J. Ryan McMahon II, *County Executive*

Sarah G. Merrick, *Commissioner*

Onondaga County
Social Services (DSS-ES)

Annual Report

2025

2025 at Onondaga County Department of Social Services - Economic Security was defined by innovation, stronger community connection, and a continued commitment to helping individuals and families moved toward stability and self-sufficiency.

Our Phone
315-435-2700

Our Website
onondaga.gov/dss

Our Address
421 Montgomery St., Syracuse, NY

Rev 10/06/2026

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SARAH G. MERRICK

COMMISSIONER, DSS-ES

I am pleased to present the Onondaga County Department of Social Services-Economic Security's (DSS-ES) 2025 Annual Report. During 2025, DSS-ES served 140,000 plus Onondaga County residents who utilized one or more of our programs.

Program highlights, utilization and additional information are shared on the following pages. Included as well are the 2026 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.

Organizational Chart 2025

J. Ryan McMahon II, *County Executive*

Ann Rooney, *Deputy County Executive for Human Services*

Sarah G. Merrick, *DSS-ES Commissioner*

- Temporary Assistance (TA)
  - TA Employment
    - 2Gen Onondaga
- Child Care Assistance
- SNAP
- HEAP
- Medicaid
  - Community
    - Nursing Home
- Child Support
- Legal Division
  - Fair Hearings
    - Mtg Liens
      - Investigations
- Systems
  - Record Mgmt
- Admin
  - Resource Recovery
    - Burials

Onondaga County Legislature
Health and Human Services Committee

Chair: Dan Romeo

Kevin Meaker Cody M. Kelly Elaine Denton Ellen Block Timothy T. Burtis

Mission Statement

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.*

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.

Values

- **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

The Onondaga County Department of Social Services – Economic Security (DSS-ES) is committed to strengthening individuals, supporting families, and creating pathways to greater stability and self-sufficiency. Through partnerships, innovation, and compassionate public service, DSS-ES helps residents access essential resources while working to reduce poverty, improve outcomes for children and families, and build a stronger community for all. Throughout 2025, the department continued this mission by delivering critical services, expanding innovative programs, and investing in solutions that address both immediate needs and long-term opportunities

How DSS-ES Served the Community in 2025



Program Highlights Continued...

Helping Families Meet Basic Needs

DSS-ES continued to serve as a vital safety net for county residents by processing more than 17,500 Temporary Assistance applications, 22,000 SNAP applications, and maintaining over 30,000 active Medicaid cases. These programs helped individuals and families access food, healthcare, housing assistance, and financial support during times of need.

Promoting Housing Stability

Housing remained a key priority throughout the year. The department prevented eviction for 191 households through the Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment Program and fully utilized available funding to keep families safely housed. DSS-ES also provided emergency shelter services to thousands of individuals experiencing homelessness and helped dozens of families transition from temporary placements into permanent housing.

Reducing Childhood Poverty

The department continued expanding its poverty reduction initiatives through programs such as 2Gen Onondaga, CNY CHANCE, the School Attendance Project, and the Diaper Distribution Program. These initiatives focus on addressing the root causes of poverty by supporting employment, housing stability, school attendance, child well-being, and family self-sufficiency.

Supporting Employment and Self-Sufficiency

DSS-ES remained committed to helping individuals achieve long-term independence through employment and workforce development services. During 2025, nearly 1,900 individuals entered employment, while hundreds of others secured Supplemental Security Income benefits and other supports designed to promote financial stability.

Strengthening Families and Children

Child Support Services collected nearly $45 million on behalf of local families while continuing to exceed state performance benchmarks. The department also expanded fatherhood initiatives, parenting supports, and family-centered programming designed to strengthen household stability and improve outcomes for children.

Investing in Innovation

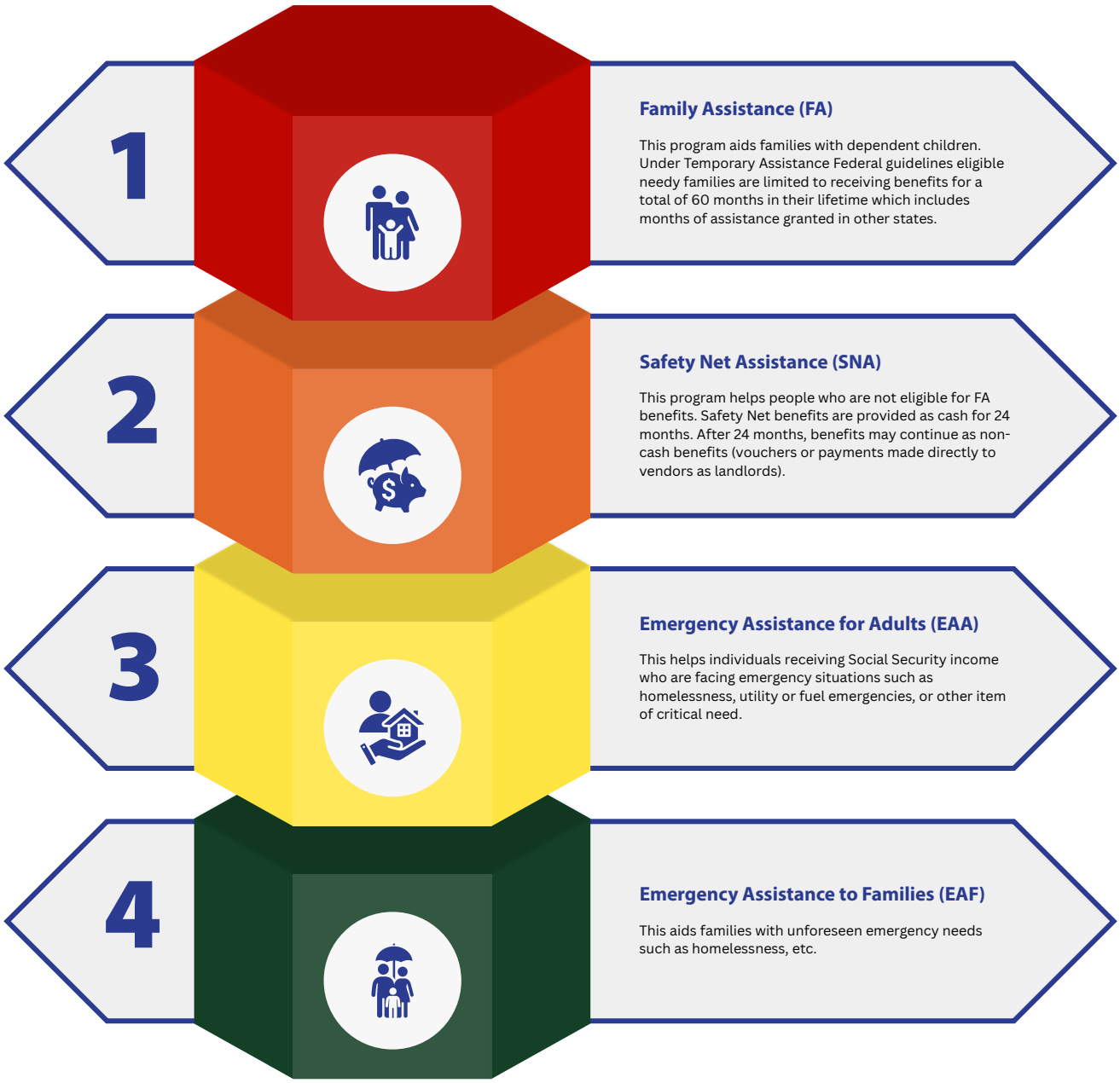
To address increasing service demands and workforce challenges, DSS-ES continued investing in technology and artificial intelligence solutions. EVA, the department's AI-powered assistant, answered nearly 200,000 calls in 2025, saving thousands of staff hours while improving customer access to information and services. Additional AI tools were launched to support interviews, program information, and future service delivery improvements.

Building a Stronger Organization

The department continued investing in employee recruitment, training, and retention efforts while modernizing internal processes and technology infrastructure. Enhanced onboarding programs, leadership development initiatives, and ongoing staff support helped strengthen the workforce responsible for delivering essential services to the community.

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. **There are 4 types:**



TA Highlights

Supporting essential needs

Processed **17,529 Temporary Assistance applications** and **maintained 5,934 active TA cases,** ensuring residents had access to financial and housing support when they needed it most.

Preventing evictions and promoting housing stability

Assisted **191 households** through the Shelter Arrears Eviction Forestallment (SAEF) program, fully utilizing **$583,000** in available funding.

- **118 of these households included children,** helping families remain safely housed during times of crisis.

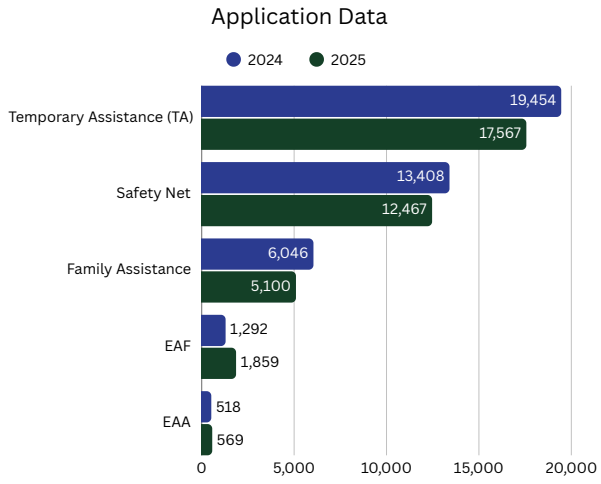
Providing emergency shelter and support

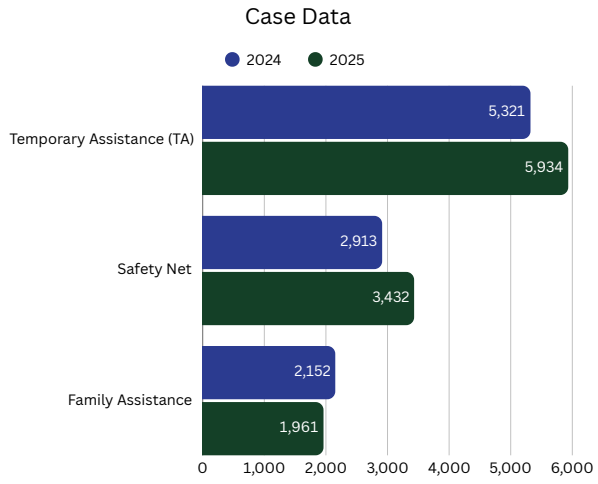
Served **3,797 individuals experiencing homelessness,** including:

- **1,405 males, 558 females, and 137 individuals identifying as other**
- **530 families (1,694 adults and children)** who received shelter and supportive services

Building pathways to stable housing

Partnered with HHC's CNY Chance to connect individuals experiencing homelessness with resources and opportunities to secure permanent housing and funding through New York State's Child Poverty Reduction Initiative (CPRI) grant.





Housing Casework Team

The Housing Casework Team plays a vital role in supporting families experiencing homelessness, particularly when emergency shelter capacity is limited.

Providing support during critical housing shortages

Works directly with families placed in hotels when local family shelters are at capacity, ensuring they continue to receive case management and support services.

Moving families into permanent housing

Successfully helped **69 families transition from temporary hotel placements to permanent housing** between July 1, 2025, and January 1, 2026—creating more stable, long-term living situations.

TA Employment

TA Employment services help individuals build skills, secure employment, and move toward long-term financial independence.

Connecting clients to employment opportunities

Supported **1,887 individuals in entering employment,** helping clients take meaningful steps toward self-sufficiency and financial stability.

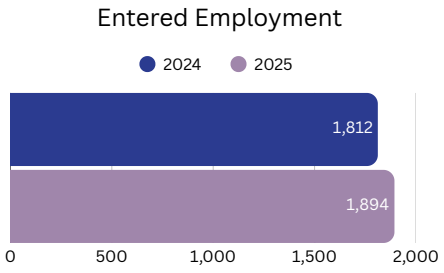
Linking clients to long-term financial support

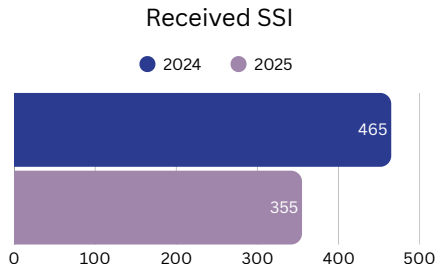
Assisted **355 individuals in securing Supplemental Security Income (SSI)** benefits, providing critical, ongoing support for those unable to work.

Improving service delivery and client experience

Reduced case transfers by **50%** through enhancements to the Ventek system, allowing caseworkers to spend more time directly assisting clients rather than preparing cases for reassignment.

- This change improves consistency, strengthens client relationships, and enhances overall customer service.





2Gen Program

The 2Gen program takes a family-centered approach to reducing poverty by supporting both parents and children together—helping families build stability, strengthen relationships, and create long-term opportunities.

Expanding support for more families

Launched a major program expansion using New York State Poverty Reduction funding, increasing capacity to serve more families receiving Temporary Assistance.

- Added **6 additional caseworkers,** each supporting **16–18 families**
- Expanded eligibility to include primary caregivers **under age 36,** broadening access to services

Engaging families in long-term success

As of December 31, 2025, **187 families were fully engaged** in the program, working toward goals related to employment, education, and family stability.

Supporting fathers and strengthening families

Introduced **two additional cohorts of fathers** in 2025, currently working with **24 fathers** to:

- Maintain employment
- Strengthen parenting skills
- Improve overall health and well-being

Advancing mental health support for parents

Partnered with Upstate Hospital to implement a cognitive behavioral therapy-based intervention designed to reduce postpartum depression among new mothers and fathers.

- **All 12 caseworkers trained** in 2025
- Currently supporting **60 parents** through this initiative

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. Throughout 2025, DSS-ES continued to adapt to evolving federal and state requirements while maintaining essential services for the community.

Most Temporary Assistance recipients receive SNAP as part of their overall assistance grant. 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.

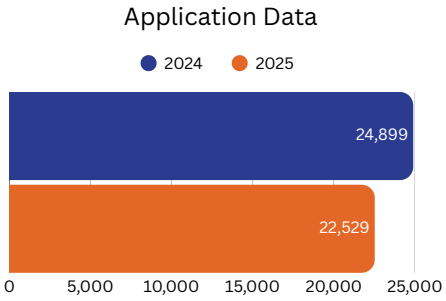
Responding to changing federal and state policies

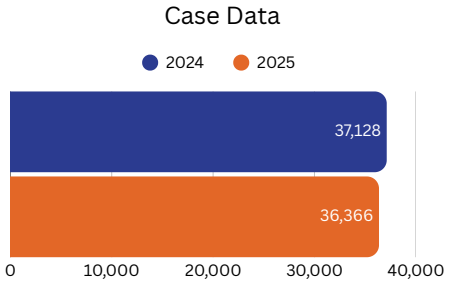
Continued operating critical assistance programs amid ongoing policy and regulatory changes, including:

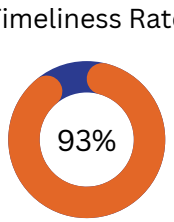
- Coordinating with community partners during a federal shutdown to support local food access through food banks and pantries

Strengthening food security

Processed **22,498 SNAP applications** and supported **36,366 ongoing SNAP cases,** helping individuals and families access consistent, reliable nutrition.



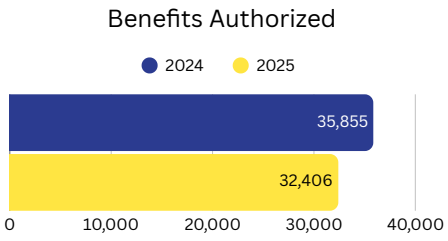


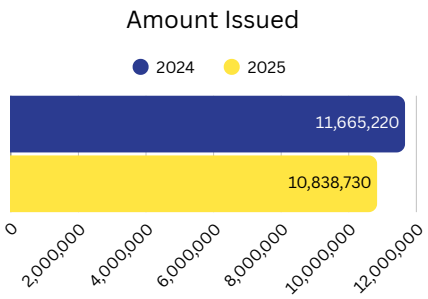


Home Energy Assistance Program (HEAP)

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.





***Note:** The Home and Energy Assistance Program (HEAP) Federal Fiscal Year runs from October 1-September 30.

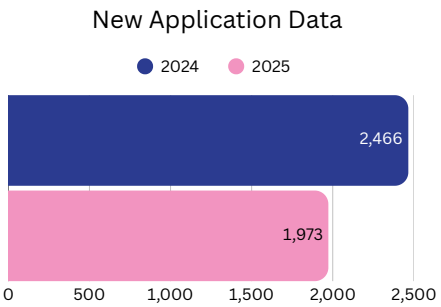
Child Care Assistance

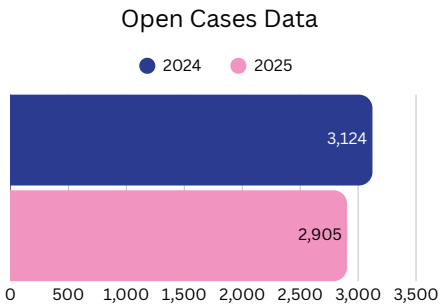
Child Care Assistance is available for certain eligible parents or caretakers to allow them to work. Block grant allowance from the federal and state government predicate the availabilities issues to Onondaga County residents.

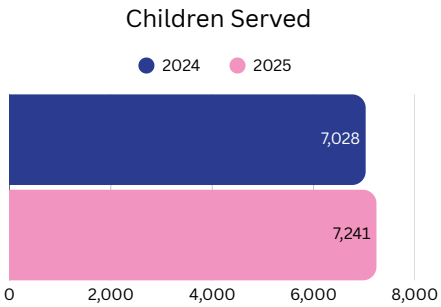
Maintaining child care support during funding challenges

Due to limited federal and state funding, the County implemented a child care waiting list in June 2025. Through a State waiver and the use of local funding, DSS-ES was able to maintain assistance for families already enrolled who continued to meet eligibility guidelines.

- Ended the year with **2,905 active child care cases**





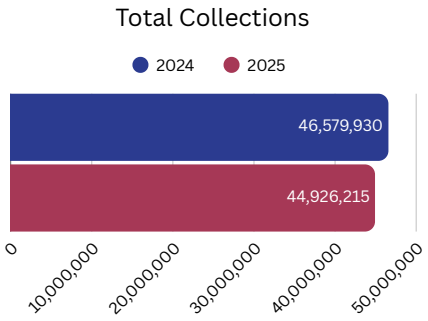


Child Support Services

Child Support Services helps ensure children receive consistent financial support, strengthening family stability and promoting positive outcomes for children across the county.

Delivering critical financial support to families

Collected **$44,926,215.31 in child support payments** for approximately **10,556 households** in Onondaga County, helping families meet essential needs and maintain stability.

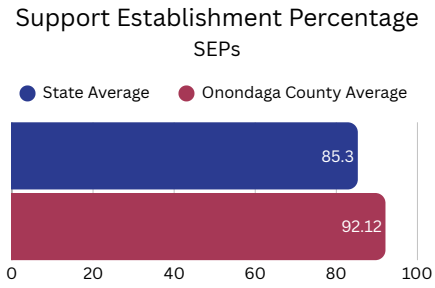


Exceeding state benchmarks in establishing paternity

Achieved a **Paternity Establishment Percentage (PEP) of 96.40%** in 2025—**9.41 percentage points above** the New York State average—ensuring more children have legal ties to both parents and access to support.

Leading in support order establishment

Reached a **Support Establishment Percentage (SEP) of 92.12%** in 2025—**6.82 percentage points above** the state average—helping families secure reliable, ongoing financial support.



Medicaid

The Medicaid program ensures access to critical healthcare coverage for eligible residents, supporting individuals and families in maintaining their health and well-being.

Community

Community Medicaid handles assisted living and all home care programs.

Nursing Home Care

The Nursing Home Care Unit handles nursing home cases only.

Providing access to healthcare coverage
Processed **7,674 Community Medicaid applications** and **1,188 Nursing Home applications,** helping individuals access essential medical services and long-term care.

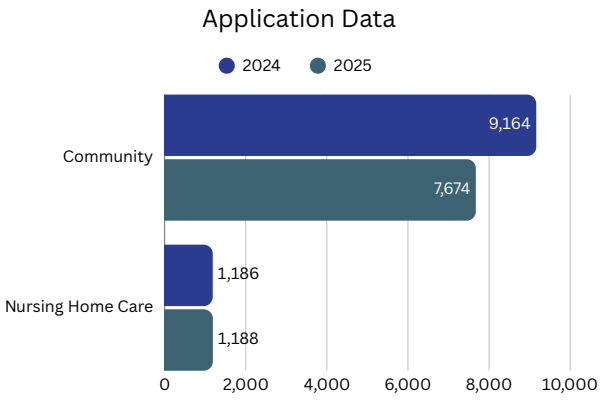
Supporting a large and complex caseload
Maintained **30,559 active Medicaid cases,** reflecting the scale of support provided across the community.

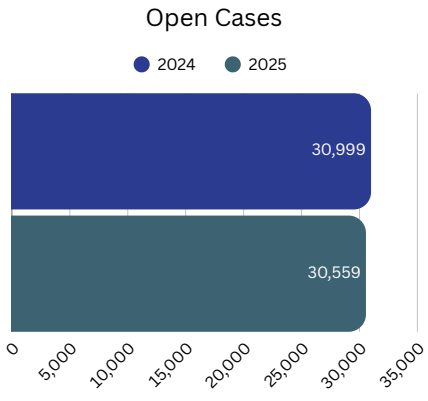
Improving service efficiency and timeliness
Made significant progress in reducing processing delays, decreasing Community Undercare task backlogs from **2–6 months to under 60 days,** now maintaining this standard consistently.

- This improvement ensures faster service and more timely support for clients navigating the Medicaid system.

Strengthening application process for long-term care
Implemented a new pre-screening process in NH that is slowly reducing the number of apps becoming over a year old.

Ensuring compliance and protecting critical funding
Met NYS DOH's COVID Unwind requirements, avoiding serious financial penalties.





***Note:** New York State Department of Health (NYS DOH) handles the balance of nearly 70,000 cases for Onondaga residents.

Investigations

The Investigations unit helps protect the integrity of public assistance programs by identifying fraud, ensuring compliance, and safeguarding taxpayer resources.

Protecting public funds through proactive oversight

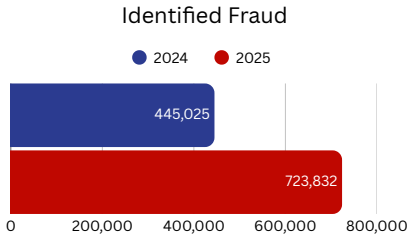
Achieved **$5,487,810 in cost avoidance,** preventing ineligible payments before they occurred.

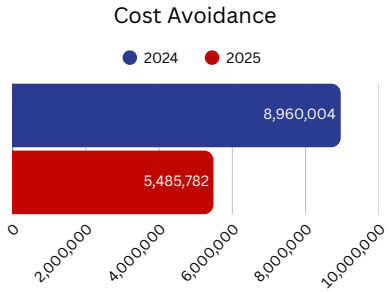
Identifying and addressing fraud

Documented **$729,681.86 in fraud,** reinforcing accountability and program integrity.

Enforcing program rules and sanctions

Generated **$470,992 in cost avoidance** through Intentional Program Violation (IPV) sanctions, ensuring benefits are distributed fairly and appropriately.





Fair Hearings

The Fair Hearings unit ensures due process by representing the agency and supporting accurate, timely case resolutions.

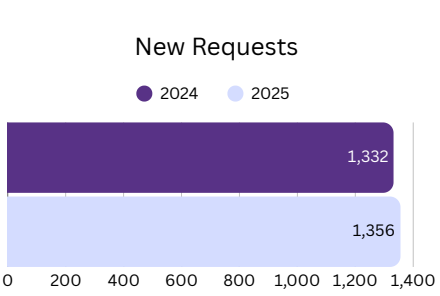
Managing a high volume of hearings

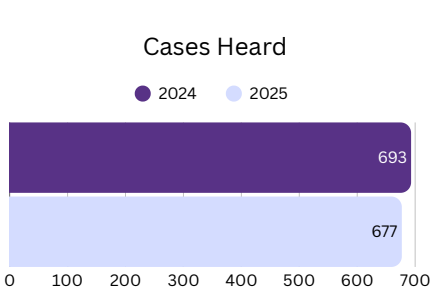
Handled **1,468 fair hearings** in 2025, maintaining an **85% success rate,** reflecting strong case preparation and adherence to policy.

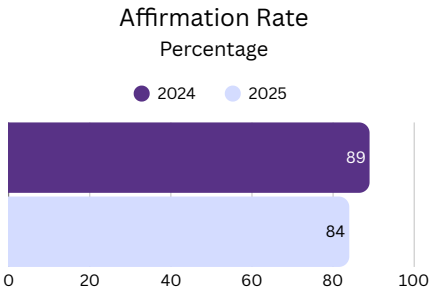


Reducing backlog and improving efficiency

Decreased the hearing backlog from **998 cases to 892,** improving timeliness and responsiveness for clients.







Systems

The Systems team supports the technology infrastructure that enables efficient, modern service delivery across DSS-ES.

Supporting staff through high-volume IT assistance

Responded to **5,662 Help Desk calls** and **12,208 emails,** ensuring staff have the tools and support needed to serve clients effectively.

Modernizing technology across the department

- Deployed **Windows 11 to over 940 computers**
- Replaced **200+ end-of-life devices** across DSS-ES and partner departments

Advancing innovation in service delivery

Partnered with TipCo to **expand EVA,** the department's AI assistant, to help answer calls and complete interviews for Temporary Assistance—improving efficiency and accessibility.

Records

The Records unit plays a key role in ensuring timely processing and accurate documentation across all program areas.

Processing high volumes of applications efficiently

Cleared **66,699 applications** across both Services and Non-Services programs, helping ensure clients receive timely access to benefits and services.

Resource Recoveries

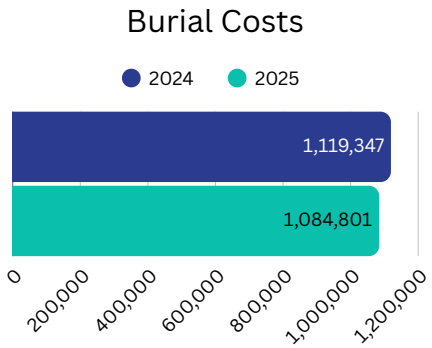
Resource Recoveries ensures responsible stewardship of public funds by identifying and recovering eligible reimbursements while supporting essential services.

Recovering funds to offset program costs

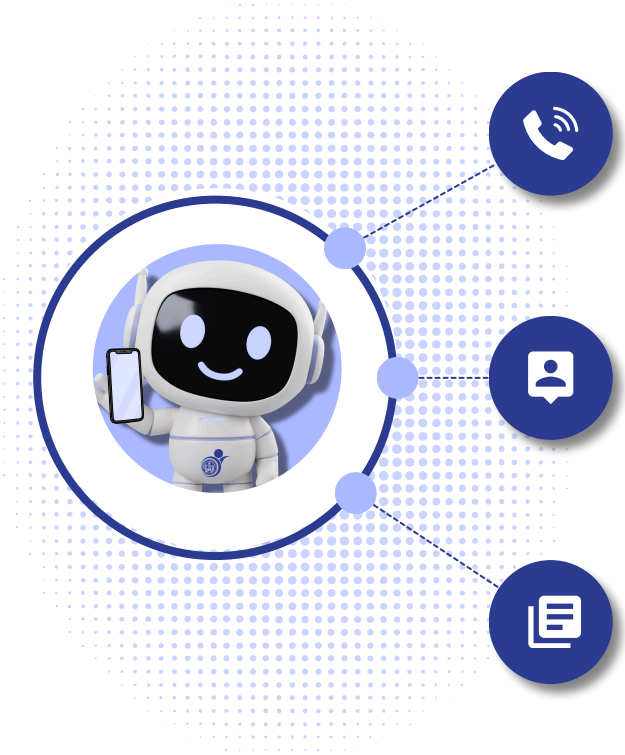
Recovered **$397,068** through personal injury settlements, estates, property liens, and other sources.

Providing dignified support services

Coordinated **497 indigent burials,** totaling **$1,085,031,** ensuring respectful arrangements for individuals without financial resources or support.



EVA Modernization Initiatives



EVA Phone

Launched on April 28, 2025, EVA Phone helps streamline incoming calls, improve customer access, and reduce administrative burden on staff.

EVA Interview

DSS-ES launched its first AI-assisted application interview process for Temporary Assistance on December 10, 2025.

EVA Rights & Responsibilities (SNAP)

Launched on January 31, 2025, EVA R&R provides SNAP applicants with required program information through an automated system.

EVA Phone

- **Answered 197,323 calls in 2025** (Averaging **24,665 calls per month**).
- **Resolved approximately 30% of calls without staff intervention,** while transferring more complex calls to appropriate program areas.
- **Saved 3,584 hours and 6 minutes of staff time,** allowing employees to focus more directly on casework and client support.
- DSS-ES plans to continue expanding EVA in FY26 so all incoming client calls are routed through EVA first for initial assistance.

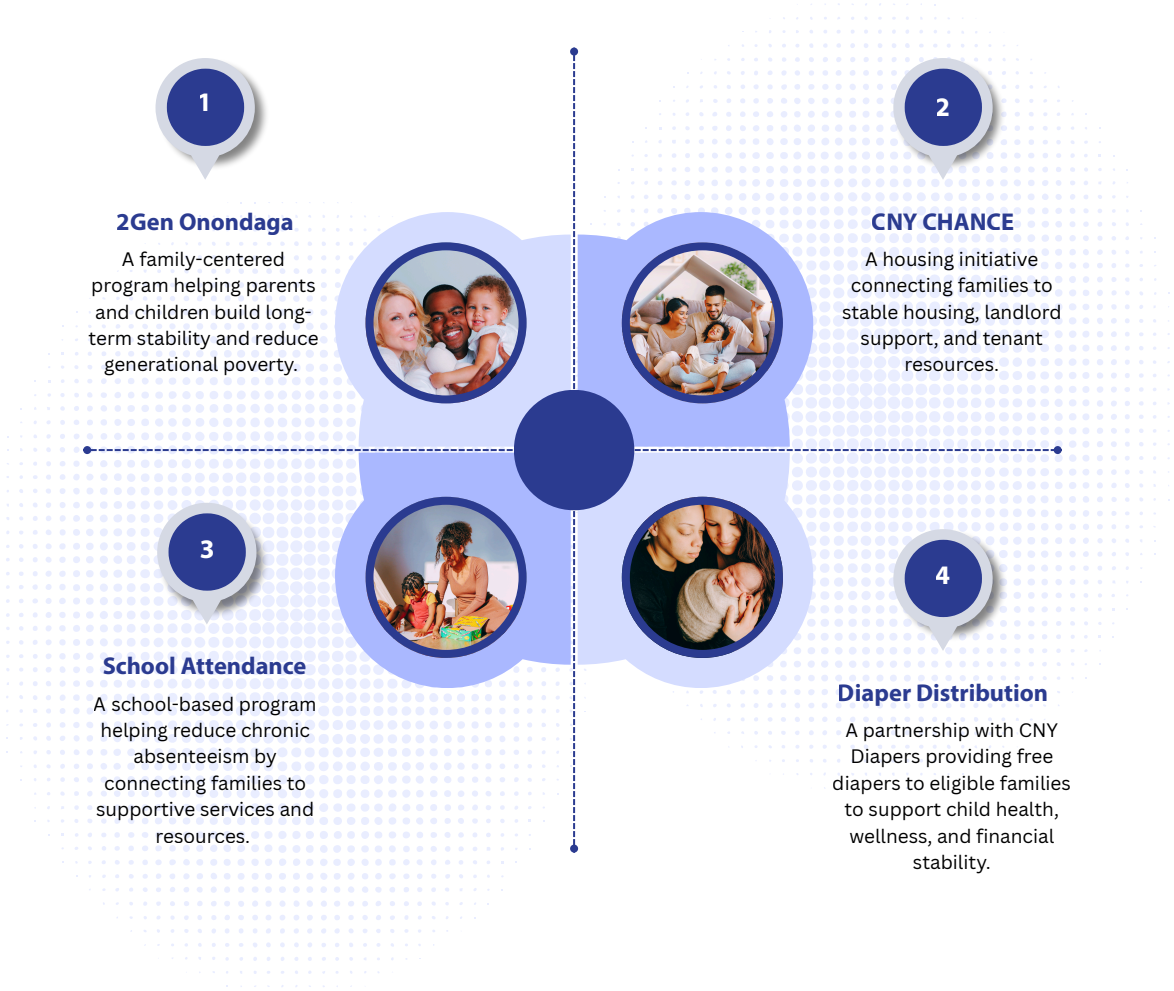
EVA Interview

- **Focused first on Temporary Assistance,** one of the department's most detailed and complex application processes.
- Worked closely with TipCo over several months to develop and test the system before launch.
- **Completed 77 applications with a 68% success rate** during the initial testing phase.
- The average Temporary Assistance interview takes approximately **35 minutes.**
  - With **over 17,500 TA applications annually**, expanding this technology could result in significant future time savings for staff.
- DSS-ES continues working toward official approval from the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance (OTDA) while operating the system in test mode.

EVA Rights & Responsibilities

- **Logged 13,794 calls in 2025**
- **Saved 1,395 hours and 39 minutes of staff time**
- **Reduced call time by an average of 6 minutes and 29 seconds per interaction**
- This technology helps improve consistency, accessibility, and efficiency while ensuring applicants receive required information.

Child Poverty Reduction Initiatives *"CPRIs"*



2GEN Onondaga

Expanding support for more families

Launched a major program expansion using New York State Poverty Reduction funding, increasing capacity to serve more families receiving Temporary Assistance.

- Added **6 additional caseworkers,** each supporting **16–18 families**
- Expanded eligibility to include primary caregivers **under age 36,** broadening access to services

Engaging families in long-term success

As of December 31, 2025, **187 families were fully engaged** in the program, working toward goals related to employment, education, and family stability.

Supporting fathers and strengthening families

Introduced **two additional cohorts of fathers** in 2025, currently working with **24 fathers** to:

- Maintain employment
- Strengthen parenting skills
- Improve overall health and well-being

Advancing mental health support for parents

Partnered with Upstate Hospital to implement a cognitive behavioral therapy-based intervention designed to reduce postpartum depression among new mothers and fathers.

- **All 12 caseworkers trained** in 2025
- Currently supporting **60 parents** through this initiative

Child Poverty Reduction Initiatives *"CPRIs"*

CNY CHANCE

CNY CHANCE continued expanding housing opportunities for Temporary Assistance recipients by strengthening partnerships with local landlords and increasing access to stable housing. Between July 1 and December 31, 2025, the program successfully helped 69 households secure permanent housing, with zero evictions among participating families.

By the end of 2025, CNY CHANCE had established partnerships with 189 properties, providing access to 155 available housing units and creating a strong foundation for continued growth. The program also reached full staffing by year-end, positioning the initiative for significant expansion in 2026.

Mission	Expanding housing opportunities.
Outcome	69 households housed with ***ZERO*** **evictions.**
Building	189 properties, 155 units.
Future	Fully staffed and prepared for growth.

School Attendance

The CPRI attendance team became fully staffed and successfully onboarded to their assigned schools. Their outreach efforts resulted in **43% of the students improving their attendance rate** by the end of December 2025.

Diaper Distribution Program

Launched in partnership with the Diaper Bank of Central New York and the Early Childhood Alliance, the Diaper Distribution Program helps reduce financial stress for families with young children by providing free diapers through a convenient online ordering and home delivery system. By removing barriers to accessing this essential resource, the program supports child health, family well-being, and economic stability.

Since launching on March 1, 2025, the program has distributed more than 900,000 diapers through 3,451 deliveries, serving 918 unique households and benefiting more than 1,200 children across Onondaga County. The innovative delivery model minimizes operational costs while making it easier for families to receive the support they need.

900,000+

Diapers *delivered.*

3,451

Orders *fulfilled.*

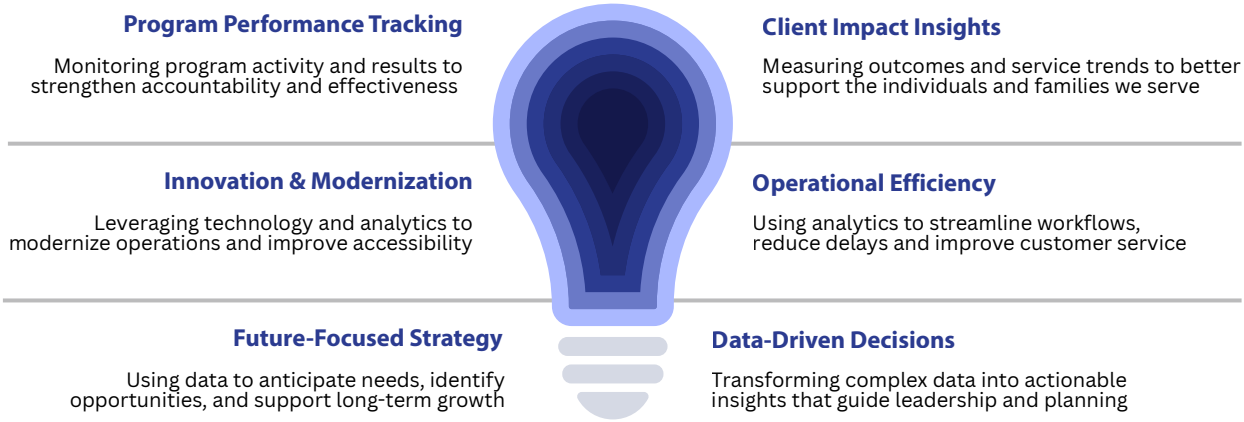
1,200+

Children *supported.*

Quality Assurance

The Quality Assurance team continues to develop innovative solutions that improve access to essential resources while maximizing efficiency and reducing operational costs.

Key Impacts



Leveraged Data To Understand Benefit Distribution In Onondaga County
Expedited our ability to understand the scope of impact of recent federal legislation (BBB); and to more precisely evaluate anticipated food shortages during the 2025 Federal Government shutdown in a way that augmented local organization's planning efforts.

Implemented Real-Time Dashboards for Critical Benefit Programs, such as Temporary Assistance, Medicaid, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP).

- New data tools ensure middle and upper management remain aligned on key performance indicators, such as timeliness and workflows, ensuring optimal customer service.
- Real-time data allows managers to evaluate performance objectively, identifying outliers, bottlenecks in processing, and allows supervisors to be situationally aware by providing historical context at a glance.

Launching an innovative diaper distribution program
Implemented a cost-effective diaper distribution initiative allowing eligible families to order free diapers and pull-ups through an online store with free DoorDash delivery. It is funded through New York Child Poverty Reduction Initiative (CPRI) Grant.

Expanding access for families in need
Since March 1, 2025:

- Distributed **over 900,000 diapers**
- Served **918 unique households**
- Fulfilled **3,451 orders**
- Supported more than **1,200 children** across Onondaga County

Improving convenience and efficiency
The program minimizes operational and staffing costs while helping families access critical supplies in a simple, accessible way.

Operational Activities

The Staff Development team has focused on onboarding, training, and professional growth to help employees succeed and strengthen service delivery across DSS-ES.

NEW EMPLOYEES

New Hires

Successfully onboarded 75 new employees in 2025 and created a comprehensive New Hire Manual to support learning and engagement.

Onboarding

Redesigned onboarding from a single 3-hour session into a **4-day onboarding program** during employees' first week, providing clearer expectations, stronger training, and a deeper understanding of the DSS-ES mission and culture.



EMPLOYEE GROWTH

Long-Term Success

Implemented follow-up feedback sessions with new employees at 2 months, 5 months, and 10 months to encourage communication, identify challenges early, and strengthen retention.

Leadership Skills

Established ongoing coaching and support initiatives for supervisors, including:

- **Monthly support meetings** for Supervisor II staff beginning in June 2025
- **Bi-monthly Supervisor Training** Sessions launched in September 2025



Other activities include, but are not limited to:

- 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.
- 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 broads 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 45 employees have been trained to represent DSS-ES at community events.
- 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.

2026 DSS-ES Goals

Expanding the use of AI and automation

In response to staffing shortages and growing operational demands, DSS-ES continued integrating AI technology across multiple program areas.

- FY25 focused on launching:
  - EVA Phone
  - EVA Rights & Responsibilities (R&R)
  - EVA Temporary Assistance Interview tools
- FY26 expansion plans include SNAP interviews, Child Care, Medicaid, Child Support, TA Employment, Welfare Fraud, and Indigent Burial applications and inquiries.

Other goals include:

- 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.
- Continue to recruit to fill vacancies. Provide onboarding and continue professional training.
- Implement new work and eligibility rules for SNAP for Able Bodied Adults Without Dependants (ABAWDs) and non-citizens that were passed by Congress in HR 1 June 2025.

Onondaga County
Social Services

Our Phone
315-435-2700

Our Website
onondaga.gov/dss

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