

## **DHS, CMU students partner to improve court experience**

Over the last several months, the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Allegheny County Family Court have been involved in an exciting partnership with Carnegie Mellon University (CMU) design students.

For six weeks, ten students in a graduate-level visual communications design studio course worked to find opportunities to improve the court experience. They interviewed many stakeholders including youth and families; staff from DHS, probation, and the court; system professionals; and Youth Support Partners (YSPs) to better understand the positives and negatives of the court experience. They also observed court activities; reviewed court manuals, hearing, websites, and resource guides; and conducted surveys and focus groups.

After completing their research, students created plans designed to use visual communication strategies to improve experiences for youth and families, as well as business processes for court staff. These plans were presented on December 15 to staff and stakeholders.

The students' proposed solutions had a strong focus on creating more user-friendly materials that were easy to understand, eliminated jargon and led Family Court participants through the process step-by-step. The solutions also emphasized technology, with ideas that included advanced notification through SMS with a text-bot answering system, a mobile-optimized court website, an electronic check-in system, and a notification board showing estimated wait time. Additional suggestions included a resource room where court participants could learn more about the system as well as community resources; improved collateral materials; and customizable court signs that share information on court restrictions, permissions, and way-finding.

"One of the youth interviewed for this project said something that stuck with me: 'Every time I walk into the court house I am reminded that my life is not normal,'" said Judge Jennifer McCrady, Allegheny County Court of Common Pleas. "The majority of the people entering the court house have experienced some level of trauma. The students provided solutions that encourage transparency, empowerment and trustworthiness – all key components of being a trauma-informed court. This project – and its potential to improve the court experience – is very exciting."

To learn more about this project, please contact Mike Mitchell at [mike.mitchell@alleghenycounty.us](mailto:mike.mitchell@alleghenycounty.us).