

DHS Case Competition teams present creative ideas to assist individuals facing employment barriers

More than 50 students from graduate programs around the county gathered November 9-12 to offer innovative human service solutions during the 10th annual DHS Local Government Case Competition. Supported through the Human Services Integration Fund, this competition assigns students to interdisciplinary teams and gives them three days to immerse themselves in an issue, develop recommendations, and present their proposals to panels of judges.

This year's challenge – improving systems to help people with barriers gain and sustain employment – reflected the important role a living wage plays in a safe, healthy, and independent life. Participants were asked to create detailed recommendations to help one or more target populations (e.g., people with unstable housing, youth transitioning out of foster care, individuals who are English language learners, etc.) with one of three system issues:

- 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 career pathways?

The students competed in 15 teams, with the top four teams receiving prizes of \$3,500; \$2,500; \$1,700; and \$800. Team Westinghouse, comprised of three students from the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University's Heinz College, and Point Park University, took first place with a plan that would, in their words, "match foster youth with jobs in elder care facilities to experience a viable career path in the fast-growing industry of elder care, while gaining professional development and transferable skills in the field." Other winning solutions focused on the importance of linking members of target populations with mentors and community resources.

"The Case Competition is a unique and important opportunity for graduate students to consider working in local government or public service," said Courtney Lewis, program specialist in the Office of Data Analysis, Research, and Evaluation (DARE), who was the project manager for this year's competition. "We give them a real problem and genuinely consider implementing ideas from their solutions. We want them to see the challenges we are actually facing and think about the impact they could have on people's lives working for an organization like DHS."