

## 2015 Allegheny County DHS Local Government Case Competition

### Making Transportation Work: Creating Access and Ensuring Equity for All



March 2016



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**Allegheny County Department of Human Services**

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## CONTENTS

Executive Summary	1
Background	2
The 2015 Case Competition	3
The Competition	3
Participants	4
Judges	5
The Case	5
Case Presentations	7
Other Recommendations	11
Conclusion	13
Appendix A: Contributors	14

## Figures

FIGURE 1: Winner of the Social Media Photo Contest	3
FIGURE 2: Allegheny County Port Authority Bus Routes and Community Need Levels	6
FIGURE 3: Proposed Mobile Application	8
FIGURE 4: Community Organized Solutions	9
FIGURE 5: Employer Provided Shuttles	9
FIGURE 6: Application Process Map	10
FIGURE 7: Child Accessibility Transportation System	11
FIGURE 8: Companion Cab Volunteer Program	12
FIGURE 9: “Uber Oasis” Application	12
FIGURE 10: Proposed Ferry Route	13

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

<sup>1</sup> The Human Services Integration Fund was created by a group of local foundations in 1997, to support innovation and integration within DHS. Since its establishment, the Fund has provided more than \$12 million in funding that has given DHS the flexibility to implement innovative strategies for improving department operations and service quality.

Held in November 2015, the ninth annual Local Government Case Competition focused on transportation challenges for Allegheny County's residents. Sponsored by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and supported by the Human Services Integration Fund<sup>1</sup>, the annual competition is designed to engage graduate students from local universities in finding creative solutions to real-life social problems.

**"Last night my stress level was at an all-time high. I swore off case competitions for the rest of my life. This morning as I presented, I felt as though this was one of the best experiences of my life. I learned numerous things about human services, about myself and how I work with others. This was a truly valuable experience."** — 2015 Case Competition participant

This year's topic, Making Transportation Work: Creating Access and Ensuring Equity for All, addressed a number of transportation challenges in the region. Students were tasked with developing creative solutions to one of four transportation issues:

- helping people get to jobs and job-related activities
- addressing challenges in transit deserts
- improving options for people who qualify for subsidized or shared rides
- creating solutions for children experiencing unstable housing situations

Fifty-three students participated and represented 14 programs from five universities. As in past years, students were assigned to interdisciplinary teams composed of students from other universities and programs. Over the course of three days, the 16 teams studied the issues, developed recommendations and then presented their proposals to judges who represented local foundations, universities, community organizations and DHS. From the 16 teams, four were chosen to move on to the final round.

The **first-place team** proposed a mobile application that would help coordinate transportation for children involved with the county's child welfare system. The team also proposed a new flexible busing system that would help children experiencing homelessness travel to their home school district.

The **second-place team** proposed a three-pronged solution to the problem of Allegheny County residents commuting to work: the creation of fixed-route Port Authority bus passes that would allow people to commute to work while saving on the cost of expensive unlimited monthly passes; community-organized transportation in the form of volunteer drivers who could provide emergency transportation when a person's existing transportation falls through; and employer-subsidized shuttles that would create transportation options between employer hubs and transportation stops.

The **third-place team** recommended an online management system that would coordinate children's transportation needs, volunteer drivers, DHS staff and school staff by allowing users to input available resources and demands. In addition to an electronic scheduling system, the group also proposed the strengthening of partnerships with organizations that already help homeless people, like churches and advocacy groups, and engaging them to help with homeless children's transportation needs.

The **fourth-place team** envisioned a mobile phone and computer application that would determine the most convenient and safest route option for a child based on data from public transit, carpools and approved taxi services, and would then provide the child with simple, step-by-step instructions to follow that route.

Although only four teams made it to the final round, every team identified interesting and thought-provoking strategies, including neighborhood-based shuttles to help people get to public transportation hubs, subsidized ride shares for people commuting to work, rides provided by volunteer retirees in return for gas or free rides, expansion of bike share availability in transit deserts, and a river ferry that would connect Braddock and Hazelwood to downtown. Overall, the teams' recommendations underscored the importance of continuing to foster the partnerships between DHS, Port Authority and other community organizations in cooperatively approaching complex transportation issues.

## BACKGROUND

In 2007, DHS celebrated its 10th anniversary. As part of that anniversary celebration, DHS instituted the Local Government Case Competition, which has become an annual event designed to engage graduate students from local universities in identifying creative solutions to difficult social problems. The Case Competition has been an ideal way to give graduate students an opportunity to connect what they are learning in school and apply it to real social issues. It also encourages students to consider careers in the public sector; in fact, several past participants have gone on to hold internships and jobs with DHS, the City of Pittsburgh and other local nonprofits.

The first Case Competition charged students with envisioning how DHS might look on its 20th anniversary. Since then, students have been asked to come up with ways to position Allegheny County as a leader in the environmental sustainability movement, assist the Homewood Children's Village in designing its five-year strategic plan, address academic performance for students attending the Pittsburgh Public Schools who were also receiving services from DHS, address the issue of suburban poverty, design ways to address stigma and improve the experiences of individuals living with serious mental illness, recruit and retain an innovative and modern human services workforce, and design solutions to address housing instability.

## THE 2015 CASE COMPETITION

### The Competition

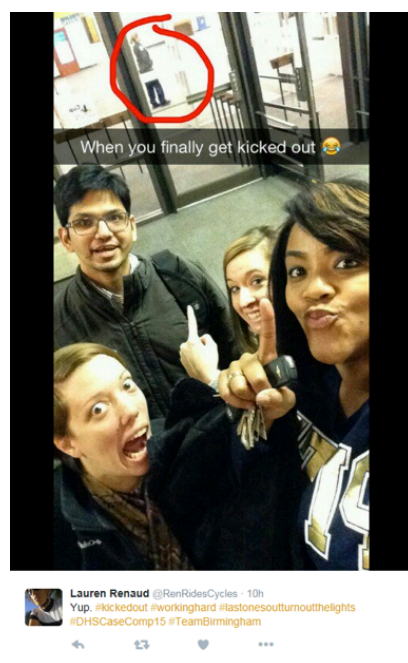
The Case Competition commenced with a reception on Wednesday night at which team assignments were made and the topic was announced. Students and judges were fortunate to hear remarks from special guest speaker Rich Fitzgerald, Allegheny County Executive, who spoke about his own experiences growing up in Pittsburgh, working in the region and entering the government sector, and encouraged students to consider public service careers. The case was then introduced by Erin Dalton, DHS Deputy Director, Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation, and students were given a flash drive loaded with additional case materials.

Student teams then had Wednesday evening through Saturday morning to prepare their recommendations. Presentations were due via email by 7 a.m. Saturday with presentations beginning at 8 a.m.

On Saturday, the 16 teams presented to one of four panels of judges and were judged on presentation content, presenter skills, visuals and overall impression. The top team from each panel moved on to the final round, in which teams repeated their presentations to all judges and were then awarded prizes for first through fourth place.

This was the second year that a social media photo contest was held. Teams submitted pictures of their experience to Twitter and Instagram, and the team that collected the most votes received a prize.

FIGURE 1: Winner of the Social Media Photo Contest



For the first time, a food drive was held during the Case Competition. Participants were asked to donate food and hygiene products to benefit the Pitt Pantry, a food bank for university students experiencing food insecurity. More than 200 items were generously donated by students, staff and judges.

### Participants

The DHS Case Competition continues to attract students from diverse disciplines and programs. This year, 53 students from 13 programs and five universities participated:

- Carnegie Mellon University
  - Heinz College
- Duquesne University
  - Graduate Center for Social and Public Policy
  - Donahue School of Business
  - School of Law
- University of Pittsburgh
  - Graduate School of Public Health
  - Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
  - School of Social Work
  - School of Law
  - Katz Graduate School of Business
- Chatham University
  - Business Administration
  - Accounting
  - Psychology
- Point Park University
  - Curriculum Design and Instruction
- Allegheny General Hospital

### Judges

The competition was judged by 19 volunteers representing local government, community organizations, local universities and foundations:

- Jewish Healthcare Foundation
- Hillman Foundation
- The Heinz Endowments
- The Pittsburgh Foundation
- Urban Redevelopment Authority
- The Office of Mayor William Peduto
- Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Allegheny County Department of Human Services
- Allegheny CountyStat, County Manager's Office
- The Opportunity Fund
- The University of Pittsburgh
- The City of Pittsburgh
- Pittsburgh Bike Share
- City of Pittsburgh Taskforce on Disabilities

### The Case

Students were tasked with addressing the problem of transportation access and equity in Allegheny County. Transportation is a vital part of people's lives because it helps them access food, maintain a job, participate in community events and receive healthcare; but transportation is not equally available to everyone due to differences in income level, geographic area, availability of public transportation routes, and physical or mental ability.

To address these complex challenges, students were asked to provide both a vision and a practical approach to one of the four scenarios described below. In addition, teams were asked to include an explanation of their plan's financial viability and an argument for why their proposal should be implemented first in a world of limited time, money and staff.

The **first scenario** students could choose was **helping people get to jobs and job-related activities**, such as job training or interviews. Employment is one of the most important factors in self-sufficiency. Lack of viable transportation solutions has a significant impact on economic development in our region. One DHS client survey found that 75 percent of clients identified transportation as a barrier to getting to work or finding work.

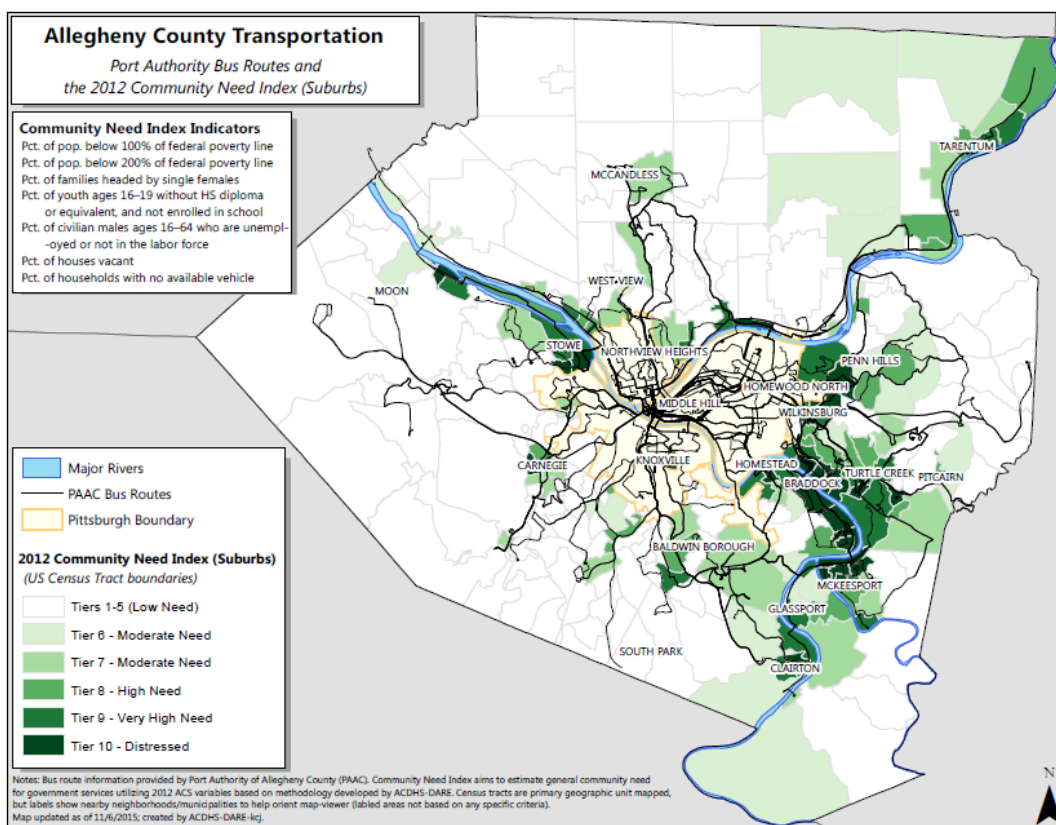
There are many reasons that transportation to work can be a challenge. Among them are a lack of public transportation routes in some regions, the prohibitive cost of car ownership for some individuals, and transportation difficulty resulting from irregular or unpredictable work schedules.

**Scenario two** was **addressing challenges in "transit deserts"** — in other words, areas where the demand for public transportation is greater than the supply of available routes. In these regions, transportation both within the community and to other neighborhoods is insufficient. Low-income individuals tend to be heavily represented in such neighborhoods.



Regions without adequate public transportation often face other transportation-related barriers that contribute to challenges for those who live there. Neighborhoods that have less access to public transit are also likely to have fewer bike routes, bike share opportunities and sidewalks for pedestrians.

FIGURE 2: Allegheny County Port Authority Bus Routes and Community Need Levels



**Scenario three** was **improving options for people who qualify for subsidized or shared rides** through services such as ACCESS and the Medical Transportation Access Program (MATP). ACCESS is a door-to-door, advance-reservation, shared-ride service for Allegheny County residents who are 65 or older or who have physical disabilities that prohibit them from utilizing their own vehicles or Port Authority routes. Under ACCESS's umbrella is a DHS-specific program called MATP, which provides rides and bus passes for clients who need to get to medical-related appointments.

These subsidized and shared-ride programs fill a gap, but challenges exist. For example, non-eligible riders are not allowed in the vehicles, meaning that a dependent child or service aide may not be transported with a rider. In addition, wait times can be a problem, both when calling to make a ride appointment and when waiting for a ride to arrive. Adding to the difficulty, multi-stop trips are not allowed on these services.

**Scenario four** was **creating solutions for children experiencing unstable housing situations.**

Children who are in out-of-home placements due to abuse or neglect or those who are homeless or in “doubled-up” housing situations face many transportation challenges. Children in out-of-home placements make many trips per week to visit with parents or separated siblings and attend court appointments and mental health appointments, not to mention normal childhood activities.

For both children in placement and children experiencing homelessness, transportation to school is a major challenge. When children are temporarily residing outside of their home school district, it is in their best interest to continue in their home school. Education outcomes such as grades, attendance and graduation rates are all improved when children have continuity in their education. With transportation provided by a combination of DHS-employed case aides<sup>2</sup>, provider agencies, foster/kinship guardians, school buses and Port Authority buses, the logistics of such transportation can be costly and inefficient.

In addition to responding to one of the four scenarios, teams were instructed to keep a few considerations in mind when developing their plans. First, DHS funding is limited and not likely to increase, so teams were asked to present sustainable solutions. Second, DHS does not have the authority or the budget to build new infrastructure, so proposals should not include the building of new roads, bridges or railways.

**Case Presentations**

The **first-place team** proposed a mobile application that would help coordinate transportation for children involved with the County’s child welfare office.

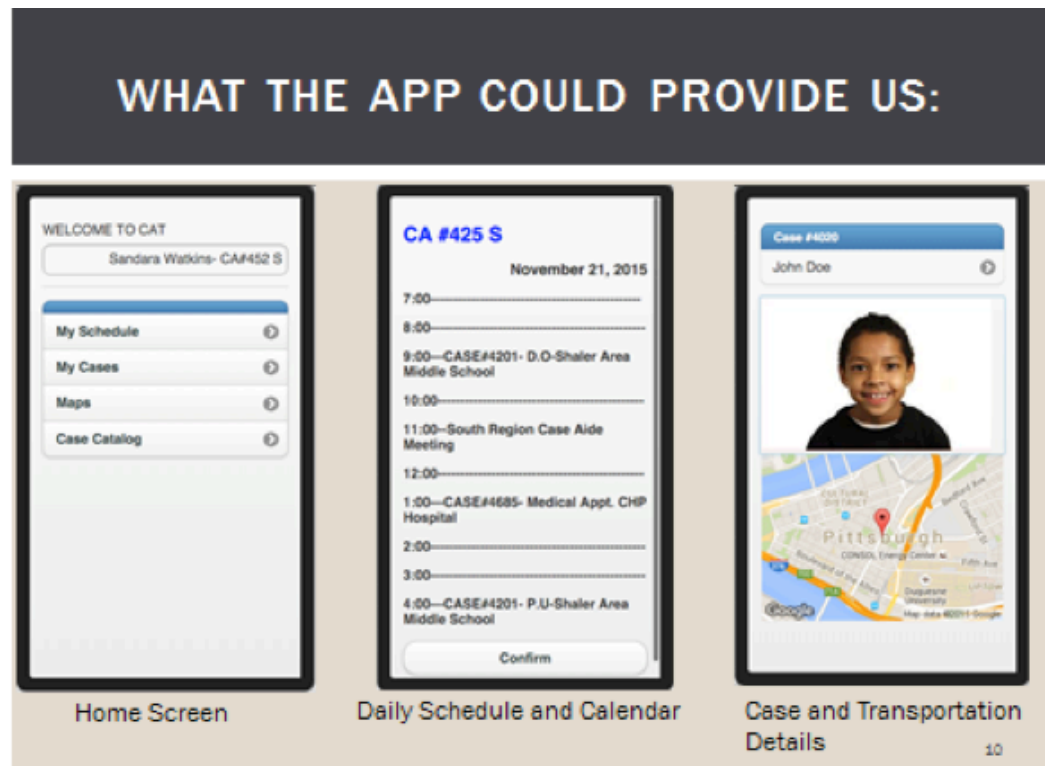
The four-person team included the following students:

- Xilin Chen, University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public Health
- Chris Lu, Chatham University, School of Psychology
- Amber Malloy, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
- Emma Wallis, University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs

The team’s proposed application would allow a child’s parent or guardian to input transportation needs, enable DHS to more efficiently coordinate case aide schedules, and permit case aides to view their schedules in real time. The proposal also included the creation of a flexible busing system that would be overseen by regional liaisons, who would work together and with school districts to solve transportation challenges. The flexible bus system would be able to transport any child to his or her home school district, independent of school district routes.

<sup>2</sup> Case aides are DHS-employed staff members who provide general assistance to child welfare case managers by transporting children who are in the care of child welfare and supervising court-mandated visits between children and their families.

FIGURE 3: Proposed Mobile Application



**The second-place team** proposed a three-pronged solution to the problem of Allegheny County residents commuting to work.

The four-person team included the following students:

- Thomas Cocchi, Duquesne University, School of Law
- Jessica Pachuta, Chatham University, Chatham University, Business School
- Ivonne Sanchez Tapia, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
- Rehka Vaitla, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College

First, the team suggested the creation of fixed-route Port Authority bus passes that would allow people to commute to work while saving on the cost of the expensive unlimited monthly passes that are currently available. Second, the team suggested community-organized transportation in the form of volunteer drivers and vehicles from organizations like nonprofits and churches that could provide emergency transportation when a person's existing transportation falls through. The third suggestion dealt with employer-subsidized shuttles that would address the "first-mile, last-mile" problem by creating transportation options between employer hubs and transportation stops.

FIGURE 4: Community Organized Solutions

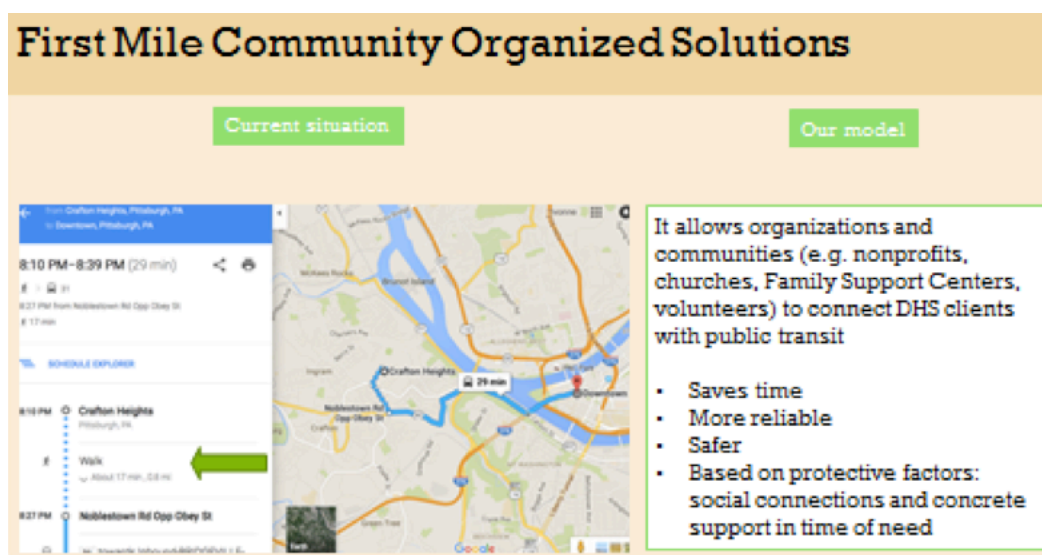
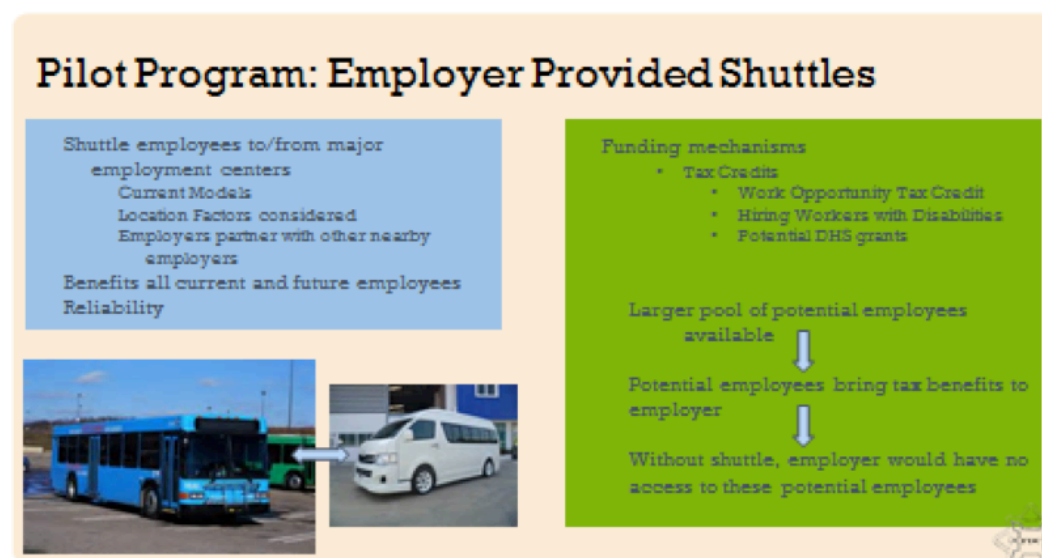


FIGURE 5: Employer Provided Shuttles



The **third-place team** focused on resolving transportation issues for children experiencing unstable housing situations.

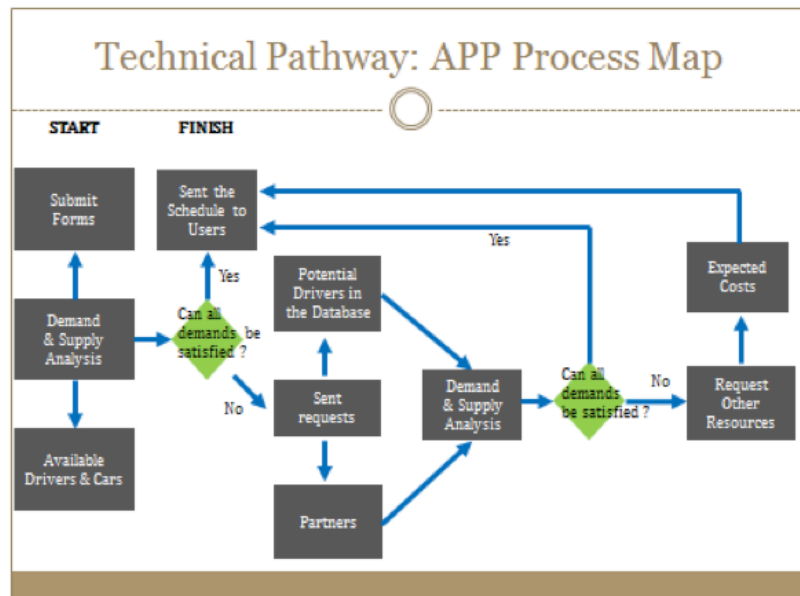
The three-person team included the following students:

- Liz Klie, Duquesne University, Graduate Center for Social and Public Policy
- Rodney Glover, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
- Xinyao Li, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College of Public Policy and Management

The team recommended an online management system and application that would coordinate children's transportation needs, volunteer drivers, DHS staff and school staff by allowing users to input available resources and needs.

In addition to an electronic scheduling system, the group also proposed the strengthening of partnerships with organizations that already help homeless people, like churches and advocacy groups, and engaging them to help with homeless children's transportation needs.

FIGURE 6: Application Process Map



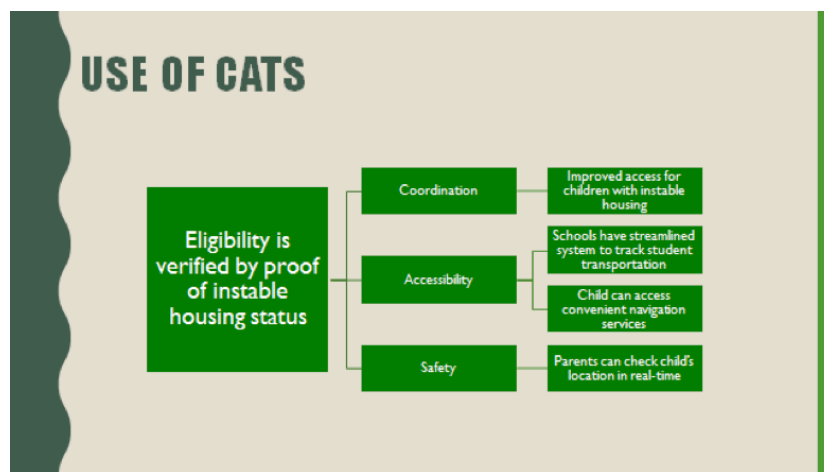
The **fourth-place team** envisioned an application called CATS (Child Accessibility Transportation System) that would allow a parent or guardian to input a child's frequent destinations.

The three-person team included the following students:

- Alix Ware, University of Pittsburgh, School of Law
- Marilyn Blasingame, University of Pittsburgh, School of Public Health
- Voneasha Davis, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work

The team's solution involved an application that would determine the most convenient and safest route for a child based on data from public transit, carpools or approved taxi services, and would then provide the child with simple, step-by-step instructions to follow that route.

FIGURE 7: Child Accessibility Transportation System



### Other Recommendations

A variety of other creative ideas were presented. One team recommended a **subsidized carpool service** for employees and job seekers. A proposed application would match drivers and those needing rides and would allow a driver with room in his car to view potential passengers residing near the driver's route to work. As an incentive, drivers would be provided with free parking at any Allegheny County metered spot with the cost subsidized by DHS. In addition, businesses would be given tax breaks based on the number of employees who used the service, encouraging business participation.

Another team proposed "Companion Cab," a **volunteer-staffed ride program** that would pair retirees and other interested volunteers with older adults and people with disabilities for both recurring trips and on-demand transportation needs. Volunteers would receive cash reimbursements or would earn points toward free rides for themselves.

FIGURE 8: Companion Cab Volunteer Program

### “Companion” Volunteer Driver Program

Create and manage a network of volunteer drivers that transport **older adults and people with disabilities** on a recurrent and on-demand basis:

Two Tracks:



Another team recommended “Uber Oasis,” a partnership between **Uber and DHS to provide free and low-cost rides to DHS clients**. The team proposed that Uber would donate a specified number of free rides in addition to giving paying passengers the opportunity to easily donate money toward free rides for those who need them. Uber drivers could be encouraged to venture outside of their usual city driving areas through incentives such as free meals, parking, sporting event tickets or vehicle maintenance donated by county businesses.

FIGURE 9: “Uber Oasis” Application

**Newsroom**

How it works:

- ❖ DHS will utilize a business account through uber and instead of adding employees, add those who qualify for subsidized rides
- ❖ DHS can manage account or contract out (including process to apply for subsidized rides)

**ENTER PROMO CODE**

**PROMOCODE**

FOR A **FREE RIDE UP TO \$20**  
NEW USERS ONLY

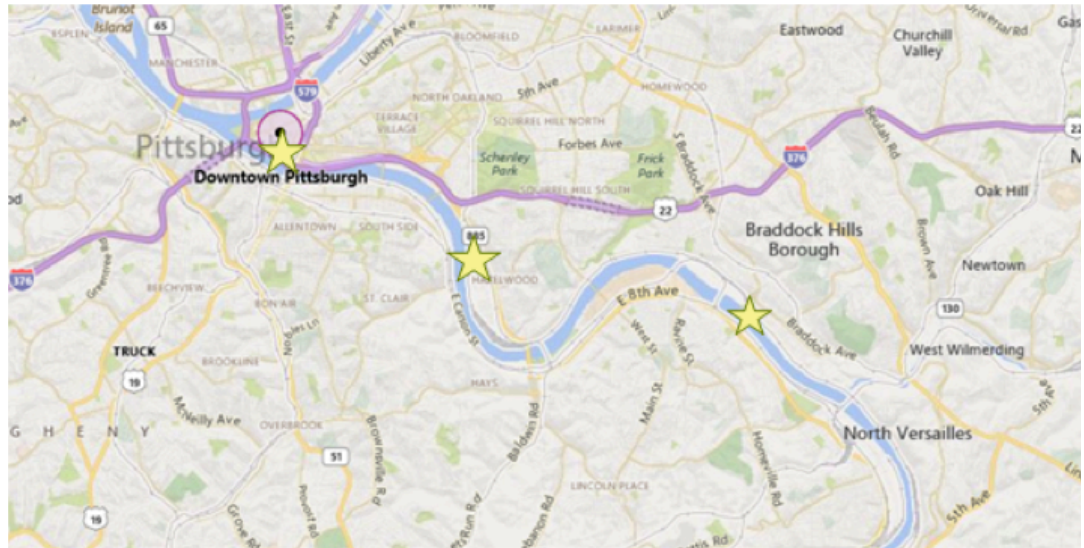
**HOW TO REDEEM**

- 1 DOWNLOAD THE APP
- 2 ENTER THE PROMO CODE
- 3 REQUEST YOUR RIDE



Pittsburgh's unique geography was utilized in another team's proposal. The team suggested a **ferry that would operate on the Monongahela River** and connect transit deserts such as Braddock and Hazelwood to downtown Pittsburgh.

FIGURE 10: Proposed Ferry Route



Bike solutions were also suggested by a number of teams. Ideas included: placing bike share stations in both transportation deserts and at major bus stops in order to help residents connect to bus routes; increasing accessibility to bike trains; creating more protected bike lanes; and adding bike safety questions to the drivers' license exam so that biking might be a safer alternative for all.

## CONCLUSION

The transportation challenges in Allegheny County are complex and wide-reaching, and the difficulties are amplified for many vulnerable individuals. Case Competition teams responded to these challenges with ideas that made creative use of technology, encouraged strong community partnerships and utilized out-of-the-box alternative modes of transport. These innovative ideas will help inform the future of DHS's work.



## APPENDIX A: CONTRIBUTORS

DHS thanks the participating students for their energy, patience and hard work. Staff and faculty at local universities were invaluable in spreading the word about the competition.

The Case Competition would not be possible without the judges who gave their time, thoughtful consideration of each proposal and valuable feedback to students:

- Chuck Alcorn, Urban Redevelopment Authority
- Lindsay Angelo, 2014 Case Competition Finalist
- Kyle Chintalapalli, Office of Mayor William Peduto
- Christophe Combemale, 2014 Case Competition Finalist
- Erin Dalton, DHS Office of Data Analysis, Research and Evaluation
- Robert Ferguson, Jewish Healthcare Foundation
- Lauri Fink, Hillman Foundation
- Joanne Foerster, CountyStat Manager
- Jake Goodman, The Opportunity Fund
- Leigh Halverson, The Heinz Endowments
- Sera Linardi, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh
- Breen Masciotra, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Laura Meixell, Office of Mayor William Peduto
- Paul O'Hanlon, City of Pittsburgh Taskforce on Disabilities
- Amy Silbermann, Port Authority of Allegheny County
- Tracy Soska, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work
- Patricia Valentine, DHS Integrated Program Services
- David White, Pittsburgh Bike Share
- Michael Yonas, The Pittsburgh Foundation

DHS would also like to thank Marina Duane, who coordinated the case competition, as well as the following DHS staff who volunteered their time and talents to ensure its success:

- |                     |                  |                    |
|---------------------|------------------|--------------------|
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