temporary Assistance, Emergency Assistance to Families and Emergency Assistance to Adults benefits assist with paying rent and other basic needs. This represents 4,929 adults and 5,660 children receiving Temporary Assistance (TA).

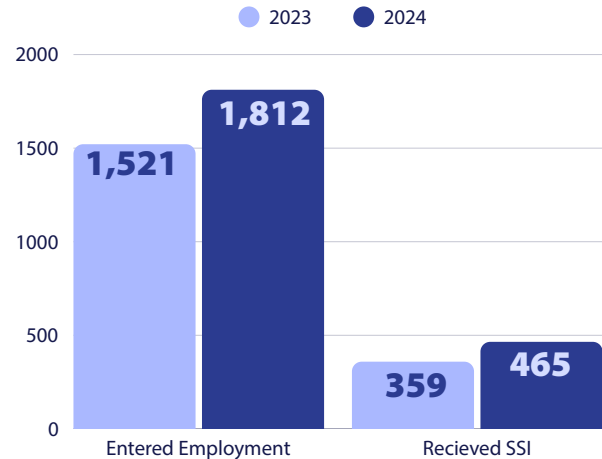


## TEMPORARY ASSISTANCE (TA) EMPLOYMENT PROGRAM

- The TA Employment Program works with applicants and recipients of TA and/or SNAP. Recipients who are able to work must be engaged in activities to improve their work readiness and to support job placement. Recipients who have been determined exempt are required to engage in activity to restore employability which may include treatment and medical care. Staff provide assessment and case management services. Individualized plans are created in collaboration with the client.

### ASSISTANCE INCLUDES:

- Supervised Job Search
- Educational and Vocational Training
- Job Readiness Training
- Work Experience Placements
- On-the-job Training
- Case Management
- Transportation Assistance
- Child Care
- Applying for SSI, if appropriate



## TA Employment Highlights

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Over 1,800 TA clients secured employment.
- 2Gen Onondaga Initiative supported employment efforts:
  - 90 parents worked on employment goals.
  - 34 parents employed in roles such as cashier, cleaning, clerical, manual labor, and healthcare.
- TA Clients Approved for Social Security Benefits:
  - 465 approvals (106 more than the best prior year).
- Resulted in \$910,000 in benefit recoveries.

The TA Employment Program continues to focus on long-term self-sufficiency through job placement, skill-building, and innovative partnerships.



## 2 Gen Onondaga

- **What does 2Gen mean?** Specifically, 2Gen stands for two generations. Any work with children and families using a 2Gen approach means that work is being done with and for multiple family members – for example for mom and the child. A two generational (or whole family) approach is considered best practice when trying to help children and families in need. The idea is that people do not live in silos. A person's decisions, goals, outcomes, development, and successes do not only affect the individual, but they affect their partners, their children, and the entire family unit.
- While two-generational approaches are gaining momentum across human service agencies and the social work field nationwide, there are very few approaches that come from the public sector side of social services. The 2Gen Onondaga initiative has changed that. 2Gen Onondaga has taken on this multigenerational approach, specifically with young parents that are receiving temporary assistance and were also on their parent's temporary assistance case as children.
- This program consists of a wraparound, intensive case management design that concentrates on the needs of both the parent(s) and the child(ren). We have created a shift away from the standard practice of measuring success by client compliance, to measuring success by client engagement and goal achievement.
- **3<sup>rd</sup> Year of 2Gen Onondaga**

- 86 families actively engaged as of Dec. 31, 2024.
- 90 parents supported with employment goals in 2024.

- \$64 boost in personal savings
- \$24 decrease in out-of-pocket housing costs

- \$173 average monthly income increase for participants
- \$65 increase in housing subsidies

- \$12 reduction in credit card debt
- Higher self-ratings in key areas like employment, parenting, mental health, and childcare attendance

## 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-MEDICAL CARE

Community Medicaid handles assisted living and all home care programs (the transition of these active cases started late 2023 and community processed all non-nursing home applications beginning early 2024).

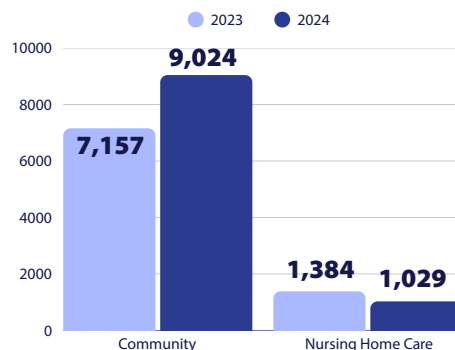
### NURSING HOME CARE

The nursing home care unit (formerly chronic care) handles nursing home cases only.

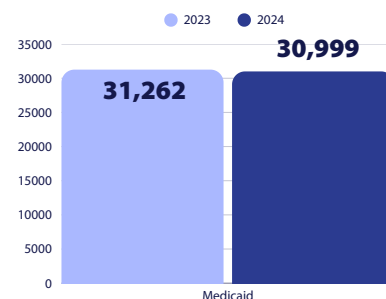
### HIGHLIGHTS

10,000+ Medicaid cases processed; caseload of 31,000.

### APPLICATIONS



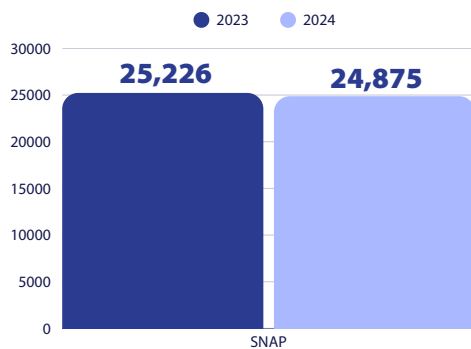
### OPEN CASES



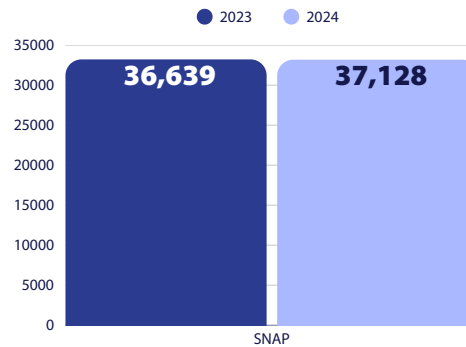
## SUPPLEMENTAL NUTRITION ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (SNAP)

- The Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) provides food purchase for low income working people, senior citizens, and impaired individuals. Electronic benefit cards (similar to a debit card) are issued to the clients for food purchases.
- Most Temporary Assistance recipients receive SNAP as part of their overall assistance grant. In addition, there are 37,128 households, or 67,144 individuals in Onondaga County receiving SNAP. Under federal rules, benefit eligibility is determined by household income, resources and 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.

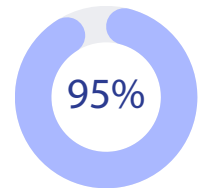
### APPLICATION DATA



### CASE DATA



### Timeliness Rate



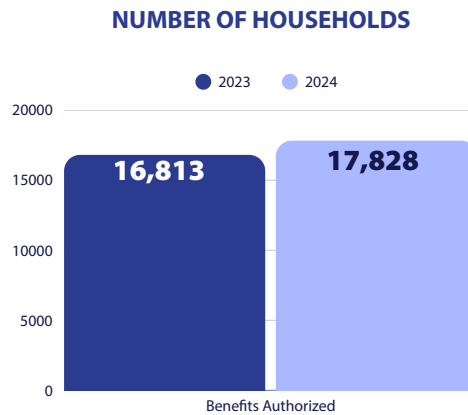
## SNAP Highlights

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Even with staffing challenges, the average SNAP determination rate is 16 days (from date of application to decision date). This is well under the mandated 30-day timeframe.
- SNAP maintained average timeliness of ~ 95% in 2024 which is above average for NYS.

## HOME ENERGY ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (HEAP)

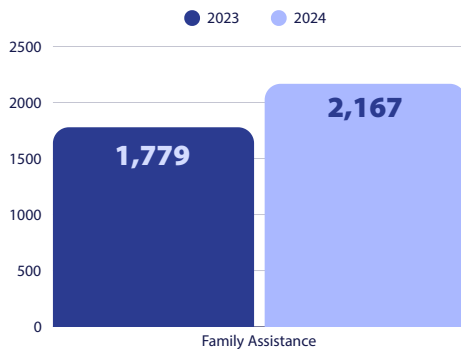
- The Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) is a federally funded program administered by New York state which provides assistance with home energy bills for those eligible. The HEAP program consists of five components-Regular HEAP, Emergency HEAP, Heating Equipment Repair and Replacement (HERR), Cooling, and the Clean and Tune benefit.
- HEAP is unique in that unlike other DSS-ES services it does not operate on a calendar year, rather seasonally from November to April as dictated by OTDA.



## Child Care Assistance

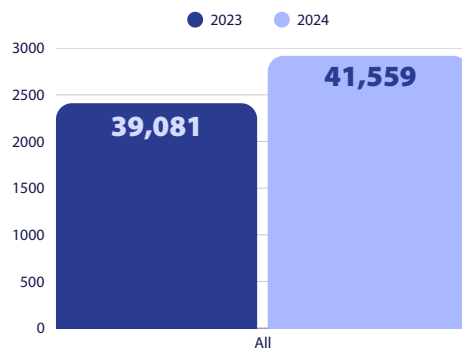
- Child Care Assistance is available for certain eligible parents or caretakers to allow them to work. Block grant allowance from the federal and state government predicate the availability of subsidies issued to Onondaga County residents.

### NEW APPLICATIONS



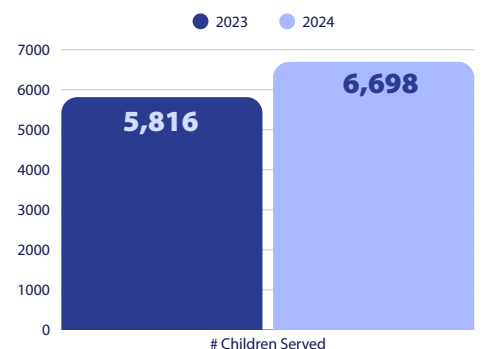
**22% increase**

### OPEN CASES



**21% increase**

### CHILDREN SERVED

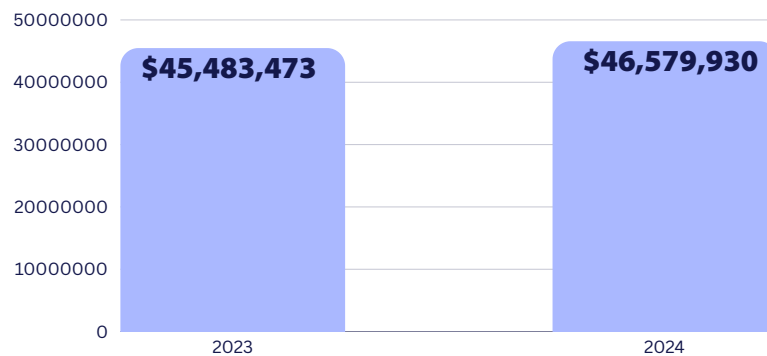


**15% increase**

## Child Support Services

- The office of Child Support Services provides custodial parents with assistance in obtaining financial support and medical insurance coverage for their children by locating parents, establishing parentage, establishing, or modifying support orders and collection and distributing child support payments.
- The Child Support program helps to strengthen families and reduce Temporary Assistance spending by placing the responsibility for supporting children on those with the financial resources to provide such support. For families receiving Temporary Assistance, the establishment and enforcement of support obligations provide a step toward self-sufficiency.

### COLLECTIONS



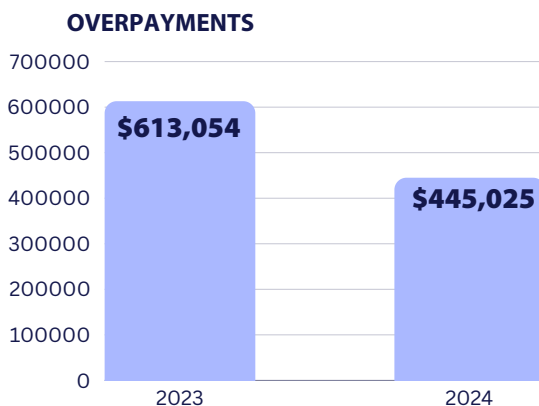
## Highlights

### HIGHLIGHTS

- \$46 million collected in child support for 11,400 families.
- Paternity Establishment Percentage (PEP): 96.3% (7.97% above state average).
- Support Establishment Percentage (SEP): 92.34% (6.5% above state average).
- 2,500 new child support petitions in 2024
- Active petitions impacted 23,000+ children in 2024
- SAVES Project
  - Ensuring safer access to child support for custodial parents facing domestic violence.
  - Expanded to include warm referrals to local domestic violence agencies.
- Parent Support Program Expansion
  - Now operated by Northeast Community Center.
  - Provides employment support for non-custodial parents (linked to 2Gen Project).
  - Includes case management, employment referrals, and incentives.
  - Highly praised by Hearing Magistrates and Family Court Judges.

## Investigations

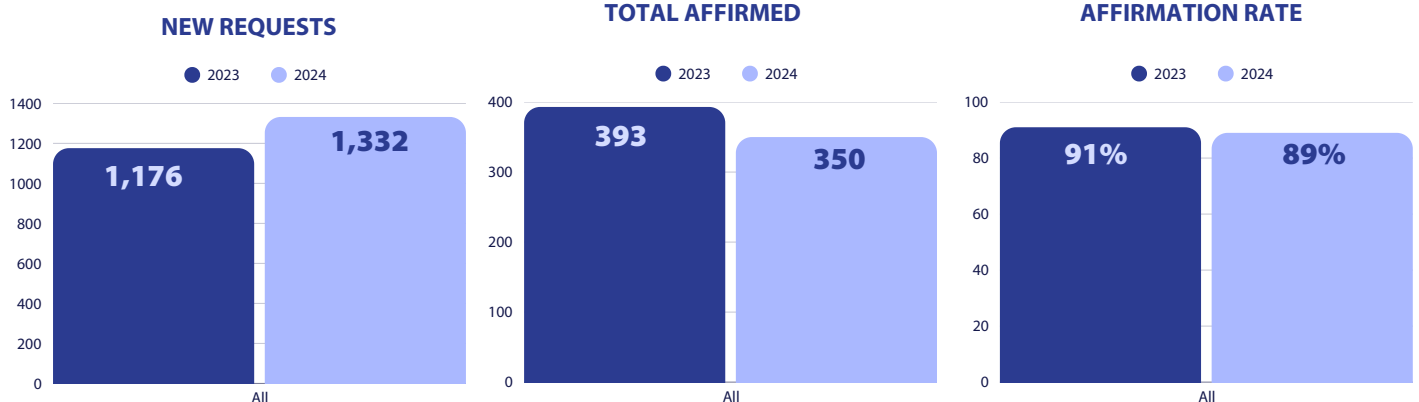
- The Investigations Unit is responsible for ensuring the integrity of DSS-ES programs by conducting investigations of recipients/applicants to verify that eligibility is determined correctly. Most of these referrals come from within the Agency, however, allegations of fraud/misuse are also received from other Agencies as well as the public.
- 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. Whether or not criminal prosecution is pursued is the sole discretion of the District Attorney.



- 4,640 investigation referrals resulted in \$9 million in Cost Avoidance and \$445,000 in newly documented fraud.
- In response to a rise in phishing and card skimming scams targeting EBT users, Onondaga County has worked to educate clients on how to protect their benefits and report theft quickly. We have successfully **replaced \$148,477.40 in stolen benefits** to support impacted households and ensure continued access to food and essential resources.
  - Stolen Benefit Applications: 413 processed, 266 approved, and \$148,477.40 replaced.

## Fair Hearings

A fair hearing is a formal procedure provided by the Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH), a division of the Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA.) Fair Hearings are requested by an applicant or recipient of benefits who are not satisfied with the determination of Social Services-Economic Security. Specific departments include Temporary Assistance, SNAP, Medicaid, HEAP and Day Care. In 2024, there were 393 total affirmed cases in Fair Hearings with **89% DSS-ES affirmation rate**.



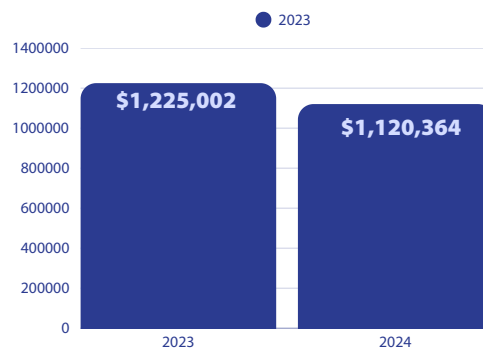
## Resource Unit

- The Resource Recovery Unit is responsible for taking and processing mortgages and liens for applicants and recipients of some social service programs. It is also responsible for paying for and assisting in the scheduling of burials for residents of Onondaga County who die without funds or family to arrange and pay for burial. When applicable The Resource Unit also coordinates claims against personal injury defendants and estates for the recovery of some

### Highlights

- Indigent Burials: 506 approvals processed.
- \$1.3 Million dollars recovered.

### BURIAL COST



## Systems

- The Systems unit provides computer support and account creation/maintenance for four Onondaga County departments: Social Services-Economic Security, Children and Family Services, Adult and Long-Term Care Services (which includes Aging/NY Connects/Protective Services/Veterans) and Financial Operations.
- Systems includes the Records Management Unit which is responsible for the maintaining and storing of closed and some active cases, the case and individual clearance procedure, the Client Identification Number (CIN) reconciliation process, and responding to case record inquiries from within the Department and from agencies in the community. The Records Unit maintains one offsite storage location for case records. The Records Unit is also responsible for the destruction of case records in accordance with the State Records Retention and Destruction Schedule.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- 16,000 IT support requests handled; 200+ new PCs deployed.
- 67,000 case records processed and cleared.

## Operational Activities

- Contracted with CR Fletcher Associates to assist with recruitment. Able to onboard 81 new employees. Unfortunately, 54 employees left due to retirement, not the right fit or other employment.
- NYS Civil Service continued the H.E.L.P. (Hiring for Emergency Limited Placement) which enabled the hiring individuals who were not required to take a civil service test.
- 2024 marked the fourth year in a row with an average vacancy of 40 to 45 positions, or 11% vacancy rate.
- Employees participated in Remote work and Flexible Work Schedule where operations could support it.
- Continued employee fun committee that assisted with wellness week, hot cocoa day, lemonade day, ice cream day with games, Halloween contest, Employee Craft Fair, and interactive topic boards throughout the floors. All of these events brought some important fun and cheer to the department and helped improve staff morale.
- Continued Community Outreach/Recruitment team. Over thirty employees have been trained to represent DSS-ES at community events.
- New & Improved Website: We've launched a brand-new, user-friendly website designed to make it easier for residents to access information, apply for services, and find the resources they need quickly.
- Internal Department Brochures: To improve communication and efficiency within DSS-ES, we've developed department-specific brochures that clarify roles, services, and key information for both staff and the public.
- Ventek has been working over a year to build a TA Employment platform to integrate with the department's case management system. This new platform was launched in March 2024. Documentation requests for all types of activity are now autogenerated.
- An expanded childcare assistance marketing campaign ran from January – June 2024. This focus resulted in a 22% increase in applications, 21% increase in open cases, and 15% increase in childcare, representing 6,698 children in care.
- Partnered with Child Care Solutions to execute the County Executive's Child Care Enhancement Grants to assist the 73 existing providers by giving small grants to improve their childcare settings. A total of \$450,000 was disbursed. Our local childcare resource and referral agency, Child Care Solutions administered the grant process.
- The Director of Quality Assurance developed program dashboards that visualize data. This has allowed Management and supervisors to become more proactive and effective in running operations.

## 2025 Goals

- Staff recruitment is a top priority. Landed a new partnership with OCC to provide internships for fourth semester students to encourage graduates to apply for full-time employment.
- Continue to navigate the pressure the Federal, State, and Advocacy agencies are putting on our staff to meet mandated application timeliness requirements.
- Continue to meet the demands of family and individual homelessness.
- Implement Onondaga County Child Poverty Reduction Initiative (CPRI). (See following page)
- Previous to NYS ITS forcing DSS-ES to decommission the kiosk machines, clients were able to scan their documents and receive a receipt. Kiosk submissions averaged 250 daily, and the elimination of these machines has negatively affected both efficient customer service while increasing the DSS-ES workload as workers now have to accept the documents manually. The goal is to serve the clients more effectively by creating a client self-check through repurposing a section of former 2nd floor Civic Center.
- Partnered with Child Care Solutions to execute the County Executive's Child Care Enhancement Grants. For 2025, there is another \$500,000 of County Funds available for a 2nd round of enhancement grants.
- We are piloting AI in SNAP/HEAP with TipCo's EVA.
  - EVA Phone - Answers incoming calls from the public. General questions but in specific client case information in the future.
  - EVA Interview - Currently reciting Rights and Responsibilities to client and verifying client agreement. Current languages are English, Spanish, French, and Arabic. In time, the hope is to make calls to clients to gather answers to application and recertification questions, package the information, and send to the appropriate DSS-ES employee for processing.
  - EVA Companion - Able to pull information from policies, regulations, training materials to answer staff questions.
- We have purchased 19 Translate LIVE AI tablets and using throughout the department.
  - A real time translation tool designed to help you communicate clearly and confidently, no matter what language you speak. It supports over 120 languages through text and speech translation.

# Onondaga County Child Poverty Reduction Initiative (CPRI)

Helping Families in Syracuse Move Forward

## Our Mission

To reduce child poverty in the City of Syracuse by providing targeted support to families receiving or eligible for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF).

## Why This Matters



### Syracuse Poverty

Syracuse has one of the highest child poverty rates in the nation.



### Direct Support

These funds provide direct and immediate support to families in need.



### Long Term Benefits

Investments focus on short-term poverty reduction with long-term benefits.

**Total Grant Award:** \$12,250,000

**Funding Source:** New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) – TANF Funds

## Programs Funded

### 2Gen Onondaga

- Expanding the 2Gen Onondaga Generational Poverty Reduction Initiative
- A multi-generational approach to breaking the cycle of poverty.
- Provides mobility mentoring, economic stability support, and goal planning.
- Works with both custodial and non-custodial parents on employment and parenting.
- **Impact:** 450 households over three years.
- **Funding Allows:** Hiring of 10 additional DSS-ES staff.

### CNY CHANCE

- Housing Assistance and Network for Community Engagement (CNY CHANCE)
- A partnership with the Homeless and Housing Coalition to support landlords and tenants.
- Landlord incentive & retention services to encourage rentals to Temporary Assistance recipients.
- Tenant Navigators to educate families on housing rights and responsibilities.
- **Impact:** 750 new housing units; 450 tenants assisted over three years.

### School Attendance Project

- Led by the Department of Children and Family Services in partnership with the Syracuse City School District.
- Places full-time Attendance Liaisons in 7 schools to reduce chronic absenteeism.
- Provides support for transportation, housing, utilities, mental health, and childcare.
- **Impact:** 1,050 families supported over three years.

### Diaper Distribution

- Diaper Distribution for Families on Temporary Assistance
- A collaboration with the Diaper Bank of Central New York and the Early Childhood Alliance.
- Provides free diapers to families with children aged 0-3 to support health and well-being.
- **Impact:** 1,995 children supported over three years.