

COUNTY OF



ALLEGHENY

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Allegheny County Partners with International Research Team to Improve Human Services Delivery Through Predictive Analytics

PITTSBURGH – Allegheny County is partnering with an international team of researchers to develop predictive models to support child welfare worker decision making. The team is led by Professor Rhema Vaithianathan from Auckland University of Technology (Auckland, New Zealand). The arrangement is made possible through a technology improvement grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, announced in September.

“Allegheny County has long been a hub of innovation, with ideas forged through strategic public and private partnerships. We’re proud to announce this collaboration, which not only puts us at the forefront of data analytics, but ultimately benefits those relying on the human services in the county,” said County Executive Rich Fitzgerald.

The research team, which includes researchers from Auckland University of Technology, the University of Southern California, the University of Auckland and UC-Irvine, was selected after a search process last year, during which the County issued a Request for Proposals that drew national and international respondents. The proposals were reviewed by a committee that included Department of Human Services (DHS) staff members, providers, community members, and academics from around the country.

“There are few groups out there who can take the type of data that we’re sitting on and, with a sensitivity to all the issues around it, produce tools that can make what we do in the human services better,” said Marc Cherna, Director of the Department of Human Services. “Finding the right partner is a huge step.”

The research lead Professor Vaithianathan is a health economist at the Auckland University of Technology Business School who is experienced and well respected in the relatively new field of “predictive analytics” (extracting information from an existing collection of data to determine patterns and predict outcomes). She regularly works with a broad range of partners to create new technologies that support better decision making, with a focus on health and child welfare. The research team will initially be focused in child welfare, as they work with DHS to develop methods that can predict a range of outcomes, including risk for recurring involvement with the child welfare system.

The ultimate aim of the partnership is to develop tools that will simplify the information that workers manually collect and present that information in a way that allows them to incorporate it into the decision-making process.

Throughout the project, DHS will be evaluating the process and its outcomes and will conduct an ethical review focused on any issues of “disproportionality” (the over or under-representation of certain groups [e.g., racial/ethnic, gender, age] in a public child welfare agency relative to the group’s proportion in the general population) caused by disparities, some in society at large, and some in public child welfare.

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