2016 Allegheny County DHS Local Government Case Competition
Improving Systems to Help People with Barriers Gain and Sustain Employment

April 2017

CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Held in November 2016, the tenth annual Local Government Case Competition focused on barriers to employment for Allegheny County's residents. Sponsored by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) and supported by the Human Services Integration Fund,[1] the annual competition is designed to engage graduate students from local universities in finding creative solutions to real-life social problems.

1 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.

This year's topic, *Improving Systems to Help People with Barriers Gain and Sustain Employment*, addressed a number of employment challenges in the region. Students were tasked with developing creative solutions to one of three employment-related questions:

- How can job centers or other employment resources better support vulnerable populations in finding and maintaining jobs?

- How can systems work together to encourage businesses to hire vulnerable populations?

- How can systems work together to support, equip and empower job seekers to achieve higher wages and advance along their career pathways?

"I really enjoyed this experience. Not only was working on the case challenging, but I grew in working with individuals from other backgrounds."
— 2016 CASE COMPETITION PARTICIPANT

Fifty-six students participated and represented nine programs from four 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 15 teams studied the issues, developed recommendations and then presented their proposals to judges who represented local foundations, universities, community organizations and DHS. From the 15 teams, four were chosen to move on to the final round.

The **first-place team** proposed matching foster youth with jobs in elder care facilities to experience a viable career path in the fast-growing elder care industry while gaining professional development and transferrable skills.

The **second-place team** proposed a two-pronged solution to addressing the employment challenges of skilled immigrants, who may lack English language skills and social capital. First, new immigrants in search of a job would be matched with two mentors: a retiree and a college student who would help mentees with career skills, networking opportunities and employment resources. Second, a mobile application would help immigrants by matching them with volunteers to learn English skills and providing a centralized listing of resources in the county.

The **third-place team** recommended a mentoring program in which unemployed Hispanic English-language learners would be paired with employed Spanish speakers who could help their mentees navigate the process of networking and finding and maintaining employment.

The **fourth-place team** envisioned a mentor program supporting unemployed youth aging out of the foster care system. Mentors would be chosen from the in-demand health, tech and energy sectors and would meet with mentees monthly to support them in identifying training programs and, eventually, obtaining employment.

Although only four teams made it to the final round, every team identified interesting and thought-provoking strategies, including specialized job training for people who are incarcerated; a mobile unit that would support job-seekers while reducing the challenge of transportation; an "adopt-a-worker" program in which DHS would help fund the hiring of unemployed people; and flexible training and job search support for single parents and expectant mothers. Overall, many groups' solutions emphasized the importance of partnerships — both between organizations and between individuals — when it comes to addressing the challenge of unemployment.

BACKGROUND

In 2007, DHS celebrated its tenth anniversary. As part of that 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 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, design solutions to address housing instability, and tackle the region's transportation challenges.

THE 2016 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 Stefani Pashman, chief executive officer at Partners4Work, who spoke about Pittsburgh's employment-related strengths and challenges and current initiatives that are helping residents find work. 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 8:45 a.m.

On Saturday, each of the 15 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.

Participants

The DHS Case Competition continues to attract students from diverse disciplines and programs. This year, 56 students from nine programs and four universities participated:

- Carnegie Mellon University
  - Heinz College
- Duquesne University
  - School of Law
- Point Park University
  - School of Business
  - School of Arts and Sciences
- 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

Judges

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

- BNY Mellon Foundation

- McAuley Ministries Foundation

- The Pittsburgh Foundation

- Richard King Mellon Foundation

- Human Services Center Corporation

- Family Office Exchange

- Goodwill

- Community College of Allegheny County

- Partners4Work (formerly the Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board)

- University of Pittsburgh

- Allegheny County Department of Human Services

The Case

Students were tasked with addressing the challenge of helping vulnerable populations find and maintain employment.

To address this complex issue, students were asked to respond to one of the three system issues described below and to explain how their solution would benefit at least one of the following target populations:

- People experiencing unstable housing

- Youth transitioning out of foster care

- People with a criminal history

- Single parents and pregnant women

- People with substance use disorders

- People with mental illness

- Individuals who are English language learners or have substantial cultural barriers

- People with low levels of literacy or no high school diploma

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 system issue** students could choose was: **How can job centers or other employment resources better support vulnerable populations in finding and maintaining jobs?** While useful for job seekers without major employment barriers, job centers are often not equipped to address the barriers that vulnerable populations face. These barriers might include child care, transportation, housing and mental health needs, which often must be addressed in order for a person to successfully maintain a job. Even with these needs addressed, vulnerable populations may still have difficulty using the resources available through job centers due to the need for prior knowledge such as computer literacy or an understanding of the application process. In cases in which a person successfully obtains a job via a job center, support for the employee's retention and advancement is limited.

The **second system issue** was: **How can systems work together to encourage businesses to hire vulnerable populations?**

The **third system issue** was: **How can systems work together to support, equip and empower job seekers to achieve higher wages and advance along their career pathways?**

Teams were instructed to present sustainable solutions, given the expectation that DHS funding is limited and not likely to increase.

Case Presentations

The **first-place team** proposed a market-driven solution to support career development for foster youth.

The three-person team included the following students:

- Kathleen Blackburn, University of Pittsburgh,
  Graduate School of Public and International Affairs

- Eileen Patten, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College

- Cierra Freeman, Point Park University, Community Psychology

The team's proposed Foster Forward partnership would match youth transitioning out of foster care with elder care facilities to provide hands-on job experience, professional development and transferable skills. After three months of unpaid training, youth participants would be transitioned to a paid internship, with the opportunity for full-time employment to be offered after six months in the program. In addition to the benefits received by the youth, the agencies would obtain skilled workers, trained specifically to meet the facility's needs, with minimal initial risk.

FIGURE 1: **Foster Forward Timeline**
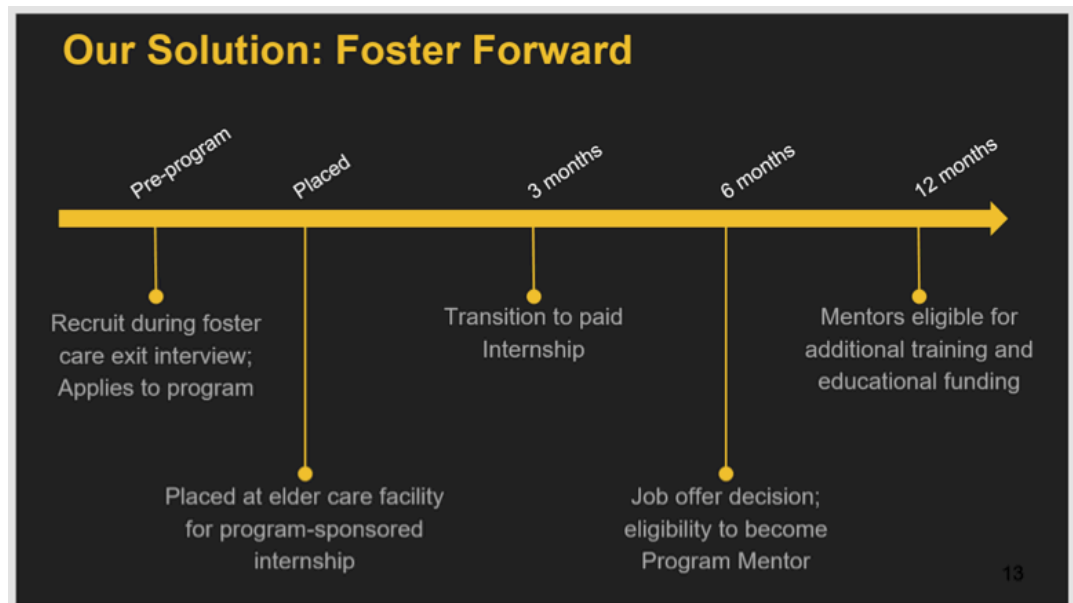
The **second-place team** proposed a two-pronged approach to combating barriers faced by skilled immigrants.

The four-person team included the following students:

- Natalie Boydston, University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs
- Varun Joshi, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College
- Lycia Neumann, University of Pittsburgh, School of Public Health
- Ada Tso, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College

First, the team suggested matching participants with two Champions — a retiree and a college student — to assist with career advancement skills and networking. Second, the team suggested creating Bridges, an app offering a centralized listing of services for basic needs such as transportation and child care. The app would also allow the participant to practice English through video chat with local volunteers.
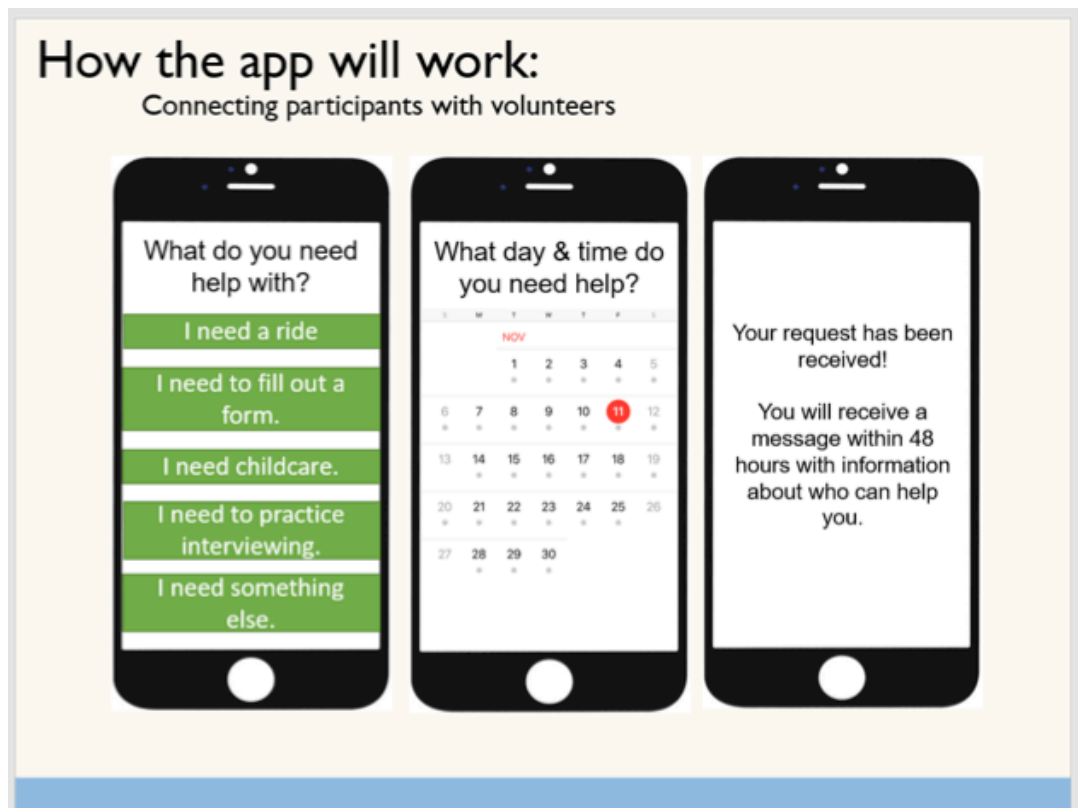
FIGURE 2: **Bridges App**

How the app will work:
Connecting participants with volunteers

FIGURE 3: **Bridges English Language Practice**
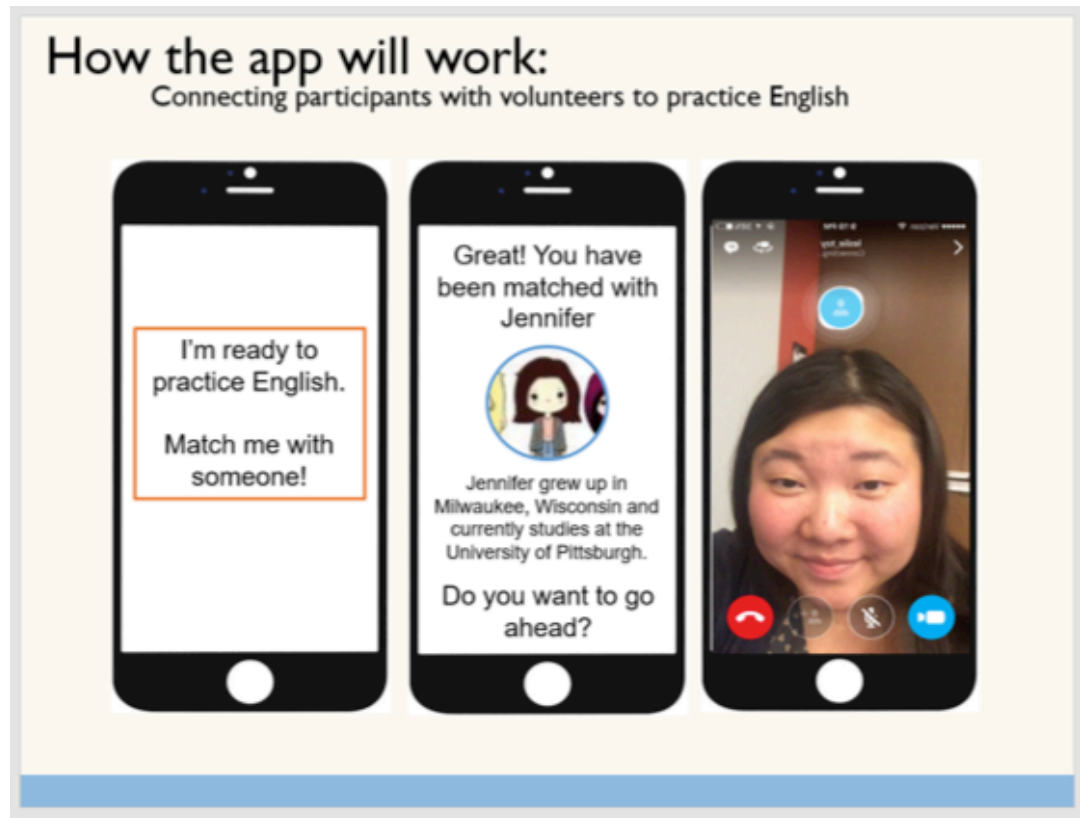
The **third-place team** focused on providing support for Hispanic English Language Learners (ELLs).

The three-person team included the following students:

- Leah Scott, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College of Public Policy and Management

- Kelly Williams, University of Pittsburgh, School of Public Health

- Rodolfo Scannone, Carnegie Mellon University,
  Heinz College of Public Policy and Management

The team recommended establishing mentorship pairs of ELLs and trained volunteers with cultural similarities as part of a program also named Bridges. Mentors would function as an industry-specific resource to help the program participant with terminology and networking. Further, mentors would serve as a supportive mechanism to assist participants with finding and maintaining employment.

FIGURE 4: **Bridges Logic Model**

INPUTS	OUTPUTS		OUTCOMES		
	Activities	*Participants*	*Short*	*Medium*	*Long*

Partners:
-Three Rivers Workforce Investment Board Employment Centers (TRWIB)
-Pittsburgh Metropolitan Area Hispanic Chamber of Commerce (PMAHCC)
-Latino Family Support Center
-University of Pittsburgh Evaluation Institute
 	
Staff:
-Program Manager x1
-Intern x2
 	
-Community buy-in
-Funding (WIA)
-Training space
	-Stakeholder focus groups x2
	-Mentor training program development
	
	Mentors
	Mentor recruitment
	-Initial: PMAHCC network
	-Future: Events with PMAHCC & Successful mentees
	
	Mentor training session
	- In finding jobs
	-Maintaining jobs
	(Sessions occur every month as mentor recruitment is on rolling basis)
	
	Match Process
	-Match trained mentors with clients from TRWIB centers
	-Send matches to centers for initial met
	
	After Initial Match
	-At minimum:
	   1 call weekly
	   1 in-person visit monthly
		-Partners & Community
		
		-DHS staff & TRWIB
		
		- TRWIB
		- PMAHCC network
		
		- TRWIB
		
		- TRWIB
		-Mentors
		
		-Mentors
			-Create mentor training program
			
			-Complete one training session per month for 12 months
			
			-To have at least two mentors per mentee enrolled in the program by 6 months after initial start
			
			-Mentees create 2 professional goals within the first 3 months of having a mentor *(Measurement: report from mentor)*
				-Increased job specific terminology *(measure: online survey)*
				
				-Increased social network by 2 individuals
				
				In finding Job Specific
				-Being able to list 2 resources for job seeking development support *(measure: online survey)*
				
				Maintaining Job Specific
				-Being able to list 2 resources for family emergency support *(measure: online survey)*
				
				-45% of mentees met the 2 professional goals set *(Measurement: report from mentor)*
					40% increase in job retention *(measured by: consistent employment for 12 months)*

The **fourth-place team** envisioned a mentorship program to address low retention rates in vocational training and community colleges.

The three-person team included the following students:

- Eddie Palmer, Carnegie Mellon University, Heinz College

- Ashley Pesi, University of Pittsburgh, School of Social Work

- Jennifer Breeze, University of Pittsburgh, Graduate School of Public and International Affairs

The team's solution involved matching mentors in health, technology and energy with youth aging out of foster care. Mentors would assist the youth by offering opportunities to learn, practice skills and network. Successful youth participants would receive gift cards as incentives to continue working with the program.

FIGURE 5: **Connections 4 Careers Mentorship Program Pilot Goals**

Other Recommendations

A variety of other creative ideas were presented. One team recommended **a website platform called ACE (Action, Community, Employment) to assist ex-offenders seeking employment**. ACE users would gain points by completing activities such as volunteering, job readiness training and education. These points would allow ex-offenders to present a more well-developed story to potential employers, showcasing their dedication to the community as well as their personal successes instead of focusing on their criminal history.

FIGURE 6: ACE Points Tracking
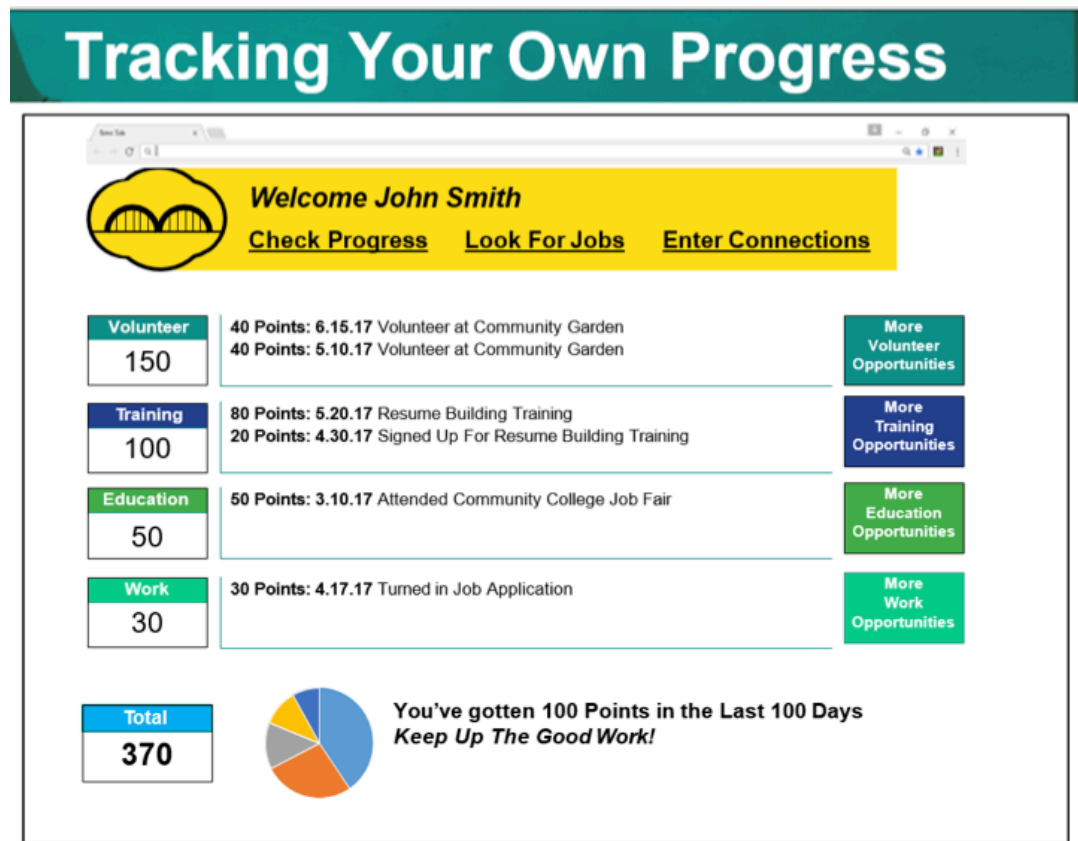
One of the teams proposed streamlined communication between DHS, job centers and human services organizations through the **creation of an integrated database**. The Workforce Improvement and Human Services Integration System (WIHSIS) would allow each organization to share data needed to develop programs, track existing opportunities and improve efficacy. On the client side, participants would have access to a WIHSIS app that would allow them to keep track of appointments, find training opportunities and provide feedback on the system.

FIGURE 7: **WIHSIS Interface**
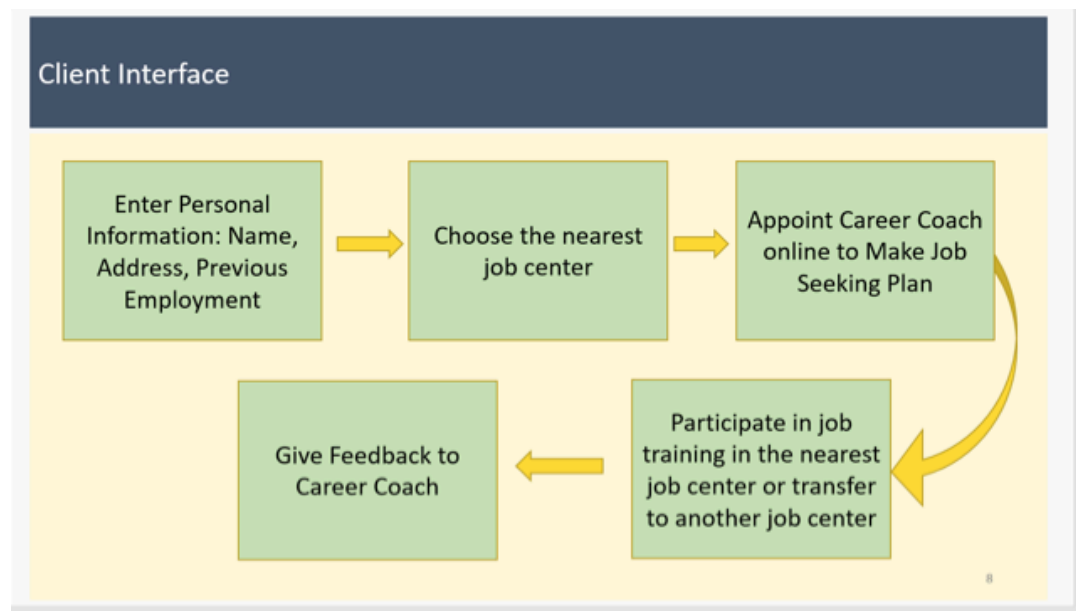
Another team recommended a **mobile unit to bring the job search directly to the job seeker**. The community engagement mobile unit would serve high-need areas by offering programs and skill-building workshops focused on communication, job seeking, conflict resolution, financial literacy and parenting. Partnerships between DHS and outside agencies would provide additional supports to the job seeker: for example, local transportation companies would donate bus or ride sharing passes to assist with transportation challenges, city parks would offer use of recreation centers and activities for children, and Pittsburgh Public Schools would register children for Head Start and kindergarten on-site.

FIGURE 8: **Community Engagement Mobile Unit**

Another group created e3 (Empower, Employ, Excel), a **training program to eliminate barriers for single parents and pregnant women**. Employers working with e3 would commit to providing full-time positions with paid sick leave, flexible schedules to work with childcare needs and opportunities for growth. Interested employees may apply for open positions; however, before hire, they would be required to complete a series of training classes focused on professional development, technical skills, communication and workplace strategies. Once the individual has completed the training, their application would be sent to the employer with a "stamp of approval." The e3 program would continue to offer support services after placement.

Mentoring opportunities were also suggested by several teams. Ideas included matching successful, employed ex-offenders with ex-offenders who need networking opportunities and guidance; pairing business leaders with youth aging out of foster care; and finding employers willing to "adopt" DHS clients by providing them with mentoring and employment opportunities.

CONCLUSION

Employment challenges in Allegheny County are varied, requiring diverse solutions to meet the needs of diverse populations. Case competition teams responded to these challenges by creating solutions focused on improved technology, community partnerships and mentoring opportunities. These innovative ideas will inform DHS's future work.

WRITER
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APPENDIX: 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:

Kenya Boswell, BNY Mellon Foundation of Southwestern Pennsylvania

Xinlin Chen, 2015 Case Competition Winner

Michele Rone Cooper, McAuley Ministries Foundation

Dave Coplan, Human Services Center Corporation

Erin Dalton, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

Jane Downing, The Pittsburgh Foundation

Ann Dugan, Family Office Exchange, Headwaters, S.C.

Ella Holsinger, Goodwill Industries

Deb Killmeyer, Community College of Allegheny County

Lisa Kuzma, Richard King Mellon Foundation

Christopher Lu, 2015 Case Competition Winner

Amber Malloy, 2015 Case Competition Winner

Raymond Miles, Allegheny County Jail Collaborative

Susie Puskar, Partners4Work

Davon Rutherford, Allegheny County Department of Human Services, Youth Support Partner Unit

Cynthia Shields, Partners4Work

Andy Smith, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

Tracy Soska, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Emma Wallis, 2015 Case Competition Winner

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Sophia He	Natalia Perez-Pena	Alison Wolfson
Brandon Henderson	Kelly Prokop	Farhod Yuldashev
Terry Lane	Peter Sloan	Liz Zembruski
Maggie McGannon	Sumiya Tarannum	Chengyuan Zhou