Faculty members give a glimpse into their recent research engaging with and impacting communities in New Jersey and beyond.

Message from the Dean

Rutgers School of Social Work Celebrates the Classes of 2020 and 2021

SOGIE Workshop Engages with Community to Help Practitioners Establish Affirming Environments

Faculty Voices in the News

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What to Read and Watch

The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Creator Seeks to Strengthen Community Ties Through Collaboration

A Day in the Life: Marleina Ubel SSW’21

Class Notes

RESEARCH WITH LOCAL IMPACT

Faculty members give a glimpse into their recent research engaging with and impacting communities in New Jersey and beyond.

“The greatness of a community is most accurately measured by the compassionate actions of its members.”

CORETTA SCOTT KING
Dear Friends,

As we enter our third year of life with COVID-19, many of us are disappointed with our progress and frustrated by its continued impact on our daily lives. We could not have imagined the twists and turns the past two years have given us. Yet, despite the countless losses we’ve suffered, I remain hopeful for the future. Each day, as I talk to our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends, I am reminded of one of the most important aspects that define us as social workers — our commitment to bettering the world. You, our social work alumni and friends, are the light that carries us through the darkness, and I am so grateful for your dedication to supporting communities to be not only safe but to thrive. This work makes me most proud to be a social worker.

Working with communities, and community engagement, is the focus of this edition of our alumni magazine. In it you will discover some of our faculty research projects that are making a direct impact on communities. From an analysis of substance misuse indicators to an assessment of maternal health in New Jersey, our faculty are leading pioneering research that will affect those in greatest need — the most vulnerable members of our communities. We’re also putting a spotlight on one of our longtime partners, The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation (DJFF), which is marking its 20th anniversary this year. Founder and president Linda J. Walder, Esq. shares how The DJFF engages with communities to create paths for adults with autism to lead fulfilling and potential-driven lives.

This magazine also gives you a glimpse into the lives of some of our community members. Faculty and staff share the books they’re reading, and shows and movies they’re watching that have impacted their lives. A recent graduate of our MSW program also provides an inside look at a day in her life as a policy analyst at New Jersey Policy Perspective through the State Policy Fellowship at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. You’ll also read about our celebration of the Classes of 2020 and 2021, other recent events, and so much more.

I hope you’ll join me in finding optimism in the stories of some of the leaders in our profession. Let us remain hopeful and committed to building a better and more just future. Thank you for your dedication to the School of Social Work, the entire Rutgers community, and the communities we partner with and serve.

Sincerely,

Cathryn C. Potter, M.S.W., Ph.D.
Dean and Distinguished Professor
Rutgers School of Social Work
Rutgers School of Social Work celebrates the classes of 2020 and 2021

Members of the Classes of 2020 and 2021 endured unexpected challenges as they completed their degrees during a global pandemic that transformed their lives and time at Rutgers.

Last fall, Rutgers School of Social Work welcomed these recent graduates back to campus to celebrate their successes. More than 300 alumni gathered at the tent at Woodlawn Mansion along with hundreds of family members, friends, and supporters.

Dean and Distinguished Professor Cathryn C. Potter welcomed guests to the event, noting their remarkable resilience. “We know the last nineteen months were far from what you could have imagined they would look like when you first entered your program at Rutgers,” she said. “You’ve faced countless challenges and made so many sacrifices, yet you still pushed ahead and earned your degree. We are so very proud of you and welcome you to the social work profession.” Alumni were also greeted with supportive remarks from Francine Conway, Chancellor-Provost of Rutgers University–New Brunswick.

Associate Professor of Teaching and Director of the Baccalaureate Program V. DuWayne Battle presented the faculty address, offering words of encouragement to the Classes of 2020 and 2021. Following his address was a speech from alum Nicole G. Epps SSW’21, winner of our Outstanding MSW Student in the Blended Program Award.

Members of the Classes of 2020 and 2021 were finally given the chance to proudly walk across the stage and have their name announced by the School of Social Work’s academic program directors. An enthusiastic audience cheered on the group that had waited many months to take these very important steps marking the end of their journey at Rutgers.

A social-justice themed performance by Paul Lewis, president of Rutgers Verbal Mayhem, rounded out the program.

Dean Potter closed the event with enthusiasm for the path ahead. “Members of the Classes of 2020 and 2021, you have been prepared for a wonderful career in social work by an outstanding group of faculty and field instructors. We wish you great success,” she said. “Our hope is that each of you will find creative ways to make a difference in the lives of the people and communities you serve. We are so very proud of you!”
Last fall, the Rutgers School of Social Work Office of Field Education hosted a training session on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE) for social work professionals with HiTOPS, an organization fostering strong and healthy young people of all identities by providing inclusive and youth-informed sex education and LGBTQ+ support for young people throughout New Jersey.

The workshop introduced the three separate yet related constructs of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression to an audience of 350 participants, including agency supervisors, administrators, and staff from New Jersey and beyond who serve children and families as well as mental health and community service-focused organizations. Stacy Robustelli, PhD, Director of Education at HiTOPS, led the training. Dr. Robustelli provided an introduction of basic terminology that relates to each construct and discussed the implications for establishing affirming environments.

"Right now many people working in agencies are craving this kind of professional development in which they can open up the discussion for what it means to be affirming in any given organization," said Dr. Robustelli. "It was clear that this audience in particular wanted to learn how to unpack all of the terms related to SOGIE and what they mean. Participants asked many follow-up questions and shared wonderful comments about the importance of the training."

"The SOGIE training was an important milestone for the School of Social Work’s Office of Field Education and the larger community as it signaled to students, faculty, and community partner agencies throughout New Jersey and beyond that we are serious about inclusion and equity," said Nancy Schley, Assistant Professor of Teaching and Associate Director of Field Education in New Brunswick. "We invited partner agencies to join us in our effort to learn from each other and build positive, affirming relationships with people of all identities. The momentum created by this training provides the School of Social Work community direction and focus regarding important next steps. The knowledge gained by the training not only reverberates with attendees but also within the communities they serve."

It is important for all practitioners to have a baseline understanding of SOGIE and pursue further educational opportunities, but it’s particularly crucial for those working with youth populations—especially given COVID-19’s toll on children and adolescents’ mental health. Studies show that if a young person has at least one affirming person in their life, it reduces their risk of suicidality by 40%. "It’s staggering and shows that this kind of training is incredibly important for people working within our communities," said Dr. Robustelli.

One of the challenges in teaching SOGIE is the speed at which information changes. Some may feel overwhelmed by the evolving terminology or might not know how to approach topics and conversations that are deeply personal. Dr. Robustelli suggests that people extend grace to those learning about SOGIE.

"As someone who teaches a variety of audiences about SOGIE, my goal is to meet people where they are to the best of my ability and have compassion for the fact that there are generational differences. People have different motivations, values and educational backgrounds, and we have to recognize that not everybody has had the same experiences," said Dr. Robustelli. Although most attendees reported having little or no familiarity with SOGIE prior to the training, a post-event survey revealed that a majority of participants learned valuable takeaways and planned to implement what they learned in both their personal and professional lives.
“During the COVID-19 pandemic, technology has been essential to facilitating remote learning. At the same time, there is a growing concern that excessive technology use, particularly for entertainment, may adversely affect children’s educational development by facilitating undesirable study habits and detracting from time spent on learning activities.”

Teens should only use recreational internet, video games 1 hr daily to avoid lower grades
Assistant Professor Vivien (Wen Li) Anthony in Yahoo! Sports

“Child marriage is concerning from a human rights, health and economic perspective...Girls married before age 18 are more likely to drop out of school early, become poor, acquire sexually transmitted infections, experience domestic violence, teenage childbirth and accompanying childbirth complications, including low birth weight babies or death.”

In Ethiopia, mother’s wealth more protective against child marriage than father’s
Assistant Professor Felix Muchomba in Phys Org

“You need to show not only that you are persecuted, but that you are persecuted because you are LGBTQ. It’s invasive. It becomes about private moments.”

‘A virtual death sentence’: Gay Afghans brace for uncertain future under Taliban
Associate Professor and Chancellor’s Scholar of LGBTQ Mental Health, Trauma, and Resilience Edward Alessi in NBC News

“Child support debt can lead to license suspension and incarceration, which undermine fathers’ ability to work, pay off debts and spend time with children; can lead to more conflict in the co-parenting relationship, less reliable cash support and less involvement with children; cannot be discharged by filing for bankruptcy; and can be extremely difficult for the lowest-income parents to ever repay, thus persisting and accumulating throughout childhood.”

Mental health of teenagers affected by fathers’ type of debt: Study
Associate Professor Lenna Nepomnyaschy in Yahoo! Life

“This is the perfect time to consider repealing policies that criminalize pregnant women for substance use and instead focus on health education, treatment and supporting research that will develop regulatory policies that protect the health of mothers and their children.”

Cannabis Legalization Can Lead to Health Disparities in Women
Assistant Professor Qiana L. Brown in Patch

“I was very proud that our project team, and the other advisory group members, saw them as valued project partners and collaborators. We definitely took their advice and suggestions into account.”

What Is Engaged Scholarship and How Can It Improve Your Research?
In an article about the importance of community engaged research, Cassandra Simmel, Associate Professor and Director, MSW Certificate in Promoting Child and Adolescent Well-Being, described a recent project she and other Rutgers colleagues implemented with community partners, including Youth Move National, in Inside Higher Ed

“People who live far from clinics or hold steady jobs are particularly burdened by daily trips to be watched getting a dose.”

How COVID pandemic changed methadone treatment for addiction
Distinguished Research Professor Stephen Crystal in ABC News

“The gambling court would, for the first time, provide some alternatives for previously law-abiding citizens who offend due only to their gambling addiction.”

New Jersey Proposed Gambling Court Provides Option To Prison, Proponents Say
Professor and Director of the Center for Gambling Studies & Addiction Counselor Training (ACT) Program Lia Nower in Casino.org
Assistant Professor Qiana L. Brown received an NIH/NIDA subaward to examine trends and disparities in prenatal care as part of the NIH’s RE:Learning for Early Careers in Addiction Disorders (LEAD) Program. Dr. Brown also received a two-year NIH/NIDA Health Disparities Loan Repayment Program Award.

Dr. Barnyard also received the Outstanding Scientific Contributions to Trauma Psychology Award from the American Psychological Association’s Division 50 psychology’s focal point for research, practice, policy development and education on trauma psychology. Additionally, Dr. Barnyard authored a new book, Strengths-Based Prevention: Resilience Violence and Public Health Problems, with Sherry Hamby.

Professor of Teaching and Director of the Interdisciplinary Program Erika Deglau was appointed to the New York Association of Mental Health and Addiction Agencies Conference with an Editorial Pioneer in Workforce Development Award.

Associate Professor of Professional Practice Patricia Flatley was appointed to the NIH Division of Mental Health and Addiction Services from the Rutgers Research Council for her project Developing Al-informed Vulnerability Index to Target the Food Security Track Program in Zambian Children. Additionally, she received a $30,000 Global Health Seed Grant from Rutgers Global Health Institute for her project Exploring Scalable Multimodal Approaches to Identify Vulnerable Populations in the Congo.

Initially, Victoria Banyard was awarded a $2.95 million grant, Banyard Psychology, development and practice, policy point for research, ensuring that every Institute that works, ensuring that every individual and family has the resources, opportunities and support they need to successfully raise their children from birth to young adulthood. She was also also awarded a $10,000 grant from the Health Resource Service Administration for the Rutgers University Behavioral Health Collaborative.

Cory Morton received a $341,000 grant, Evaluation of Multidisciplinary Measurement for Performance Disorders: Substance Use Mental Health or Substance Use Disorders: Preclinical & Clinical Laboratory Research Professor and Chancellor’s Early Career Fellow at the Institute on Minority Health and Disparities, a division of the NIH, for their project Eliminating Latinx sexual assault for work focused on stigma, mental health, and substance use among LGBT and Latinx populations.

Assistant Professor Tawanda Hubbard received an $18,000 Collaborative Multidisciplinary Award from the Rutgers Research Council for her project Developing Al-informed Vulnerability Index to Target the Food Security Track Program in Zambian Children. Additionally, she received a $30,000 Global Health Seed Grant from Rutgers Global Health Institute for her project Exploring Scalable Multimodal Approaches to Identify Vulnerable Populations in the Congo.

Associate Professor Ousseina Alidou received a $30,000 grant from the Center for Addiction Research Professor and Chancellor’s Early Career Fellow at the Institute on Minority Health and Disparities, a division of the NIH, for their project Eliminating Latinx sexual assault for work focused on stigma, mental health, and substance use among LGBT and Latinx populations.

Assistant Professor Beatrice Bennett received a $25,000 in Azure credit for her project Exploring Scalable Multimodal Approaches to Identify Vulnerable Populations in the Congo. Dr. Jung also received a $25,000 in Azure credit for her project Exploring Scalable Multimodal Approaches to Identify Vulnerable Populations in the Congo.

Assistant Professor Kristin Gilmore Powell (Principal Investigator) and Dr. Buzzetti was appointed to the Advisory Reviewers Board for the Journal of Social Policy and Social Work Studies, an international publication of Rutgers University’s Department of Social Work in Turkey.

Assistant Professor Michelle Butler was named an Early Career Fellow at the Rutgers Institute for the Study of Global Racial Justice. She was also awarded a faculty grant to lead the Policy and Intersectionality Working Group through the IIDEA Research Recognition Award.

Assistant Professor Michael M. Joo received a $77,000 grant from the Health Resource Service Administration for the Rutgers University Behavioral Health Collaborative.

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THE VANISHING HALF
BY BRIT BENNETT

Brit Bennett’s second novel is a real page turner. This story follows the lives of identical twins, Desiree and Stella, who are light-skinned Black women who run away from their small hometown in Louisiana and make very different choices that forever change the course of their lives. Across different generations and from various perspectives, this book beautifully covers issues of identity, racism, privilege, secrecy, colorism, and loss. Once you start reading, you will be captivated, eager to know what happens to each of the story’s characters.

OUT OF PLACE: SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND MENNONITE MIGRANTS IN CANADA
BY DR. LUANN GOOD GINGRICH

From a feminist perspective, Dr. Gingrich examines traditional Mennonites excluding themselves from mainstream society and how social workers work with them in a culturally responsive manner. “Voluntary exclusion” is typically discussed as a theoretical issue, and therefore, Dr. Gingrich is innovative by adding a practice perspective. I relate to Dr. Gingrich’s work as a social worker, as well as someone who grew up in a (more open) Mennonite community.

BEST SHAPE OF MY LIFE
WITH WILL SMITH

This engaging YouTube original examines actor and musician Will Smith’s journey to improve his physical and mental health. We learn about Will’s upbringing, his personal and professional successes, as well as his failures. I enjoyed learning about Will’s life, and it shows that even very successful people have struggles to overcome.

CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS
BY ISABEL WILKERSON

As someone born and raised within the Indian caste system, I found this to be a thought-provoking book that expanded my understanding of the American caste system, the prevailing inequality and social injustice, and my own positionality within that structure. A must-read for everyone!

MAID
CREATED BY MOLLY SMITH METZLER

Maid illustrates the challenges of a young single mother after she manages to escape an abusive relationship. Through what seems like a research-informed plot, this show highlights how clinical and policy approaches are both crucial to overcome poverty, intimate partner violence, and homelessness among single mothers in America.

GATHER
PRODUCED BY TANYA AGER MEILLIER

This Netflix documentary focuses on chefs and elders within Native American/Indigenous communities who teach community members about the origins of their food and creating opportunities for them to become more acquainted with their foods again as part of decolonization and stimulating their economy. It was educational, profound, inspiring and uplifting. My hope is that many more seek out this fascinating documentary.
Rutgers School of Social Work / Partnering for Change

Dr. Qiana L. Brown, Assistant Professor at Rutgers School of Social Work, was awarded a $10,000 NIH/NCATS/CTSA pilot award through the New Jersey Alliance for Clinical and Translation Science (NJ ACTS – a Rutgers-led NCATS/CTSA program hub). The pilot award, entitled The COP Study: Communities and Officers Working Together to Prevent Opioid Use Disorder, aims to build an innovative, community-academic-police partnership (CAPP) to guide the development and implementation of the New Jersey State Police (NJSP)-led wastewater-based epidemiology opioid use surveillance pilot program in Camden County, New Jersey.

“This study is important because the US opioid epidemic is ubiquitous and in Camden County, New Jersey opioid overdose fatalities increased nearly 470% from 89 total fatalities in 2010 to 328 in 2018,” said Dr. Brown. “While research posits that many ethical concerns, including fears around police use of wastewater-based epidemiology methods, are unlikely to be realized, no studies, to our knowledge, have directly interviewed community members in neighborhoods where wastewater-based epidemiology opioid use surveillance programs are being implemented to attain a deeper understanding of concerns and to work with communities to address trepidations. Implementing such surveillance programs in communities without the communities’ knowledge and input is a missed opportunity to develop community-informed prevention interventions,” said Dr. Brown.

“Our proposed project will help address these issues through community-based participatory research (CBPR), which will provide the community with an opportunity to offer input and work collectively with academics, law enforcement and other stakeholders (e.g., clinicians, public health practitioners) to address any concerns regarding the NJSP-led wastewater-based epidemiology opioid use surveillance pilot program before the program is implemented,” said Dr. Brown. “Dr. N. Andrew Peterson (Professor and Associate Dean for Research at Rutgers School of Social Work and co-investigator); Dr. Nicole Faber-Fendel (Associate Professor at Rutgers School of Engineering and co-investigator); and Lt. Adam Polhemus (co-investigator from NJSP).”

NEW FACULTY
RESEARCH
AIMS
TO BUILD
INNOVATIVE
PARTNERSHIP
TO PREVENT
OPIOID USE
DISORDER

The COP Study is a key component of the Rutgers-led wastewater-based epidemiology opioid use surveillance pilot program in Camden County, New Jersey. This initiative aims to build a community-academic-police partnership (CAPP) to address the community’s knowledge and input into the development and implementation of the pilot program. The project will involve community-based participatory research (CBPR) to address any concerns regarding the program’s implementation. The key personnel for this study include Dr. Qiana L. Brown (principal investigator from Rutgers School of Social Work), Dr. N. Andrew Peterson (Professor and Associate Dean for Research at Rutgers School of Social Work and co-investigator), Dr. Nicole Faber-Fendel (Associate Professor at Rutgers School of Engineering and co-investigator), and Lt. Adam Polhemus (co-investigator from NJSP).
At the School of Social Work, the impact of research extends beyond academia. In many cases, faculty members partner with leaders in the local community to yield findings that have the potential to affect how people receive services, access programming, and ultimately, live their lives. This is the power of community-engaged research, “Community-engaged research aims to build authentic partnerships between researchers and the researched,” says N. Andrew Peterson, professor and associate dean for research, “as well as strengthen communities’ awareness of their own capabilities as researchers and change agents.”

Here are just some of the most current community-engaged research projects taking place right here in Rutgers’ home state of New Jersey.
ANALYZING SUBSTANCE MISUSE INDICATORS

About 15 years ago, the State of New Jersey adopted a public health model to guide changes within the substance misuse prevention system, with the aim to embrace data-driven processes, bring different community sectors together, and select smart strategies for local needs. "This is different from traditional curriculum-based prevention programs in that the focus is on environmental strategies, such as policy change, to make community impact that might discourage substance misuse and promote health and wellness," says Kristen Gilmore-Town. But research professor and associate director of the Center for Prevention Science.

In her work with prevention coalitions, Powell helped partners develop a mobile app called Be The One in 2017, which helps local leaders communicate through photos and the positive negative experiences of their community as they partake in substance misuse. Now, Powell is analyzing three years' worth of photos from people who came to the state to find out what might support healthy choices in communities versus what might endure substance misuse.

"One common theme that emerged from Powell's research is the influence of product placement, the goal is to think about policy changes that foster a healthier environment," she says. "Be able to point this out has allowed coalitions to approach store management and work with them to think about product placement and marketing in a more responsible, responsible, and responsible, manner."

Another area of improvement that the study revealed is the prevalence of litter. "It was common to see photos of a path that's frequently littered with trees like empty alcohol bottles or cigarette and vaping litter," Powell says. "This is an important environmental consequence of substance misuse to consider."

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"It's no secret that once they hit their 18th birthday, many residents leave New Jersey for another state. The age-friendly communities movement in New Jersey seeks to change this trend by also helping to make the state’s diverse communities better places to grow up and grow old, especially for older adults with fewer resources to navigate the challenges and opportunities of aging in their own homes and communities."

As part of this movement, professor Emily Greenfield and her team conducted interviews with age-friendly community leaders during the winter of 2020-2021. They found that the leaders tended to play a variety of roles within their communities. These roles included creating (launching new programs, activate encouraging others), communicating (sharing and gathering information across adults when planning their own programs, services, and events), communications broker (sharing and gathering information across diverse community networks), and good community partner (helping partner organizations in limited but meaningful ways, for example, by donating to help sponsors or encouraging others to attend).

The value of this research is that it gives current leaders the language with which to describe their work, make their work visible to others, measure success, and substantiate needs. "It helps other community leaders understand the nature of this work," Greenfield says. "If they designate someone to lead an age-friendly community initiative in their municipality, this research shows how they can and should do to be effective."

PROTECTING RUTGERS FUTURE SCHOLARS

The Rutgers Future Scholars program (RFS) identifies first-generation, low-income, academically promising middle school students from Rutgers’ home communities of New Brunswick, Piscataway, Newark, Camden, and Rahway, and offers them a unique pre-college program that includes programming, events, support, and mentoring that continues through their high school years. Students who successfully complete the five-year program and are accepted to Rutgers University receive full tuition funding. RFS scholars are committed to spurring students to overcome their barriers to success in college.

"The ultimate goal is that these young people will return to the community and engage in work that matters and in work that is important,“ says Adrian Gale, assistant professor in the child welfare and well-being research track. "It’s not just a college access program. It’s a program that seeks to impact each of the larger communities where Rutgers resides by impacting its young people."

Gale is currently gathering data from current RFS participants to evaluate the impacts of the different areas of focus that exist in each program. For example, how does being in an urban setting impact the implementation and outcomes of RFS in Newark? Which parts of the program are most impactful for scholars in Camden? Do suburban students in RISB have the same needs as those in Piscataway? "We would like to be able to determine if it is possible, about which parts of the program—academic tutoring, mentoring, college socialization, or tuition scholarships—are successful, and that there are students who need all of the services to be successful," he says. In the future, Gale also wants to interview the parents and families of the scholars, to get their take on the program.

Gale anticipates that he’ll be able to analyze the data by the fall of 2022, and ultimately present it to leaders at RFS to help them determine best practices. "We want to find the students who have the greatest needs, and make sure they have the resources to succeed," he says.
“Really strong community engagement research involves everyone willing to take some big risks.”

Parents began participating in the program in January 2020 and, along the way, Bosk has been gathering data to examine outcomes in maternal and child mental health, child welfare, parent-child relationships, and substance use. “To date, out of the 46 families that have been receiving services, 90 percent of the children remain at home—this is incredibly significant when compared to the national average,” says Bosk. “We also see very few re-entries to child welfare when families are involved in the program.” Instead, children are identified for early intervention services quickly; 43 percent of kids in the program have been referred to and started early intervention. This is critical, says Bosk, as the earlier such intervention is started, the better the chances are of restoring positive developmental trajectories. “Three-quarters of our clients in the program report a history of family substance misuse, so it’s clear that intervention is needed from an intergenerational perspective.”

The program is currently operating in Ocean County, New Jersey (with plans to expand to Union County in April 2022), open to parents of children ages six and under, who misuse substances. Parents receive three visits per week from a care team that includes a substance use clinician, infant mental health clinician, and family support specialist. “The goal is to interrupt intergenerational transmission of trauma,” says Bosk.

“Keeping Families Together Nationwide, young children in the welfare system who have caregivers that misuse substances have between a 20 and 40 percent chance of staying in their home. What if there was a better way to approach these cases so that parents could get the help they need and children could continue to safely live at home with their families? That’s the goal of a new in-home recovery program, the result of a partnership between the New Jersey Department of Children and Families, the Yale Child Study Center, Preferred Behavioral Health Group, and assistant professor Emily Bosk at the School of Social Work. The program is currently operating in Ocean County, New Jersey (with plans to expand to Union County in April 2022), open to parents of children ages six and under, who misuse substances. Parents receive three visits per week from a care team that includes a substance use clinician, infant mental health clinician, and family support specialist. “The goal is to interrupt intergenerational transmission of trauma,” says Bosk.

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ASSESSING MATERNAL HEALTH

A number of factors can influence a birthing person’s risk of severe maternal morbidity (SMM, a group of life-threatening labor and delivery outcomes—from heart attack to kidney failure—that result in significant short- and long-term health consequences). Could the community in which a person lives be one of them? Assistant professor Felix Muchomba says yes.

In his recent study, Muchomba and his team gathered one million New Jersey birth records dated from 2008 to 2018, and linked each of these births with maternal hospital discharge records to determine rates of SMM across the state.

Some of what Muchomba found was unsurprising, for example, that mothers with higher socioeconomic status had lower rates of SMM and those with advanced maternal age had higher rates “But all of these factors only partly explain the variation we found across the state of New Jersey,” he says, which is that rates of SMM increased the more southern in the state the mother lived, with some exceptions. And, the municipality with the highest rate of SMM (Bridgeport, New Jersey, in Cumberland County) had over three times the rate of Westfield, New Jersey in Union County, which had the lowest rate in the state.

Additionally, Muchomba examined municipal spending data in the areas where the mothers lived, specifically, how these different municipalities invested in person in the areas of public health, housing and community development, transportation, libraries, fire protection and ambulance, and policing, and how this spending measured against the likelihood of SMM.

Muchomba found that mothers living in municipalities that spend more per resident on these public services were less likely to have SMM, and an additional $1,000 per capita spent on these services reduced the odds of SMM by between 35 and 67 percent—with one exception. “More spending on police did not have the same association with better maternal outcomes,” he says. “Mothers living in places that spend more on police were actually more likely to have negative post-childbirth outcomes.”

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Some of what Muchomba found was unsurprising, for example, that mothers with higher socioeconomic status had lower rates of SMM and those with advanced maternal age had higher rates “But all of these factors only partly explain the variation we found across the state of New Jersey,” he says, which is that rates of SMM increased the more southern in the state the mother lived, with some exceptions. And, the municipality with the highest rate of SMM (Bridgeport, New Jersey, in Cumberland County) had over three times the rate of Westfield, New Jersey in Union County, which had the lowest rate in the state.

Additionally, Muchomba examined municipal spending data in the areas where the mothers lived, specifically, how these different municipalities invested in person in the areas of public health, housing and community development, transportation, libraries, fire protection and ambulance, and policing, and how this spending measured against the likelihood of SMM.

Muchomba found that mothers living in municipalities that spend more per resident on these public services were less likely to have SMM, and an additional $1,000 per capita spent on these services reduced the odds of SMM by between 35 and 67 percent—with one exception. “More spending on police did not have the same association with better maternal outcomes,” he says. “Mothers living in places that spend more on police were actually more likely to have negative post-childbirth outcomes.”

Muchomba’s work, having recently been published, is currently being disseminated to media, community organizations, and municipal leaders. “This research helps us understand what kind of investments have the potential to improve the lives of birthing people in the state,” he says, “and could help municipalities create spending plans that better support the health of their residents.”

Support for Muchomba’s research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation’s Policies for Action program. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.
be Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation (DJFF), the first nonprofit and only all-volunteer-run organization in the U.S. focusing on adult autism, has been serving teens since 2002. The DJFF’s model programs, resources, public policy and awareness initiatives are person-centered and derive from the needs and hopes of the diverse population of adults diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families. As the foundation marks its 20th anniversary, founder and executive director Linda J. Walder, esq. shares how the DJFF engaged with communities to create paths leading to fulfilling and potential-driven lives.

How did The DJFF get started?

The DJFF was established in honor and memory of my son, Danny Fiddle, who was diagnosed with autism when he was about two and a half years old. During Danny’s lifetime I realized he was going to have potential-driven lives. DJFF engages with communities to create paths leading to fulfilling and potential-driven lives.

What about your background and how it helped you create the foundation?

I really started from the ground up. In retrospect, my background as an attorney and prior work in public relations helped. It actually was the perfect storm, because I had the understanding of how to formulate partnerships and agreements, and I also knew how to move our mission forward, spreading awareness that autism is a lifelong journey, not just a childhood situation.

What are some of the challenges you faced when starting The DJFF?

One of the challenges was my naivete in the sense that I didn’t have a nonprofit background. However, my enthusiasm really led me to reach out to others. I think when you work with likeminded organizations you are not faced with as many challenges because working together often helps create solutions. I actually started the foundation mission and brought it forward because of an article I read in The New York Times about a place called High Point Farm that is owned by an entity in New York City that focuses on supporting people with bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. I thought the farm would be a great place for young adults who have been diagnosed with autism who are seeking to be outdoors to get their Eagle Scout badges. So we partnered with Foun-

Tell us about your background and how it helped you create the foundation.

As The DJFF marks its 20th anniversary, what are your hopes for the future of the foundation?

As I look back, I get emotional because I didn’t have great aspirations when we started. I wanted to help one person or one family, so we will continue helping one individual and one family at a time. If we do that then we have done something really important. I hope that through our efforts we can inspire others to see that you don’t have to be competitive, you can be collaborative, and your goal should be to help those you serve, not to enhance your position. Collaboration can propel us forward to do good things for people and help us realize that we all have a right to achieve our best life possible.

With collaborative thinking, positiveness, and the goal of helping people, we can pretty much make anything happen.

What are The DJFF’s goals and values?

We always centered our mission on adults, and our core value has always been to aspire to create the most fulfilling lives possible as I had wished for my own son. Another core value in our mission is to meet people where they are, a tenet of social work. It was imperative that we listen to people, watch what they gravitate towards, and then help open the doors where they’re going. Another key component of our mission is enthusiasm. We cannot underestimate passion and enthusiasm, which generate collaboration.

How does The DJFF engage with communities?

One of the strongest aspects of The DJFF is that it’s known for being a highly collaborative organization. I think in our society we are very competitive by training from childhood onward, but for some reason, I’m not built that way. I feel that collaboration is much stronger than competition. I would rather listen to a variety of people that collaboration is much stronger than competition. I would rather listen to a variety of people that collaboration is much stronger than competition. I would rather listen to a variety of people that collaboration is much stronger than competition. I would rather listen to a variety of people that collaboration is much stronger than competition.

Another key component of our mission is enthusiasm. We cannot underestimate passion and enthusiasm, which generate collaboration.

What advice would you give to someone who wants to engage with their community but might not know where to start?

Do your homework, which means listening, determining what you want, and developing your focus. I can’t stress enough the importance of listening. When we started The DJFF we created an advisory board comprised of an array of people, and the most important people we listen to have been those who have autism and their family members. It’s critical to listen and listen, not dictate to people what you think they want. I think that’s been a big mistake a lot of organizations make, especially in the world of autism. A lot of advocates feel that organizations design missions based upon their own vision, but not about the people themselves who are affected by the challenges of autism.

Tell us about The DJFF’s relationship with Rutgers School of Social Work.

It began when I reached out to Dean Cathryn Potter. I didn’t know her, but I knew Rutgers School of Social Work had a lauded and well-expected program, so it seemed like there would be no better place to start an endowment fund. I explained to Dean Potter that we wanted to make sure adult autism would be a focus in perpetuity at a university that had exceptional programs in the specific areas that we were interested in pursuing. We decided to focus on providing support and resources for the family members of adults with autism, an underserved community of people who are also on the lifelong journey of autism. We thought the best way to facilitate this would be to support graduate fellows working as direct care clinicians with family members of adults with autism. Obviously, you can only help a handful of people in that manner, so to throw the not out further, we tasked the fellows with creating and maintaining a resource guide to help individuals obtain information that could help their family member or just themselves. We’ve had an exceptional group of fellows over the years. There has been a common denominator of enthusiasm and passion amongst the fellows, and many of them have had a personal connection to autism.

As The DJFF marks its 20th anniversary, what are your hopes for the future of the foundation?

To learn more about The Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation, visit dfdffoundation.org.

Collaboration can propel us forward to do good things for people and help us realize that we all have a right to achieve our best life possible.
Marleina Ubel SSW’21 was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the mainland when she was about five years old. She spent most of her formative years in Miami, Florida with her mother, stepfather, and four siblings. Her stepfather, who raised her as his own, was Cuban, and so her childhood was one that blended Puerto Rican and Cuban traditions. Things were not always easy, and Marleina did not start her college education until she had a daughter of her own. She started her educational journey at Valencia College in Orlando, earning a transfer scholarship to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where she received a BA in philosophy. Later, she would move to the great state of New Jersey and earn her MSW at Rutgers School of Social Work.

Today, Marleina works as a policy analyst at New Jersey Policy Perspective (NJPP) through the State Policy Fellowship at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). While she makes contributions to work on tax and budget, her main area of focus is the criminal legal system. The nature of this work is ever-evolving and often fast paced.

What follows is an example of an average day for Marleina.

7:00 AM: I get out of bed to make a cup of Bustelo before I have to wake my 10-year-old for school. I savor the 30 minutes of silence before the morning routine truly starts.

8:10 AM: I rush my daughter out the door after she has had her breakfast and put up a fight about brushing her hair. I sit down to check my calendar and inbox, which is generally in need of some attention. I respond to emails from partners at the American Civil Liberties Union, Salvation and Social Justice, and Make the Road New Jersey.

9:00 AM: Time for our weekly staff meeting. Since the start of the pandemic, we have been meeting and working remotely, with a few exceptions. The NJPP staff Zoom in to the meeting and give relevant updates. Given that I am part of the research team, I tell my colleagues about a series of bills I am watching that are related to my area of expertise. On this day, they are S2656, a bill that requires access to law enforcement disciplinary records as government records, and S2863, a bill that will authorize local civilian review boards to review police operations and conduct.

10:30 AM: I am working on a blog that will lift up a recent report published by our friends at CBPP. The report highlights how states can use American Rescue Plan dollars to fund alternative models to policing. I use this opportunity to also lift up my recent report on police spending and alternative models in New Jersey.

12:00 PM: I make some lunch and eat with my husband, who is a graduate student. While these times are challenging, small things like being able to have extra time together give us something to be thankful for.

1:30 PM: I have a meeting with leaders in the New Jersey legislative staff offices to discuss the current status of bills that are of interest to my partners and me. We also hope to glean some insights that may help us move the legislation forward.

2:30 PM: I attend a webinar on lobbying. Attending webinars is a common way to engage in professional development, and because NJPP is a nonprofit organization, it is important to know what the guidelines are around lobbying as a representative of NJPP.

3:30 PM: There is an Abolish the Drug War (ATDW) coalition meeting. I represent NJPP in various coalitions, which consist of partner organizations, professionals, impacted individuals, and advocates across the state. ATDW meets every two weeks to brainstorm ways to create a more equitable state by ending the drug war and finding ways to remediate all the harms it has caused.

6:30 PM: I am pretty tired! I make dinner and help my daughter with her homework. I also catch up on any emails — it never ends!

9:30 PM: My husband and I read stories with our daughter as we tuck her in. After this, we get to spend about an hour of time together before I fall asleep.
The New York Times article “How Shadow Foster Care is Tearing Families Apart” (December 5, 2021) looked specifically at a tragic case of illegal activity in Cherokee County, North Carolina. Daniel Beerman SSW’72 was the plaintiff’s social work expert witness. The federal civil court jury awarded $4.6 million to the plaintiff’s family.

Susan P. Chizeck, Ph.D. SSW’83 is semi-retired and teaches part time for the University of Texas at Dallas in interdisciplinary studies. She teaches a regular internship class for all majors and a special one for emergency medicine tech trainees. She gave up teaching her regular classes on critical thinking and writing so she could travel, but of course that all stopped when COVID-19 hit. She is married, has one child (now grown up), and continues to enjoy life. Teaching online kept her busy during lockdowns, it was a lifeline. She learned new skills and collaborated with professional staff. She never thought she’d get used to staying home to work, but now she loves it. She was previously active in professional societies and edited a journal for many years, but is glad to be done with those responsibilities.

Richard S. Cohen SSW’99 recently publishes FOREVER SILENCED, a humorous and entertaining cozy mystery, in a heartwarming story with various forms of plot twists. FOREVER SILENCED is a page-turner that takes readers on an enjoyable and ever-so-memorable journey.

Jim Berkos SSW’68 and his wife finally got to travel the world from Singapore through all of Europe and Asia. He ended his career as CEO for 30 years at Seminole Behavioral Health (now Aspire Inc.), one of the largest facilities for mental health and substance abuse in Florida.

After 50 years in the mental health field and being married that long also, Jim Berkos SSW’68 and his wife finally got to travel the world from Singapore through all of Europe and Asia. He ended his career as CEO for 30 years at Seminole Behavioral Health (now Aspire Inc.), one of the largest facilities for mental health and substance abuse in Florida.

Linda Moore SSW’93 retired as director of social services at Vineland Developmental Center in November 2014. She is enjoying her free time to do volunteer work with ladies in supervised living and at an animal sanctuary.

Karen W. Wimberly SSW’31 (formerly Karen Bakerjian) is an LCSW who completed the Post-Graduate Certificate Program in Veterinary Social Work from the University of Tennessee—Knoxville. Her keystone project focused on the link between violence towards animals and violence towards people.

Kim Gileyn SSW’13 is working part time at Monmouth Medical Center in their outpatient Center for Perinatal Blood and Anxiety Disorders, aiding women and couples with issues related to pregnancy, post partum, infertility, and loss. She also started her private practice, Infinite Balance Psychotherapy, this year and is treating adults and adolescents with mood issues, anxiety, grief/loss, relationship issues, and life transitions. Kim is very grateful for the quality education she received at Rutgers School of Social Work.

Paula Hill SSW’07 became the director of the child study team and special services in Woodridge and Moonachie school districts. She is working part time at Rutgers School of Social Work.

Javier Mercado SSW’77 hosts a Latin Bilingual Christian music program called “Latin Impact.” Music styles include salsa, merengue, ballad, reggaeton, cumbia, bachata, reggae, and worship as well as other styles of music. It airs Monday to Friday from 9:00am to 1:00pm EST at www.mixcloud.com/live/jmercador/. While at Rutgers, Mercado and his friend José had a similar radio program with the same name on WRSU radio. When Mercado graduated and returned to Atlantic City, NJ, he also had a similar radio program with the same name on the then WDSS 1490 AM radio station.
We extend our deepest sympathy to the loved ones of the deceased alumni and friends listed below whose passing has been shared with the School between July 2021 and December 2021.

Ms. Katharine B. Aldridge, SSW’81
Ms. Nancy M. Allerman, SSW’87
Mrs. Yvette Alvarez-Colon, DC’79, SSW’87
Mrs. Brenda D. Barton, SSW’71
Ms. Madelyn I. Beersmann, NCAS’86, SSW’80
Mrs. Florence M. Bernstein, SSW’63
Mr. Richard H. Bogh, Jr., SSW’65
Ms. Ann Therese Burke, SSW’72
Mr. Michael W. Claisold, SSW’83
Ms. Darlene J. Dennis, SSW’89
Ms. Theresa Devecka-Bigoglio, SSW’90
Ms. Gail V. Dougherty, GC’79, SSW’80
Ms. Kathleen M. Gilligan-Green, SSW’79
Ms. Patricia A. Keeny, SSW’70
Ms. Anita A. Manno, SSW’86
Mrs. Patricia A. Mattos, SSW’75
Ms. Mary Frances McFadden, SSW’86
Mr. Conrad Butt Metz, SSW’67
Douglas B. Niselle, A.C.S.W., SSW’60
Ms. Dorothy O’Keefe-Diana, SSW’90
Mr. Donald A. Romeo, SSW’84
Ms. Barbara Saga, SSW’88
Ms. Camilla Sentener-Riedel, SSW’14
Sister Diane P. Srbowoski, GSED’71, SSW’80
Mr. Alexander P. Thomson, NCAS’72, SSW’78
Ms. Darlilyn R. Vassar-Jackson, SSW’73
Ms. Frances Weiss Robbins, DC’39, SSW’71
Mrs. Virginia L. Wintemute, SSW’67
Ms. Irene Zimitovik, LC’78, SSW’95

“i alone cannot change the world, but i can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples.”

mother teresa