UConn Collaborations with State Yield High-Impact Research

The UConn School of Social Work maintains robust partnerships with the State of Connecticut, linking academic social work researchers with state agencies, often in innovative ways.

“These are important collaborations because social work is a research discipline and profession, and it’s also a practice profession,” says Dr. Nina Heller, dean of the School of Social Work, and Zachs Professor of Social Work. “These collaborations help us do research in real time with partners who work with the very people we want to study. This gives us a very strong potential for changing lives, improving benefits to people, and understanding complex problems.”

The centerpiece of these partnerships is an unusual arrangement between the School of Social Work and the Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services (DMHAS).

Five School of Social Work faculty members are based in the DMHAS offices. Connecticut is the only state in the country to place university researchers under the same roof as the state mental health agency.

A Win-Win Situation

Dr. Linda Frisman, research professor of social work and retired director of research for DMHAS, says that the collaboration is “such a win-win for both institutions.”

Partnering with UConn helps strengthen DMHAS’s federal grant proposals with top-notch evaluations, and offers on-site consultation about research needs. At the same time, School of Social Work researchers—with appropriate permission—can obtain data from DMHAS and other state agencies. And faculty members based at DMHAS are well positioned to spot trends worth further study.

For example, associate research professor Dr. Hsiu-Ju Lin, senior data analyst at DMHAS, was reviewing data about heroin overdoses and treatment utilization in Connecticut when she noted that Hispanic men were over-represented in the group with heroin addiction. She described this phenomenon to Dr. Michael Fendrich, associate dean for research and professor of social work, who studies substance abuse, and Dr. Cristina Mogro-Wilson, assistant professor of social work, whose research centers on Latino families. The three researchers took a closer look at heroin treatment utilization and outcomes among Hispanic men, and will present their findings at the 2016 Society for Social Work and Research conference.

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“UConn social work faculty have strengths in quantitative and qualitative methods, research design, and program evaluation. Our credibility with our state partners is built on years of successful collaboration based on those skills. We look forward to future research and program evaluation around trauma, violence, substance abuse, and mental health, all areas of dire need for effective programming and intervention.”
PIC: Using UConn Expertise to Evaluate State Programs

Since 2012, the School of Social Work’s Performance Improvement Center (PIC) has conducted an ongoing evaluation of the state’s new Community Support for Families (CSF) program. This Department of Children & Families (DCF) program is designed to connect low-risk families with informal support (through youth sports teams and scouting groups, for example), with the goal of decreasing social isolation and increasing engagement, protective factors associated with preventing child neglect. Seven community partner agencies deliver the CSF program.

The PIC team includes co-principal investigators Dr. Brenda Kurz, MSW program director and associate professor of social work, and Dr. Lin, as well as research associate Dr. Patricia Carlson. They meet regularly with DCF’s Kimberly Nilson, director of child welfare, early and middle childhood, who is the DCF program director for this project. The PIC team compiles and analyzes data quarterly to monitor data quality, determine if agencies are meeting program goals, and evaluate outcomes.

The team not only shares its findings with the community agencies and DCF, but also dialogues with them about what the data mean and how to respond to them. “In a typical program evaluation, you assess, you criticize, and you’re gone,” Dr. Kurz explains. “PIC is involved for the long term, and really is about performance improvement.” DCF administrators regularly use PIC findings to inform key decisions.

The School of Social Work contributes to other projects with state agencies on these topics:

**Suicide prevention.**
Dr. Nina Heller joined the Connecticut Suicide Advisory Board, co-chaired by School of Social Work alumna Andrea Iger Duarte, and played a central role in developing the State of Connecticut Suicide Prevention Plan 2020. The plan called for two evaluators to closely monitor suicide data; if statistics suggest an increase in suicidal ideation in certain groups, for example, “we can begin to target programs and resources to that population,” Dr. Heller says.

**Gun seizures.**
Dr. Hsiu-Ju Lin is overseeing data collection and constructing the data set for a study of Connecticut’s gun seizure law, conducted by Dr. Jeff Swanson, professor of psychiatry and behavioral health at Duke University. The statute allows police to remove guns from people who pose imminent danger to themselves or others; only two other states have similar laws. The mixed methods study includes interviews with judges and law enforcement officials, as well as state data about gun seizures to determine if the law reduces gun violence, including suicide.

**Transitional health care.**
Dr. Hsiu-Ju Lin is principal investigator for a sub-award study of the Transitions Clinic Network. Led by Dr. Emily Wang at Yale University, the study is designed to determine if connecting former prisoners to culturally competent primary care providers and community health workers soon after release improves health outcomes and reduces recidivism.

**Smoking cessation among inmates.**
Dr. Wendy Ulaszek, associate research professor and principal investigator at DMHAS, conducts research projects with the Connecticut Department of Corrections (DOC), including a Tobacco and Health Trust-funded project to address smoking addiction among inmates. Dr. Ulaszek and the DMHAS research division track smoking prevalence among inmates, work with DOC staff to facilitate local implementation teams that institute evidence-based psycho-educational and behavioral ‘stay quit’ treatment efforts, and create quarterly impact reports to track progress.

**Training mental health professionals.**
Dr. Nina Heller and Peter Papallo, assistant extension instructor of social work, are co-principal investigators of a Human Resources and Services Administration grant to train second-year graduate students working with young adults at risk who have mental illness. “We take 18 graduate students a year, and each one is partnered with a DMHAS-funded agency that works with young adult psychiatric clients,” Dr. Heller says. Dr. Wendy Ulaszek leads the project evaluation.

**Training child welfare workers.**
Through a National Child Welfare Workforce Institute grant, principal investigators Dr. Antonia Cordero and Dr. Robin Spath, associate professors of social work, collaborate with DCF to train second-year graduate students to work in child welfare agencies. Grant recipients receive full-time job offers in their agency after graduation.

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