Redefining what’s possible

Luminaries
Profiles in Social Innovation

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
BIENNIAL REPORT

2011/2012
How social work becomes social innovation

Reaching for the stars while keeping an ear to the ground. Maintaining a laser-like focus while embracing a diversity of ideas. Blending toughness and determination with warmth and humor.

This mindset, combined with academic rigor, makes the School of Social Work a laboratory for change, where knowledge kindles action, partnerships amplify impact, and research verifies results. In short, where social work becomes social innovation: spotlighting solutions and accelerating social good.

The profiles that follow demonstrate that the social work enterprise is strong, relevant and true. And that social justice is, like any great invention, a powerful fusion of science and hope.
More than ever, social work expertise is recognized as absolutely vital to sustaining the quality of our lives.

Eddie Uehara, Professor and Ballimer Endowed Dean in Social Work

Last August, I had the great privilege to co-host 40 distinguished social work scholars at a two-day conference on Bainbridge Island. The group gathered for one purpose: to discuss how to shape social work’s role in the 21st century.

The participants understood the historic work social work professionals undertook at pivotal moments in the past: from the policies that prevented illness and death among millions of poor women and infants at the turn of the last century, to the safety net programs of the New Deal, and the service models that prevented homelessness for a generation of people with mental illness moved from hospital wards to communities in the mid-20th century. The group shared a commitment to mobilize for similar responsibility in our own time.

The University’s central contribution to the meeting was to propose a Grand Challenges framework to galvanize our profession. We had studied how, a century ago, Mathematics and, more recently, Engineering and other fields employed the Grand Challenges strategy to powerful effect.

The essential qualities of the engineering profession’s 14 Grand Challenges, which ranged from making solar energy economical to reverse engineering the brain, have been described as the possibility of being solvable...the ring of things we can and must do. But the precise path is unclear. That makes them challenging; and their deep importance makes them grand.

UW Engineering Dean Matt O’Donnell joined us in sessions that explored the process Engineering worked through and the outcomes, including transforming curricula, galvanizing use-inspired research and attracting talent to the field.

The conference was, by all accounts, historic. The American Academy of Social Work has committed to a Grand Challenges for Social Work initiative.

At the School of Social Work, we look forward to engaging the Grand Challenges for Social Work. The moving profiles in this report illustrate our capacity for path-breaking work on some of the most difficult social issues in the world and at home. For example:

• Globally, policymakers look to some results of the School’s 30 years of experience in prevention science to shape a new direction in worldwide health priorities.
• Nationally, mental health professionals are considering model suicide prevention legislation crafted in Washington state with the help of one of our gifted professors.
• Locally, the School leads a statewide consolidation of Washington’s child welfare professional training and development to achieve the greatest possible expansion of professional skills.

The School of Social Work community—faculty, staff, students and community partners—deeply appreciates your support.
Practice
How knowledge kindles results

Meet Tina Orwall, 1991 MSW graduate. “What social work teaches us is that change is a group process,” says the Washington state representative for the 33rd Legislative District, which includes the cities of Kent, Des Moines, SeaTac, Burien and Normandy Park.

As a clinical social worker serving people with mental illness, Orwall learned that human-service systems improve when people come together around a common vision. “Social work gave me the ability to look at complex systems, understand them and work to include everyone's voice.”

Those skills have helped the lawmaker tackle some of the state's toughest problems, such as bringing together housing advocates, lenders and distressed homeowners to reduce foreclosure rates.

Last session, Orwall worked with School of Social Work professor and policy expert Jennifer Stuber to pass a suicide-prevention law that's a model for states across the country (see page 11). And she is currently doing research to understand how the state's secondary schools connect with community colleges to close the opportunity gap for students.

“A big part of social work is about empowering people and a healthy exchange of ideas. This dialogue is critical to successfully addressing the needs of our communities. I always partner across the aisle.”

Now, that's a fresh perspective.
EXPLORING HEALTH and RESILIENCE AMONG LGBT SENIORS

Innovative research can open doors at the highest level and influence decisions affecting millions of people. Consider Karen Fredriksen-Goldsen’s breakthrough study on health disparities facing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender seniors—a group whose numbers are expected to more than double by the year 2030, reaching more than 4 million.

Her research, recently presented at a White House conference and at an earlier congressional briefing, spotlights how long-standing social challenges can seriously affect personal well-being. With data she and her colleagues gleaned from 2,560 respondents, ages 50 to 95, the study shows that a lifetime of adversity can create barriers to optimal health as well as foster personal resilience.

For example, social stigma may inhibit physicians or patients from discussing sexuality and, as a result, restrict information about HIV risk, breast or prostate cancer, hepatitis and hormone therapy, as well as discussion of risk behaviors that have a higher incidence among some LGBT seniors such as smoking and drinking. And legal constraints placed on same-sex partnerships deny assistance available to opposite-sex married couples, such as federal family leave and Social Security benefits.

Adversity, however, also creates resilience, and weak institutional support can contribute to powerful friendships and loving partnerships that sustain and enrich the lives of individuals as they age. These and other findings are helping to inform a larger national effort to shape health care policies, define support systems, and develop interventions that benefit a diverse senior population.

CHANGING the LIVES of CHILDREN with UNEXPLAINED STOMACH PAIN

What do we learn from our parents? What do we pass on to our children? Sometimes the legacy is positive; at other times, negative patterns contribute to a new generation of children who suffer needlessly.

The School’s Rona Levy has found that such a transgenerational dynamic is present in one of the most common childhood complaints: stomach pain with no discernible cause. In addition to exploring this transgenerational pattern, Levy has identified effective ways to disrupt it. The answer is close to home: Parents have the power to make a positive impact on their children’s symptoms by changing how they direct their caring attention.

In three face-to-face sessions, clinicians trained parents to alter their responses to their children’s complaints. They also taught the children simple coping skills, including deep breathing and muscle relaxation. The result was a significant, long-term reduction in the children’s reported symptoms, compared to a control group.

Moving from research to practice, the study gives health care providers and families a low-cost protocol that’s easy to implement—with the potential to return children to their normal activities, reduce health care costs and mitigate years of unnecessary pain.

Pioneering a more effective response to a distressing, often chronic, childhood complaint is just the beginning: Levy’s cross-generational approach to health issues has profound implications for a wide range of chronic conditions, including children at risk for obesity.

Rona Levy is internationally known for her groundbreaking research in behavioral medicine. She is a professor of social work, adjunct professor of psychology, department of psychology, and adjunct professor of medicine, Division of Gastroenterology at the University of Washington.
In times of diminished funding, smart new partnerships are critical to amplifying scarce resources. In 2010, state social work leaders began exploring the best way to enhance professional training for Washington’s child welfare professionals. It was clear that the training must meet consistently high standards, be offered in diverse locations, and integrate research and evaluation tools to measure results over time.

In 2012, the Alliance for Child Welfare Excellence, a statewide partnership spearheaded by the School of Social Work, offers comprehensive training and education in three regions across the state, while incorporating a continuum of research and assessment measures to determine outcomes for vulnerable children and families. This integrated approach is a first in the nation.

The alliance model provides greater training and coaching capacity both statewide and locally, delivered through a mix of in-person training, online sessions and webinars. The participation of Eastern Washington University expands the training infrastructure, preparing social workers to be responsive to the challenges in the eastern part of the state.

The stakes have never been higher: Nearly 10,000 children and about 7,800 families in Washington receive state-supported child welfare services every month, including 90 percent of children in foster care. By sharing curricula, delivery methods and evaluation tools, the alliance can better serve families by seamlessly moving social workers from training to front-line service.

PHOTO: PARTNERS FOR OUR CHILDREN CO-FOUNDER CONNIE BALLMER (LEFT) AND UW PRESIDENT MICHAEL YOUNG (RIGHT) SHARE A CONGRATULATORY MOMENT WITH DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND HEALTH SERVICES SECRETARY ROBIN ARNOLD-WILLIAMS AND EASTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY PRESIDENT RODOLFO AREVALO AT THE ALLIANCE SIGNING CEREMONY.
In March 2012, the Washington state Legislature was the first in the nation to pass a bill requiring mental health providers to undergo training in suicide risk assessment and treatment as part of their continuing education. National experts, including the Institute of Medicine, had urged such training for at least a decade with little success.

You have to ask: How did a little-known part of the mental health service sector gain the attention of legislators preoccupied with state budget deficits and a weak job market?

The answer is the deep collaboration between state legislator Tina Orwall (see page 5) and the School’s mental health policy professor, Jennifer Stuber. Orwall and Stuber worked both sides of the legislative aisle to raise awareness and build support, citing statistics that suicide is the eighth leading cause of death among Washingtonians and claims more lives than motor vehicle accidents, homicides and HIV/AIDS combined.

According to a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2008 study, 230,000 adults in Washington state considered suicide—nearly one in 20 adults, higher than the national average.

A year before initiating the advocacy effort in Olympia, Stuber had lost her 40-year-old husband, Matt Adler, to suicide. Adler was under the care of mental health professionals, who failed to recognize critical warning signs.

The Matt Adler Suicide Assessment, Treatment and Management Act of 2012 now sets the standards for other states to follow.
How science sparks and sustains change

Global health policy is shifting from fighting infectious diseases to preventing death and disability from noncommunicable causes, such as drug and alcohol use, smoking, interpersonal violence and unsafe sex practices. International policymakers are tapping the experience of the School’s Social Development Research Group, where researchers pioneered prevention interventions that reduce adolescent behaviors that can trigger a lifetime of health issues.

In a series of articles appearing in The Lancet—one of the world’s leading medical journals—SDRG Director Richard Catalano and his colleagues share more than 30 years of experience investigating predictors of positive youth development as well as the long-term consequences of risky behaviors. They argue that scientific evidence confirms that prevention strategies lead to better health and well-being for young people. For example, programs that support school attendance inoculate many youth from negative influences and behaviors.

One of the major challenges in moving to this new model is getting communities, schools and parents to support tested prevention programs. The authors argue that selecting proven interventions that match community needs builds broad-based support and fosters trust with leaders at the local level. They also highlight the cost benefit of prevention programs, citing $2 to $42 saved for every dollar spent.

With press conferences in New York, London and Hong Kong and presentations at the U.N. Commission on Population and Development, Catalano and his global team made the case that deploying prevention programs that engage families, schools and communities generates big returns in health and welfare.

THE LANCET SERIES CO-AUTHORS ARE ABIGAIL FAGAN, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA; LORETTA GAYN, U.S. CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION; MARK GREENBERG, PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY; CHARLES IRWIN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN FRANCISCO; DAVID ROSS, LONDON SCHOOL OF HYGIENE AND TROPICAL MEDICINE; DANIEL SHEK, THE HONG KONG POLYTECHNIC UNIVERSITY.
American Indians and Alaska Natives suffer from disproportionately high rates of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, substance abuse and mental illness. Despite well-intentioned efforts to close the gap, these health disparities continue to reduce both quality of life and life expectancy for millions.

What’s missing? Karina Walters, director of the School’s Indigenous Wellness Research Institute (IWRI), suggests a profound shift in perspective. Instead of following the Western scientific approach of addressing such problems “from the outside in,” IWRI advocates ways of knowing deeply rooted in indigenous culture.

In the process, IWRI’s research, training and community capacity-building shift the focus from “fixing deficits” to building on strengths, helping people become agents of their own health by using self-knowledge and cultural knowledge as a strategy. IWRI also champions a change in expectations, from taking incremental steps to making breakthrough leaps—reanimating a sustainability model for wellness based on a coherent body of knowledge that has been around for generations.

In 2012, the National Institutes of Health named IWRI a Center of Excellence—one of 16 centers in America devoted to ending health disparities among minorities. The School is the first school of social work to receive this type of grant, which is historically given to schools of public health.

The $6.29 million infrastructure grant will help IWRI make its house a home, creating new permanent space for scholarship and bringing more students into health science research careers. IWRI will also expand its research and training activities with indigenous communities and strengthen collaboration with kindred organizations across North America, Mexico, Australia and New Zealand.

Social work researchers tackle some of our toughest social problems by examining how life experiences shape human health, behavior and well-being. That ability to measure the impact of environmental factors, such as family, school and community, adds critical understanding of root causes—and often contributes to innovative solutions.

Now, with advances in genetics, a new wave of social science is measuring how genes interact with environment to influence behavior. The School’s Karl Hill is at the forefront of this new gene-environment inquiry as he leads a team of 14 in a five-year, federally funded study to investigate the interplay of environmental and genetic factors in tobacco, alcohol and drug dependence.

Hill’s transdisciplinary approach brings a broad genetic assessment to three long-term studies of young adults. The goal is to better understand the interaction of social and genetic vulnerabilities and to design more effective prevention and treatment approaches.

As understanding of the genetics of addiction increases, social work researchers bring a crucial—and sometimes overlooked—perspective. They understand how to gauge environmental influences and assess the impact of interventions.

As stewards of social justice, social work scholars are also thinking deeply about the ethical dimensions of this research—helping to ask, and answer, the right questions to ensure that this exciting new realm of inquiry serves the public good without compromising private lives.
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We will work with you so that your contribution has the greatest possible impact.

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