

2024 Allegheny County Annual Local Government Case Competition: Improve Service Access for Humanitarian Immigrants



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The Allegheny County
Department of Human Services
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CONTENTS

Introduction 3

The Case Competition 3

The 2024 Case 4

Judges 5

Case Competition Winners 6

1ST PLACE: Humanitarian Advocacy for Neighborhood Disabilities
and Support (ACDHS-HANDS) 6

2ND PLACE: Navigating Home: Mapping Anchor Communities
and Landlord Outreach Events 7

3RD PLACE: PATH: Pittsburgh Affordable Transitional Housing 8

4TH PLACE: Roots to Routes 9

Conclusion 9

APPENDIX A: Other Case Competition Teams and Solutions 10

APPENDIX B: Case Competition Organizers and Volunteers 12

Event Organizers 12

Staff Volunteers and ACDHS Fair Participants 12

INTRODUCTION

Each year, the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (ACDHS) brings together graduate students from across the region to tackle a real-world policy challenge facing local government. Supported by the Human Services Integration Fund (HSIF),¹ the Local Government Case Competition invites interdisciplinary teams to analyze a pressing issue, design innovative solutions, and present their ideas to a panel of expert judges. The competition not only generates fresh perspectives on complex human services challenges—it also introduces emerging professionals to the meaningful and impactful work of public service.

The 2024 competition marked the 17th year of this tradition. This year's case, "*Improve Service Access for Humanitarian Immigrants*," asked students to explore how Allegheny County could strengthen supports for refugees, asylees, parolees and individuals who are out of status, or "undocumented." Teams were encouraged to consider both improvements to existing services and opportunities to create new ones.

Thirty-six students from four universities and eight academic programs participated. Judges representing foundations, universities, nonprofit organizations and government agencies volunteered their time to evaluate proposals and provide thoughtful feedback.

THE CASE COMPETITION

The Local Government Case Competition was launched in 2007, the 10th anniversary of ACDHS's formation as a fully integrated human services department. Since then, it has become an annual opportunity for graduate students to apply classroom learning to real social issues while gaining exposure to careers in the public and nonprofit sectors. Many past participants have gone on to hold internships, fellowships and full-time positions within ACDHS, the City of Pittsburgh and local community organizations.

In 2024, ACDHS continued the expanded competition format introduced the previous year. Instead of the traditional Wednesday through Saturday schedule, the event began on Monday evening and concluded on Saturday, giving teams additional time to research, collaborate and refine their proposals.

The competition opened with a Kick-Off Event hosted by Alex Jutca, director of ACDHS's Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning. Students then heard from two ACDHS staff members:

- **Adrianna Sanchez-Solis**, senior manager of community engagement and coordinator of the Immigrants and Internationals Initiative, who shared insights on the local service landscape
- **Jalal Masgood**, analyst, who spoke about his personal experience immigrating from Afghanistan

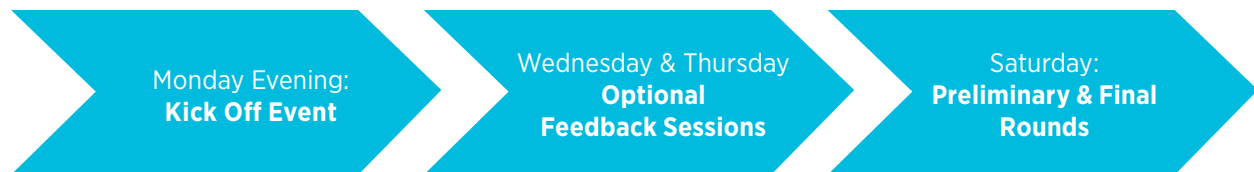
These perspectives helped ground students in the lived realities and systemic challenges faced by humanitarian immigrants in Allegheny County. At the end of the event, teams were announced and provided with a background document outlining key information about the population and available services.

¹ HSIF is a pooled fund of grants from local foundations, created to support ACDHS's innovation and quality improvement activities.

Throughout the week, teams had the option to participate in virtual feedback sessions with competition planners. All but one team chose to take advantage of this opportunity to strengthen their proposals and presentation strategies.

On Saturday, all 11 teams presented their proposed solutions to two panels of regional subject matter experts. Each panel selected two finalist teams, who then presented again to a combined judging panel. Finalists were evaluated on solution clarity, feasibility, evaluation planning and presentation quality. Cash prizes were awarded to the top three teams.

FIGURE 1: 2024 Case Competition Timeline



THE 2024 CASE

The 2024 case challenge focused on a population that plays an increasingly important role in Allegheny County's cultural and economic landscape: humanitarian immigrants. ACDHS recognizes both the significant strengths these individuals bring to the community and the barriers they often encounter as they work to establish stability and belonging. While the federal government oversees refugee resettlement nationwide, ACDHS partners with local organizations that support immigrants once they arrive. Much of that support occurs through the Immigrant Services and Connections (ISAC) program. ISAC helps individuals and families navigate essential services, strengthen natural supports, and build long-term self-sufficiency.

This year, student teams were asked to propose solutions that would improve service access for refugees, asylees, parolees and individuals who are out of status. Teams could focus on enhancing existing supports or designing new approaches. The challenge invited students to develop solutions in one of five key domains:

- **Education**
- **Housing**
- **Physical Health Care**
- **Behavioral Health Care**
- **Employment**

The goal was to generate actionable ideas that could meaningfully improve outcomes for humanitarian immigrants living in Allegheny County.

JUDGES

Case competition judges brought a wide range of experience to the Case Competition. They represented ACDHS, community organizations, health care institutions and local nonprofit organizations. Their diverse expertise ensured a well-rounded evaluation of each proposal and provided students with valuable feedback from practitioners working directly with immigrant communities.

The judges were:

- Alex Jutca, Director of Analytics, Technology and Planning, Allegheny County Department of Human Services
- Brenda Green, Program Manager, Refugee and Immigrant Services, Jewish Family and Community Services
- Ernest Rajakone, Chief of Staff for Intergovernmental Affairs, Allegheny County Executive's Office
- Howard Alvarez, Programs Director, Pittsburgh Hispanic Development Corporation
- Jackie Mwanjumwa, ISAC Service Coordinator, South Hills Interfaith Ministry
- Januka Regmi, ISAC Service Coordinator, South Hills Interfaith Ministry
- Kheir Mugwaneza, Program Manager, Allegheny Health Network's Center for Inclusion Health
- Maria Polinsky, Director of Marketing and Communications, Literacy Pittsburgh
- Zainab Adisa, Racial Equity Fellow, Office of Equity and Engagement, Allegheny County Department of Human Services

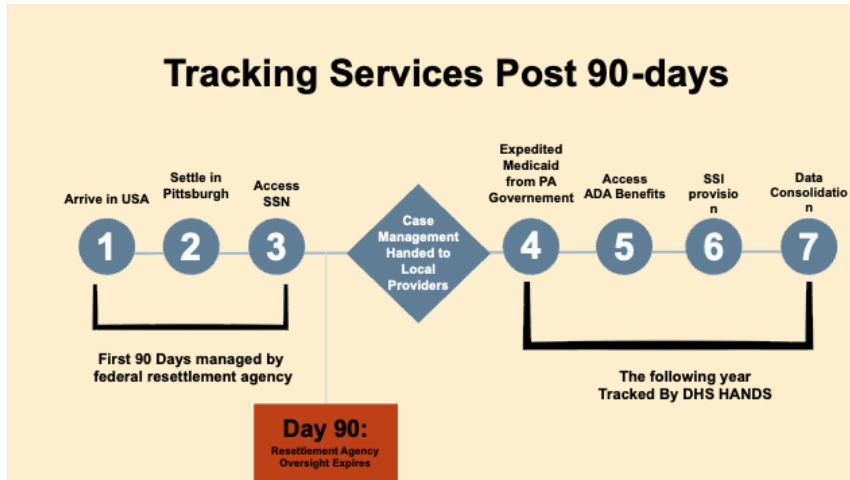
Initially, the judges were divided into two panels; each panel saw half of the presentations and identified two finalist teams. The judges then came together for repeat presentations by the four finalist teams. Judges evaluated these presentations utilizing the criteria shown in Table 1; the three teams with the highest ratings were awarded cash prizes (\$3,500 for first place, \$2,500 for second place and \$1,700 for third place).

TABLE 1: Presentation Evaluation Rubric, Case Competition

CRITERIA	DESCRIPTION
Solution Clarity	Was the proposed solution clearly articulated and well-defined?
Feasibility	Could the solution reasonably be implemented?
Evaluation Plan	Did the team outline a thoughtful and practical plan to assess impact?
Presentation Quality	Was the presentation clear, engaging, and easy to follow?

CASE COMPETITION WINNERS

1st Place: Humanitarian Advocacy for Neighborhood Disabilities and Support (ACDHS-HANDS)

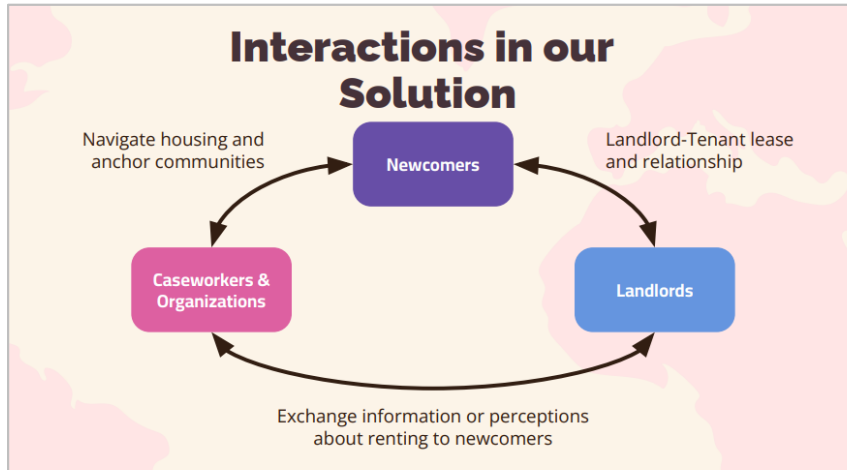


Cash Prize: \$3,500

Team members: Samiha Islam and Nathan Brooks (Carnegie Mellon University), Cait Krulock (Penn West University), Aditya Nayak (University of Pittsburgh)

Humanitarian immigrants and refugees with disabilities often face significant barriers to accessing essential supports, including limited health insurance coverage, ineligibility for federal benefits, language and communication challenges, and limited community outreach. To address these gaps, the first-place team proposed **ACDHS-HANDS: Humanitarian Advocacy for Neighborhood Disabilities and Support**. HANDS would provide specialized case management and peer support tailored to refugees with disabilities, with the goal of ensuring that individuals are connected to public benefits (e.g., Medicaid, ADA accommodations, Supplemental Security Income) and other critical resources. By offering targeted navigation and advocacy, the program hopes to reduce systemic barriers and strengthen long-term stability for some of the County's most vulnerable newcomers.

2nd Place: Navigating Home: Mapping Anchor Communities and Landlord Outreach Events

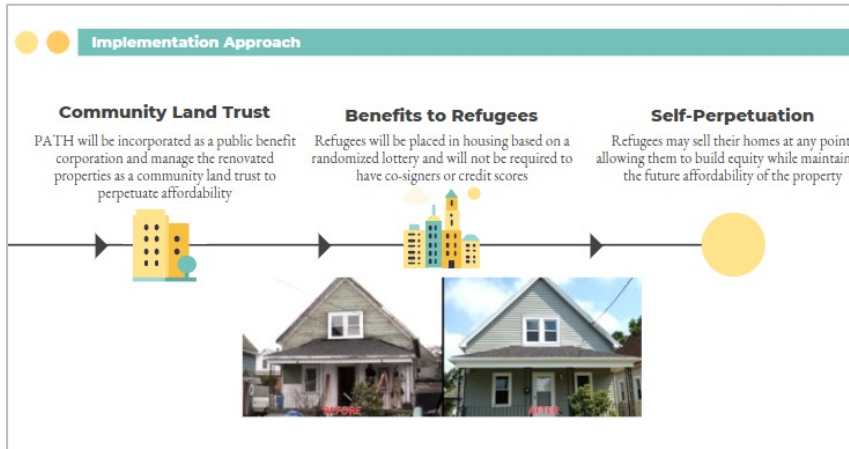


Cash Prize: \$2,500

Team Members: India Etheridge and Danielle Aira Savellano (Carnegie Mellon University), Anna Pelletti (University of Pittsburgh)

Recognizing the challenges newcomers face in securing stable housing, the second-place team proposed a two-part solution to both support caseworkers working with this population and to expand housing opportunities. Their vision centers on an **interactive, regularly updated housing map** that displays affordable and vacant units, along with neighborhood language data. This tool would help caseworkers more efficiently match clients with suitable housing options. The team also proposed hosting **culturally responsive landlord outreach events**—welcoming, educational gatherings designed to address concerns about renting to newcomers and to build trust between landlords, resettlement agencies and newcomers. Together, these strategies aim to increase housing access while strengthening community relationships.

3rd Place: PATH: Pittsburgh Affordable Transitional Housing



Intended Outcomes for Mentees

Short-Term:

- Language Comprehension
- Social-Emotional Regulation
- Childcare for Parents Seeking Employment
- School Readiness

Long Term:

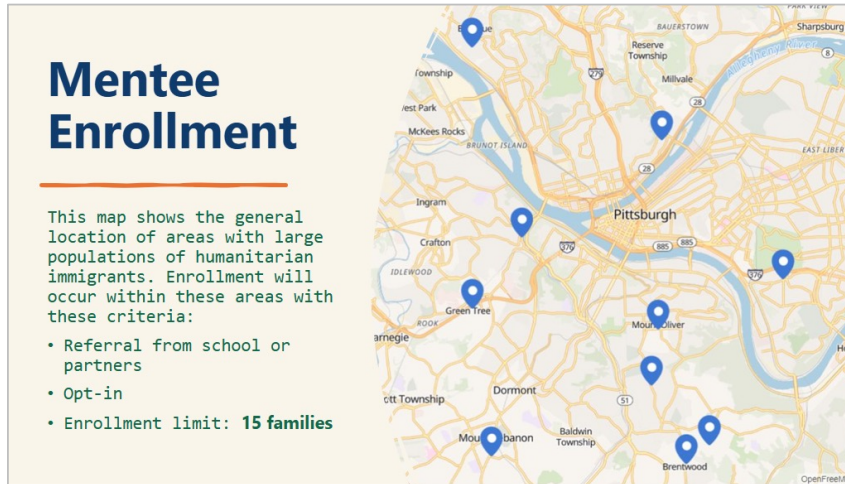
- School Achievement
- Less Reliance on Public Assistance
- Strong Parental-Child-School Relationship

Cash Prize: \$1,700

Team Members: Clarice Ann Bagsic Santos and James Hanafee (Carnegie Mellon University), Francis Foli (Duquesne University)

The third-place team focused on the acute housing challenges faced by refugees, including affordability constraints, limited housing availability, lack of credit history and larger household sizes. Their proposal, **PATH: Pittsburgh Affordable Transitional Housing**, envisions rehabilitating a portion of Pittsburgh’s 7,500 blighted, City-owned properties and making them available to recently resettled refugees through a randomized lottery. To preserve long-term affordability, the team recommended placing these properties into a City-owned land trust. By converting vacant properties into stable housing, PATH aims to expand affordable options while revitalizing neighborhoods.

4th Place: Roots to Routes



Team Members: Daniella Habib and Liv Schaefer (Carnegie Mellon University), Al Preston (Duquesne University)

The fourth-place team centered their solution on the needs of humanitarian immigrant children who often face language barriers, cultural adjustment challenges and trauma related to displacement. Their proposal, **Roots to Routes**, is a mentorship program pairing children (age 5 through 14) with graduate students in education and child development fields. Mentors would support children's social and emotional well-being, help them navigate school environments, and assist them to achieve their academic goals. By fostering consistent, supportive relationships, Roots to Routes aims to ease the transition into local schools and promote long-term success for young newcomers.

CONCLUSION

ACDHS's Local Government Case Competition serves a dual purpose: 1) it generates innovative ideas that ACDHS and partner organizations can meaningfully consider and 2) it introduces emerging professionals to the complexity and impact of public-sector work. Each year, the competition reinforces the value of bringing fresh perspectives to longstanding human services challenges.

The 2024 teams delivered thoughtful, creative solutions aimed at improving service access for humanitarian immigrants and individuals who are out of status. Their proposals reflected a deep understanding of the barriers newcomers face and a commitment to strengthening the systems that support them. By engaging students in real world problem solving, the competition not only sparks new approaches for ACDHS to explore—it also cultivates the next generation of leaders dedicated to improving the lives of Allegheny County residents.

APPENDIX A

APPENDIX A: OTHER CASE COMPETITION TEAMS AND SOLUTIONS

Andy Warhol Team

- **Members:** Katie Cecconi (University of Pittsburgh), Mahdi Jafari (Duquesne University), Derek Hurst (Carnegie Mellon University), Ashay Koradia (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** The team proposed a multilingual **ChatBot navigation assistant** designed for immigrants who are no longer receiving—or were never eligible for—formal resettlement assistance. The ChatBot would gather information about a user's needs in their preferred language and guide them to relevant services through a user-friendly webpage. The goal is to help individuals with limited English proficiency or unfamiliarity with U.S. systems more easily locate available resources.

Fort Duquesne Team

- **Members:** Vashishth Doshi (Carnegie Mellon University), Sumaiya Tasnim (Duquesne University), Zachary Zwijacz (Carnegie Mellon University), Yuxin Zheng (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** This team proposed a **centralized housing platform** that integrates landlord information and available rental units into a single system for use by local resettlement agencies. Their solution also included education for landlords and an incentive program to encourage renting to refugees. The goal is to increase awareness, build trust and reduce uncertainty in the housing search process for newly arrived refugees.

Highland Park Team

- **Members:** Jordan Dawson (University of Pittsburgh), Vanessa Thompson (University of Pittsburgh), Jhanavi Sankar (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** To reduce employment barriers, the team proposed a comprehensive program that would allow immigrants to use **non-official transcripts** when applying for technical jobs. Their broader solution includes short-term bridge employment programs, soft skills training, résumé workshops, employer education, and strategies to promote diversity, equity and inclusion. Together, these supports aim to expand access to meaningful employment opportunities.

Homestead Grays Team

- **Members:** Samir Nadra (Duquesne University), Julia Ang (Carnegie Mellon University), Yoko Kentilitisca (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** The team developed **RefugeeConnect**, a volunteer-based model that pairs humanitarian immigrants with trained community volunteers. Volunteers would provide one-on-one guidance on health care, housing, education, employment searches and legal services. The goal is to increase self-sufficiency by ensuring that access to resources translates into actual use.

APPENDIX A

Schenley Team

- **Members:** Anna Sene (Carnegie Mellon University), Anshu Rathor (Duquesne University), Sabrina Rodriguez (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** To address language barriers, the team proposed creating **community-specific booklets and a companion website** in the languages spoken by local immigrant groups. These resources would offer rapid-access information on key refugee support organizations, free English language providers and priority to-do lists. The website would also include a survey and feedback center to improve ongoing service delivery.

Smithfield Team

- **Members:** Nikitha Tirumala (University of Pittsburgh), Kate George (University of Pittsburgh), Anshika Shukla (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** This team proposed a **peer mentorship program** that matches incoming immigrants with more established immigrants who have successfully navigated the U.S. system. Using a public web survey and matching algorithm, mentors would support mentees through regular meetings, workshops, networking events and community gatherings. The goal is to reduce isolation and help newcomers navigate complex processes such as employment, documentation and integration.

Veterans/Rachel Carson Team

- **Members:** Arya Teja (Duquesne University), Manraj Dhillon (Carnegie Mellon University), Cecilia Pham (Carnegie Mellon University)
- **Solution:** The team envisioned **IdentityBridge**, a secure electronic system offering multilingual support and streamlined intake for immigrants seeking services. IdentityBridge aims to reduce delays in obtaining essential documents—such as Employment Authorization Documents—by providing intelligent guidance and simplifying the application process. Faster access to documentation would, in turn, improve access to housing, employment and other critical services.

APPENDIX B**APPENDIX B: CASE COMPETITION ORGANIZERS AND VOLUNTEERS**

The Local Government Case Competition is made possible through the dedication of ACDHS staff who contribute their time, expertise and energy. The individuals listed below played an essential role in planning the event, supporting student teams and ensuring a successful competition experience.

Event Organizers

These staff members from the Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning led the design, coordination and execution of the 2024 Case Competition:

- Cassandra Alexander, Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning
- Alex Jutca, Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning
- Kate Vander Wiede, Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning

Staff Volunteers and ACDHS Fair Participants

Many ACDHS staff contributed to the competition by volunteering at the event, participating in the ACDHS Fair and/or supporting student teams throughout the week. Their involvement reflects the department's commitment to collaboration, innovation and community engagement.

Area Agency on Aging

Kenya Brown
Robin Rafferty

Office of Administration

Loren Ganoë
Ivy Mulenga

Office of Analytics, Technology and Planning

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Erika Montana
Jonathan Rainey
Ashli White

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Office of Children, Youth and Families

Loretta Brown
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Jason Van Ness

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Andrew Halfhill
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Office of Developmental Supports

Mary Peterson

Office of Equity and Engagement

Paul Froehlich