



Center for Reducing Health Disparities Completes Five-Year Community Research Scholar Initiative

June 14, 2017—The Case Western Center for Reducing Health Disparities has completed a five-year initiative designed to enhance community research. The project, called the Community Research Scholars Initiative (CRSI), has resulted in nine innovative research projects, and submission of new scientific papers to peer-reviewed journals.

But this time, it's not academic MDs and PhDs who are researching and publishing. It is front-line workers in social service agencies. And they're using their findings to improve programs and practices at the ground level.

With funding support from the National Institutes of Health, the Case Western Center for Reducing Health Disparities—a partnership between Case Western Reserve University and MetroHealth Systems—launched CRSI in 2011 as a multi-year training, mentoring, and research development effort that partnered directly with social service agencies confronting health disparities among northeast Ohio residents.

CRSI encompassed two training cohorts, each lasting two years. The nine participating CRSI Scholars were selected from a number of applicants to the program, and devoted 40% of their professional time to the curriculum, for which their employers were compensated. The curriculum covered quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods, in addition to writing, speaking, working with coalitions and media, and a wide range of other pertinent topics. CRSI faculty was drawn from northeast Ohio academic institutions, as well as community organizations, think tanks, government, consultant groups, and the private sector. At the end of the training program each CRSI scholar designed and implemented an organization-specific research study on a topic of significance to their organization, and when the research was completed, authored a paper of sufficient quality for submission to a peer-reviewed academic journal.

Scholars came from a host of agencies and groups, including BeechBrook, West Side Community House, FrontLine Services, Susan G. Komen of Northeast Ohio, Asian Services in Action (ASIA), the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland, the Universal Health Care Action Network, the Massage Network of Ohio Practice Based Research Network, and United Way of Greater Cleveland 2-1-1.

Their research spanned numerous topics of concern. One investigated the high turnover of community health workers in education programs, and suggested approaches for improving retention of effective educators. Another examined perceptions about and barriers to therapeutic massage at five health clinics in urban and suburban settings, concluding that most people viewed therapeutic massage as a viable medical treatment, even when cost prevented them from accessing such services. A study of stress reduction among front-line workers in a local crisis center found that allocating just a few minutes a day to guided imagery resulted in statistically significant reductions in stress, and overall improvements in sleep and well-being among those

workers. A review of large health status datasets for youth receiving mental health services in Cuyahoga County provided a richer understanding of the relationship between mental health and physical health, and led to improved treatment protocols for an agency serving adolescents. Other studies researched factors contributing to successful completion of a parenting program; barriers that transgendered women experienced when they attempted to access health care; the role of support services in improving health outcomes in a clinic serving a large immigrant population; and whether insurance literacy contributed to more effective health care utilization for individuals newly enrolled in publicly-supported healthcare programs.

“Sometimes research may sound, on the surface, somewhat abstract—but it can also have significant impacts on individuals trying to get help,” said Jacquie Dolata, the CRSI Program Co-Director. A study conducted at the United Way of Greater Cleveland’s 2-1-1 service serves as an example. At 2-1-1, which helps people find, understand and access community resources through a process of conversation, assessment and linkages, referrals to certain resources were not provided due to client eligibility, situation or preference. Through the CRSI project, 2-1-1 was able to alter its software, and over a 16-month period, document 1,417 reasons why referrals were not provided across more than 500 agencies. The project culminated in a focus group of community agencies who expressed their desire for real-time access to data to improve service delivery. “Tracking the reasons why referrals could not be made to specific programs and sharing that data has the potential to improve the entire social service delivery system, resulting in more programs tailored to client needs.” said United Way 2-1-1 Director Diane Gatto.

The CRSI program has been reviewed by external evaluators from Case Western Reserve University, and showed significant impacts in both individual learning, and improved research and evaluation at participating agencies.

“We believe that the CRSI program underscores the potential for high levels of community involvement in research and evaluation,” concluded Dr. Ash Sehgal, Co-Director of the Case Western Center for Reducing Health Disparities. Dr. Sehgal and his team are currently seeking renewal funding from the National Institutes of Health to launch a series of related and new research projects designed to heighten that community engagement, and learn more about how to reduce health disparities in northeast Ohio.

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