

Part of the commitment by the Department of Human Services to Allegheny County is to ensure vigorous analysis of social problems and forging of solutions.

DHS encourages and engages young adults in this endeavor. The Scholars in Local Government program, in tapping talented individuals whose studies touch on social work, public administration, law, education and more, not only brings fresh perspectives to DHS's work but invests in the county's future. By exposing budding public service leaders to today's decision makers, everyone benefits in building a stronger community. Since 2008, nine post-graduate students have completed the Scholars program, with between one-quarter and one-half of the annual applicants routinely coming from outside of the region.

The Scholars program is underwritten by the Human Services Integration Fund (HSIF), which is funded by foundations that support programs for which government money is not available, a further showing of the partnerships that knit together efforts for the betterment of county residents.



Marc Cherna
Director, Allegheny County
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Allegheny County Executive

DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Scholars *in* Local Government



Michael Sundo began his career working in public accounting and real estate development. At night he attended Duquesne University School of Law. While there, he saw an ad in a newsletter about the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) Scholars in Local Government program.

Responding to that ad has proven to be life-changing for Michael.

“I thought, “Hmmm – a nontraditional path,” he said. Putting his skills to work in the nonprofit and/or government sector hadn’t occurred to him. He applied and was accepted as a DHS Scholar, entering a program that seeks to develop leaders in public service.

Michael worked at DHS for about a year from 2010-11,

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spending time at the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) and in the Executive's Office. After he left, instead of returning to the private sector, he became a controller for Three Rivers Center for Independent Living. Now he is controller for the Jewish Healthcare Foundation (JHF) and Pittsburgh Regional Health Initiative. He credits his career path to his time spent at DHS.

“The satisfaction at the end of the day is a lot greater for me.” “When you work for a profit-making company, your shareholders are your clients. When you work for a nonprofit, the community is your client. The satisfaction at the end of the day is a lot greater for me,” Michael said.

DHS Scholars positions are open to students with master's or doctoral degrees. The program taps people planning careers in social work, public policy, public administration, law, business, and related fields. Candidates must receive their advanced degree within 18 months of applying for the program or will have earned it by the time the program begins.

Scholars complete high-profile projects and analyze complex problems while they meet with high-level government officials, foundation executives, and nonprofit and private sector leaders.

That sort of work opened doors for Michael, he said. Besides seeing up close how nonprofits operate, he made ties with nonprofit executives. When he prepared to leave DHS, he had an offer from a corporation but chose a nonprofit job.

“Based on my time at DHS, I felt like I could continue making an impact in the nonprofit world,” he said.

Further, the friendships and professional mentor contacts he made as a scholar have proved to be lasting and have offered long-term career support. “I could call DHS people up right now and they would be there for me,” Michael said.



For Kelly Wilkinson, Policy Coordinator in the DHS Executive's Office, being offered a Scholars slot was an honor not to be denied.

“When you are offered the fellowship, you don't say no,” she said. “It opens doors. It builds in professional development.”

Kelly became a scholar after earning joint graduate degrees from University of Pittsburgh's Graduate School of Public and International Affairs (GSPIA) and Pitt's School of Social Work.

Like Michael, Kelly's work at DHS involved assisting at AAA.

Now she oversees the Scholars program and assists with compliance issues, among other tasks.

“I still wanted to know I was creating change in people's lives...” She said the Scholars Program as well as her subsequent employment with DHS, has fit her career trajectory well. “I still wanted to know I was creating change in people's lives and I wanted to help people who are underserved be heard. It made sense to do something in government.”

Kelly's work at AAA included consulting with administrators to improve support for the county's underserved communities, with a specific emphasis on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender individuals.

She also worked on projects having to do with performance-based contracting. That project in particular was interesting, since she arrived at a time when the process was being introduced and so was able to participate in it as it was planned, she said. She also worked on marketing for AAA, an important process nowadays, when so many competitors for aging services are emerging.

Kelly encourages application to the program, saying there's much to gain for anyone who thinks human services and local government might be a good career fit.

For more information about the DHS Scholars program, visit <http://alleghenycounty.us/Human-Services/Careers/Scholars-in-Local-Government.aspx>, call 412-350-3960 or email scholars@alleghenycounty.us.