Research organizations operate in dynamic and unstable environments, and are becoming increasingly dynamic and unstable themselves. Funding for high-quality social work research is increasingly competitive, and social and health issues are increasingly complex. To respond to the vagaries of this ever-changing environment, the Hamovitch research center has been organizing its research activities in teams. As recent empirical research demonstrates, research teams are efficient vehicles of high performance, better decision making, and high-quality research output to the benefit of good professional practice and policy. The featured article of this issue outlines the school’s postdoctoral program, a pioneering step in the nation’s social work research and research training. As new members of our research teams and research clusters, postdoctoral fellows are driving our scholarly efforts with diligence.

This issue of Hamovitch P.I. also presents articles that reflect the diversity and quality of our research activities on topics such as aging and health, sexual abuse, behavioral aspects of communication in outer space, trauma in schools, and managing health in integrated agency settings. I hope you enjoy reading about the exciting and groundbreaking research taking place at the Hamovitch Center!

**Postdoctoral program flourishes**

*By Charli Engelhorn*

A **new program** at the USC School of Social Work is bringing postdoctoral scholars into the school’s longstanding tradition of research excellence. Six promising scholars have been paired with top researchers and faculty members since last fall. Marilyn Flynn, dean of the School of Social Work, said that because research initiatives are becoming increasingly sophisticated and demands on young researchers are complex, it was critical for the school to develop a postdoctoral option.

She said the school has already seen significant benefits from the new research program. “The postdoctoral scholars are the engine for research,” Flynn said. “I see the program as being integral to the high-quality research that we want to do, including publications. This experience is really something people need for tenure track, grants development, and being part of a research team. We have an emphasis on team-oriented research.”

This year, four of the six research clusters at the

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**news**

Associate professor Ann Marie Yamada and postdoctoral fellow Andrew Subica discuss a grant application. The two have collaborated on research initiatives involving mental health care, spirituality, and cultural competence.

**Expert on aging and Asian populations advances ambitious research career**

*Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.*

Director of the Hamovitch Center

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**Groundbreaking study on effects of child abuse garners renewed support**

*page 4*

**New study focuses on effects of communication delays in space**

*page 6*
During her first field placement as an undergraduate social work student in Hong Kong, Iris Chi encountered what she expected to be a very depressing situation. One of her clients was a woman in her 70s who had applied for housing assistance. Her husband and children had died during World War II, she had no other close relatives, and she had worked as a maid her entire life.

“At the beginning, I thought this was a very sad case, that this was just a helpless old lady,” Chi said. “She lived on her own and the living environment was terrible.”

Contrary to her expectations, however, the woman was far from depressed or negative about her circumstances.

“She had nothing but she was very positive and she still wanted to help other people,” Chi said. “I was very surprised to see how resilient an older person can be. That one case really got me to think more about what is important in old age, and what quality of life means to older people.”

That initial spark of interest evolved into a lifelong passion for Chi, who has held the Chinese–American Golden Age Association/Frances Wu Chair for the Chinese Elderly at the USC School of Social Work since 2004. Her extensive research on health and issues of aging, particularly among older Asian groups, has garnered accolades from government officials and brought increased attention to an often marginalized population.

Born in Taiwan and raised in Hong Kong, Chi was exposed to social work at a young age, as her mother cared for children with mental disabilities. Chi said she was initially very jealous of the attention that the other children received.

“The older I got, the more I understood her work and it helped my interest in social work,” she said. Her mother’s career inspired Chi to study sociology at Chinese University of Hong Kong for two years, after which she switched her major to social work to pursue a more active and practice-based approach of social care. Her experiences during her field placement prompted her to travel to the United States to attend San Diego State University, where she was among a handful of students in a new concentration program on aging.

Gerontology was just emerging as a field of study, and many of Chi’s classmates were older practitioners returning to school for more training. They seemed surprised to see a young Asian woman in the program, she said, but Chi was confident in her choice.

“What amazed me the most was that when you looked at the population projections, you pretty much knew what was going to happen 30 or 50 years later,” she said. “I would joke with my classmates and say, I think I’ll have a pretty good career.”

After earning her master’s degree in San Diego, Chi completed a doctorate in social work at UCLA in 1985, where she shifted her focus from a practice-based career to academia. Due to a diverse group of mentors, her interests broadened to include public health and psychology.

After several years of postdoctoral work, Chi returned to Hong Kong and took a position at the University of Hong Kong, where she taught for 17 years, established a research center on aging, and oversaw postgraduate research.

She also led a handful of groundbreaking studies exploring health issues among older adults. Her initial research project involved conducting the first health survey of aging populations in Hong Kong.

“It was something to educate myself, to understand this population better,” Chi said. “Before,
there was no data on aging at all.”

She followed up that baseline survey with a 6-year study on health promotion in Hong Kong. Chi found that although the city had one of the best child health programs in the world, little funding was being directed to older adults.

“People have this misconception that they are getting old, it’s too late to do anything, it’s just a waste of money, that older people don’t even want to participate,” she said. “But that study really showed all those myths are wrong. Older people are very concerned about their health, it’s just they don’t know how to take care of themselves.”

Her results inspired the government to develop a health promotion program for older adults, and sparked interest in the issue among nongovernmental groups and the private sector. Chi parlayed that research into another innovative study on suicide rates among aging populations of Hong Kong.

Newspaper articles on teenage suicides always attracted significant attention, she said, but stories on suicides among older people were typically very brief and buried deep in the newspaper, and always attributed the deaths to chronic illness. Her baseline study found intriguing results; although suicides were indeed linked to chronic illness, other significant factors were at play.

“It wasn’t the disease per se, it was the type of disease,” Chi said.

Health conditions that caused pain, such as cancer and arthritis, were associated with suicide. Other physical issues, such as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, that induced a sense of uselessness or inhibited the ability to perform daily activities as simple as walking or completing household chores were also linked with self-inflicted deaths among elderly groups.

“This really provided useful information for social workers or practitioners,” she said. “You don’t just treat all older people with illnesses like they are going to commit suicide. You focus on specific types of disease that would create this type of effect.”

In recognition of her significant contributions to public health in Hong Kong, government officials honored Chi with the Bronze Bauhinia Star in 2004. By that time, she had drawn the attention of Marilyn Flynn, dean of the USC School of Social Work, who attempted to recruit Chi for a relatively new endowed chair with a combined focus on social work, gerontology, and older Chinese adults.

The position seemed tailor-made for Chi, who was among very few experienced scholars in the world with a strong background in all three areas, and she accepted the position in 2004.

Chi quickly set about gaining a greater understanding of the issues faced by aging groups in her new surroundings, launching a comparative study of older adults in urban areas of Los Angeles. But she also became increasingly intrigued by issues in rural areas of China, where the majority of older Chinese people reside.

“In rural China, the government hasn’t been able to provide much assistance,” she said. “People are still very traditional and rely on families for support.”

Despite being told that local customs and wariness about outsiders would prevent her from conducting a successful study in rural communities, she joined forces with...
Conference crew

As scholars, practitioners, and policy makers gathered in Southern California in January for the Society for Social Work and Research’s annual conference, the USC School of Social Work was represented by a strong contingent of faculty members, postdoctoral fellows, and students.

Approximately 10 percent of the panels, presentations, and discussions during the conference featured a representative from the school, including three special sessions led by faculty members John Brekke, Michalle Mor Barak, and Janet Schneiderman.

The event is viewed by many as the leading national and international venue for social work research.

“The conference has become a must for social work scholars of all ranks,” said Haluk Soydan, the USC School of Social Work’s associate dean of research. “I am pleased to see that so many members of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services—including senior and junior faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and doctoral students—were well represented.

“This is the year’s most important social work research event to share some of the best examples of our own research and benefit from the contributions of others to the profession.”

In all, the school was represented by 63 participants—including 33 faculty members, 23 doctoral students, and three postdoctoral fellows—who were involved in 61 presentations and roundtable discussions on a wide range of topics, from critical issues in child welfare and racial disparities in substance abuse treatment to issues faced by military populations and people experiencing chronic homelessness.

Brekke hosted a session on “The Science of Social Work,” which featured an overview of a framework of the scientific underpinnings of the profession developed by leading social work scholars during a recent conference hosted by the USC School of Social Work, as well as a critical discussion of emerging issues in the field.

During a special session with other social work scholars titled “Securing

Sexual abuse study still going strong

Penelope Trickett has led a 25-year study of the consequences of childhood sexual abuse on women.

They are more likely to be depressed, abuse drugs and alcohol, and engage in self-mutilation. They are more likely to be obese, experience posttraumatic stress disorder, and fail to complete high school. They are more likely to place their children at risk for abuse, neglect, and developmental issues.

They are women who were sexually abused as children.

These dramatic findings emerged from a landmark study led by Penelope Trickett, the David Lawrence Stein/Violet Goldberg Sachs Professor of Mental Health at the USC School of Social Work. For the past 25 years, Trickett and her research team has followed a group of girls, now women, who suffered sexual abuse when they were as young as 2 years old.

She is aware of no other study of this length that has focused on the consequences of sexual abuse, and federal officials recently acknowledged the importance of this ongoing research. A successful application for additional funding from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development received a perfect score from reviewers.

“There are certainly things you would have never been able to learn without doing a longitudinal study of this length,” Trickett said. “The fact that the reviewers gave us such a good score recognized that there was something particularly valuable about this sample.”

In 1987, Trickett and a psychiatrist named Frank Putnam recruited a racially diverse group of girls living in the Washington, DC, area to participate in a new study. Half of the girls had been sexually abused by a family member, abuse that lasted an average of two years before child protective services became involved.

During the first few interviews, researchers didn’t ask directly about sexual abuse, instead measuring levels of depression, self-esteem, and other indicators of the effects of maltreatment. As the research team began delving into various developmental and psychological issues as the girls grew older, several disturbing findings emerged.

Girls who were abused were more likely to become pregnant as teenagers, exhibited poorer verbal ability and learning aptitude, and reported becoming sexually active much sooner than their nonabused counterparts.

“We’re talking young—14 years old compared to 15 and a half for the comparison group,” Trickett said.

As years passed and more data were collected, the study became a treasure trove of

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biological, psychological, and social information that painted a detailed picture of development during the first few decades of these women's lives.

At many points, participants who were sexually abused had higher levels of disassociation, aggression, delinquent behaviors, and problems in school. By adulthood, these issues had coalesced around increased depression and substance abuse.

When interviewed in their mid-20s, abused women in Trickett's study were more likely to report experiencing new instances of sexual or physical assault than the women in the comparison group. They were also more likely to report self-harm and suicidal thoughts.

One unique aspect of the study, which garnered recognition from the Society for Social Work and Research in the form of its Excellence in Research Award in 2012, was its findings regarding levels of cortisol, a hormone released during highly stressful situations.

As children, the girls who had been sexually abused had heightened levels of the hormone. But by the time they reached adolescence, their cortisol levels were below normal. Low levels of cortisol have been linked to problems such as antisocial behavior and posttraumatic stress disorder, as well as physical issues including rheumatoid arthritis, chronic fatigue syndrome, and poor cardiovascular functioning.

“They self-report going to the doctor more often, being hospitalized more, and experiencing a variety of health issues,” Trickett said.

She credited Putnam, whose background in psychiatry prompted the research team to draw blood from participants during the early years of the study, for recognizing the importance of tracking biological markers over time. Trickett plans to focus more on physical health as the study moves forward in the coming years with its seventh and eighth data collection points.

“In their 30s, they are getting to an age where some of these physical problems are showing up after years of development,” she said.

The sample, which included approximately 160 girls at the beginning of the study, has expanded as original participants had children of their own. At the sixth data collection point, Trickett said the group included about 130 offspring; that figure has increased to nearly 250 children.

The growing sample will enable the researchers to explore the effects of sexual abuse across three generations—the abused and nonabused girls, their mothers or nonabusing caregivers, and their children. Initial forays into intergenerational issues have revealed the lasting influence of abuse on families.

“Our abused girls who have become mothers were already more likely to have been reported to child protective services than the comparison group,” Trickett said. “In most cases, it was for neglect. We think it has a lot to do with mental health outcomes and substance abuse issues, but we’d like to follow up on that.”

Although the consequences of sexual abuse have been severe for a significant portion of participants, Trickett was careful to note that many of the abused girls have coped well with their traumatic childhood experiences.

“There is a lot of variability,” she said. “One of the things we haven’t looked at thoroughly enough is whether we can identify characteristics that result in more positive trajectories.”

Advances in statistical methods during the decades since the study began will enable the research team to explore interactions among various attributes and factors in more detail, allowing them to gain a better understanding of why some girls handled the stress and trauma of sexual abuse better than others.

Another area Trickett hopes to examine during the coming years is how the study’s findings can be translated into policy and practice.

“‘There are certainly things you would have never been able to learn without doing a longitudinal study of this length. The fact that the reviewers gave us such a good score recognized that there was something particularly valuable about this sample.’

Penelope Trickett

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“The Society for Social Work and Research, founded in 1994 to advance social work research, has become the leading national and international venue in which advances in the discipline and the profession of social work are presented and exchanged. The conference has become a must for social work scholars of all ranks.”

Haluk Soydan

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Access and Implementing Research within Local and Global Organizations: Strategies, Trends, Opportunities, and Challenges,” Mor Barak described strategies to engage with nonprofit, public, for-profit, and international institutions to conduct research in complex organizational settings.

Finally, Schneiderman joined several other researchers for a “Panel of Recently Funded Scholars,” during which she outlined her experiences of applying for and receiving federal research funding, as well as strategies for success during the grant application process.

Seven USC School of Social Work faculty members also contributed to the conference by serving on its abstract review committee. Maria Aranda, Concepcion Barrio, John Brekke, Kathleen Ell, Erick Guerrero, Dorian Traube, and Ann-Marie Yamada helped conference organizers sift through more than 1,600 submissions.

In addition, professors Lawrence Palinkas and Haluk Soydan promoted their new book, Translation and Implementation of Evidence-Based Practice, during the four-day event in San Diego, Calif.

The 17th annual conference, titled “Social Work for a Just Society: Making Visible the Stakes and Stakeholders,” was expected to attract approximately 1,400 attendees.
A new federal grant will enable Dorian Traube, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, to explore the causes and consequences of a vicious intergenerational cycle of substance abuse among those involved in the child welfare system.

Studies have indicated that more than 8 million teens who need substance use treatment have parents who also struggle with substance abuse problems and were maltreated during their childhood.

“We think about 80 percent of children who are engaged by the child welfare system have some sort of family substance abuse in their profile,” Traube said. “They’ve been abused because their parent was intoxicated or they were neglected because their parent was out trying to score and left them home alone.”

Backed by a three-year, $700,000 grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, she will explore national data to determine the rates of substance use and abuse among those in the child welfare system, as well as the risk factors that might prompt them to use drugs or alcohol.

Despite the significant proportion of the child welfare population affected by substance abuse, Traube said the problem has been largely overlooked, primarily because substance-related issues are background factors rather than the primary reason that children are referred to child welfare. However, she suspects that having parents with substance abuse problems is a major indicator of whether children in the system will struggle with similar issues.

“Because of the inheritability of substance abuse problems,” she said, “the risk factors that children are exposed to during their childhood...are rare during current missions, Palinkas said the issue will become increasingly critical as astronauts begin making longer trips into the galaxy.

“When we get to Mars, the delay is going to be 20 minutes one way,” he said. “So imagine calling your husband or wife from Mars and saying, ‘Hi honey, how are the kids?’ and waiting 40 minutes before you get an answer.”

The three-year study will involve simulating communication lag between astronauts and mission control on the International Space Station and ground control staff to determine how crew members cope with stressful situations and new forms of isolation.

“Would they be stressed out by it, would they identify a way to cope, would they act more autonomously?” Palinkas said.

Crew members will be asked to perform a set of specific tasks during the course of four weeks, split between the beginning and end of their six-month stay on the space station. During two of those weeks, they will experience a 50-second delay in interaction with mission control.

Additionally, the jobs will vary in terms of how novel and critical they are in nature—that is, whether the astronauts received any training for each task and whether each situation is life-threatening or menial.

“Cleaning out the toilet is not novel or critical,” Palinkas said, “but responding to a medical emergency could be.”

Palinkas and his research team will record all communication and rate the crew’s performance with regard to how accurately, efficiently, safely, and successfully they were able to complete their assigned tasks.

“We will also be asking them to rate their performance and the quality of the communication they had with ground control, as well as how stressed they were, how much support they felt they were getting from mission control, and how much autonomy or independence they felt they could exercise,” he said.

To date, only a handful of studies have observed how individuals and teams in remote environments respond to delays in communication. Palinkas served as a consultant on one recent project that examined communication lag between ground staff and a group of astronauts in an underwater habitat off the coast of Florida.

Part of the experiment involved simulating a sting from a toxic lionfish that left one crew member in shock. A 5-minute delay resulted in the underwater team deciding to inject adrenaline directly into the patient’s heart, Palinkas said, rather than diluting it in a saline drip as medical personnel at mission control would have advised.

“It was fairly clear that they were jeopardizing the safety of the astronaut,” he said.
practice. She noted that the participants who had been sexually abused received an average of only three or four counseling sessions immediately after the abuse came to the attention of child welfare officials.

That relative lack of immediate treatment was severely inadequate, Trickett said, both from a recovery standpoint and in terms of ongoing societal costs.

“If these girls end up with lower education levels, mental health problems, substance abuse problems, and preterm births, then front-end investment in treatment would be very worthwhile,” she said.

Despite the length of the ongoing study, the researchers have been tremendously successful at reducing attrition among participants. At least 85 percent of the original group of girls has agreed to be interviewed at any given data point throughout the 25-year project, and the last three time points have boasted a retention rate higher than 95 percent.

The research team is now led by Trickett and Jennie Noll, a former doctoral student at the University of Cincinnati’s Department of Pediatrics, is a big reason why the team has been able to retain so many participants over the years.

“She has made sure that when we’ve had gaps in funding, and we have had quite a bit over these 25 years, that she keeps in touch with people,” Trickett said, describing her colleague as warm and engaging.

The project has received financial support from an array of federal and private sources, including the William T. Grant Foundation, the National Institute of Mental Health, and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

Although financial details are still being finalized, it appears the project will receive close to the $2.5 million over five years that Trickett and her colleagues requested from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

“It’s the only one that got a perfect score, so it’s right at the top of the list,” Trickett said. She added later, “If anybody had told me when I started this study that I’d still be doing it now, I would have never believed them.”

Due to the small number of available participants—only three U.S.-affiliated astronauts are stationed in space at any given time—the researchers hope to replicate the study with three to five different crews during the next few years.

Palinkas is hopeful that findings from the project will prove useful in terms of improving training programs for astronauts to handle anxiety and stress, as well as developing technology that helps mitigate the negative effects of communication delays.

Other members of the research team include Chih-Ping Chou, a senior biostatistician with the USC School of Social Work, and members of the Behavioral Health and Performance Element of the NASA Human Research Program. The study runs through September 2015.

“Several points have boasted a retention rate higher than 95 percent.”

Penelope Trickett

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abuse, both genetically and behaviorally, not to mention the self-medication for all the trauma they’ve experienced, we would expect these kids to be among the most high-risk populations,” she said.

Using data from the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-Being, the only national data set that has tracked samples of children engaged in child welfare over time, Traube will examine factors that make some children more susceptible to substance abuse, including family history of substance-related problems, race and ethnicity, type of maltreatment, and whether or not they were placed in foster care or otherwise removed from their home.

She will also explore how substance use issues develop over the course of child development, particularly during the teenage years, to determine whether there are specific points in time when intervention and prevention efforts might be most effective.

“When kids hit 15, it seems like the time when this becomes the biggest issue,” Traube said.

In addition to presenting research findings in leading journals and conferences, she plans to convene a panel of experts in child welfare and substance abuse during each year of the project. The group, which will include representatives from the National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare and the National Alliance for Drug Endangered Children, will discuss how findings can be used to improve various child welfare and drug and alcohol dependency programs.

“I am hopeful that it will lead to changes in the system of care in behavioral health services, really an alteration of the way we provide substance abuse services to families,” Traube said.

Because the data are nationally representative, she said findings should be applicable to the entire population of children in the child welfare system.

Traube is also hopeful that knowledge gained from the project will inform efforts to tailor existing substance abuse recovery programs to the specific needs of the child welfare population.

Other USC-affiliated scholars involved with the study include assistant professor Michael Hurlburt, senior biostatistician Chih-Ping Chou, and doctoral student Amy He. The project is funded through August 2015.
As the head of mental health and crisis response in Los Angeles schools in the late 1990s, Marleen Wong could sense that violence and trauma was having a serious effect on children.

When she responded to one of the approximately 3,000 serious incidents that occurred on an annual basis in local schools, such as a stabbing or assault, she would often ask students involved in the traumatic event whether they had similar experiences in the past.

“More often than not, they would say yes, my brother was beat up on the way to the store or I saw my father hurt my mother,” Wong said.

Without empirical proof of the problem, however, she was limited in terms of marshaling resources and support for those students, so Wong approached researchers at UCLA and RAND Corporation. That initial contact in 1998 spawned a series of groundbreaking studies on the prevalence and effects of trauma in Los Angeles schools and ultimately led to the creation of the Trauma Services Adaptation (TSA) Center for Resiliency, Hope and Wellness in Schools, the primary national source of strategies and materials to combat issues such as violence and bullying in schools.

Wong, now associate dean of field education and clinical professor at the USC School of Social Work, recently received a fifth round of federal funding to support the center in the form of a four-year, $2.4-million grant.

“It’s very gratifying to see that the work you do is helpful, is relevant to the challenges that people are facing in real life, not just here in Los Angeles but in different parts of the country and the world,” she said. “What is also gratifying is that the level of knowledge and comfort that people have with providing trauma interventions has really increased in schools across the country.”

The funding will enable the TSA Center to continue its mission of developing and disseminating school-based interventions focused on trauma and offering specialized training to school leaders and teachers. However, the center is expanding its focus with the new grant, including initiatives to develop a curriculum for teachers designed to improve trauma resilience among students, using technology to broaden the reach of the center, and identifying and addressing the needs of vulnerable students such as LGBT youth.

Developing strategies to reduce secondary trauma is also a new objective of the TSA Center as it continues its work during the next four years. Comparing the phenomenon to secondhand smoke, Wong explained that research has shown that teachers who are exposed to students who have been traumatized can also experience stress and depression.

“You don’t have to smoke the cigarette, but you’re in the room with all this toxic matter,” she said. “The same thing is true with teachers. They can’t get it out of their minds, the violence or trauma their students have talked to them about, and they can’t sleep at night, they are irritable, and their primary relationships can suffer.”

Another main focus of the project is offering advice and guidance as school officials adapt interventions to address their specific needs. One high-profile tool developed by Wong and her colleagues, the Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS), has been used in a wide array of settings, from Native American populations in Montana to those affected by hurricanes and the BP oil spill in New Orleans.

The intervention was developed in response to initial studies in the Los Angeles Unified School District that found an astonishing level of trauma among young students.

“More than 90% of children in living in certain zip codes here in Los Angeles, in South L.A. and East L.A., had been exposed to violence—kicked, punched, threatened with a gun or knife, assaulted—with the past year of our studies,” Wong

“It was shocking to everybody that the children we studied had higher rates of PTSD than what was going on in the Middle East at that time, or in any war zone. I think that is what really brought attention to the work we were doing.”

Marleen Wong
Health navigator model advances

By Charli Engelhorn

People with severe mental illness die an average of 20 to 30 years younger than the general population, an alarming trend that caught the attention of John Brekke, a professor at the USC School of Social Work.

Brekke was disturbed to find that this diminished life expectancy is frequently linked to complications from preventable health conditions that go untreated. With a new grant from the Unihealth Foundation, he hopes to address premature mortality among those with serious mental illness (SMI) through the further development of a health model known as the Bridge Peer Health Navigator Intervention.

“There is a separation between health and mental health agencies that leaves this population vulnerable,” Brekke said. “When the severely mentally ill try to get physical care, they face many impediments. Every place the system can break down, it does.”

With the new round of funding from the Unihealth Foundation, Brekke and his research team will develop an agency-preparedness guide. The agency-specific manual will be designed to introduce the model across a wider scope of mental health clinics around the world, specifically dealing with issues of the implementation and sustainability of the peer health navigation intervention.

Brekke and his team are working with Pacific Clinics, a Los Angeles mental health agency Brekke has partnered with on research ventures for 20 years. Pacific Clinics will help analyze the protocol and identify critical aspects that pertain to agency integration, in addition to connecting Brekke with two other agencies where the bulk of the research will be conducted.

“The two other agencies will test out the manual, looking at agency uptake and sustainability, and they will become our case studies for what is working and what isn’t,” Brekke said. “Most often, how well providers maintain fidelity of a particular treatment and implementation is the key factor. How well they practice it and keep the intervention strong will be a main point of concern for us.”

The peer navigator model promotes access to comprehensive health care by training people who have personal experience living with mental illness to serve as navigators for fellow SMI patients, helping them break through the barriers that deter them from receiving physical care. Through this process, Brekke believes the avenues leading to comprehensive health care will become demystified and less aversive, allowing patients to learn to self-manage their care.

“The goal is to link to better health care, but it is also to give the patients the skills to do this work over time and self-manage their own health care to the best degree possible,” Brekke said.

Deciphering the barriers to care was the goal of the first phase of the project. Brekke and his team sought to pinpoint the activities and attitudes that kept the SMI population from accessing physical health care. What they found were five main categories that either individually or collectively hindered access to medical services.

At the system level, a lack of integrated facilities that offer both mental and physical care often led to geographic complications for SMI patients needing to move from one doctor to another. Additionally, providers had little incentive to treat patients outside of their standard reimbursable care due to disparities in funding streams and insurance coverage for various services.

“These health care and mental health care agencies are not designed to integrate, and they never have been,” said Brekke.

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said. “It was consistent every year.”

The research project culminated in a survey of every sixth-grade student in the school district. It confirmed that those living in areas with high rates of crime and gang activity had similarly high rates of behavioral health issues. Additionally, the study revealed that 27 percent of students who experienced a traumatic event had posttraumatic stress disorder, whereas 16 percent struggled with clinical symptoms consistent with depression.

But it wasn’t until the research team published an article in 2003 in the Journal of the American Medical Association reporting on the development of CBITS as a strategy to address trauma in schools that the issue gained national attention.

“It was shocking to everybody that the children we studied had higher rates of PTSD than what was going on in the Middle East at that time, or in any war zone,” Wong said. “I think that is what really brought attention to the work we were doing.”

The intervention proved effective, significantly reducing the levels of stress and depression among students who participated in the group and individual therapy sessions. CBITS is now used across the United States and abroad in countries such as Australia, China, and Japan.

As independent research on the effectiveness of the tool in different cultural and social settings emerges, the TSA Center has provided guidance and suggestions on how best to adapt CBITS and other school trauma-related interventions, particularly through ongoing consultations and a national summit held annually.

Wong credited her strong relationship with her fellow researchers for the success of the center throughout the years, noting that the team has participated in weekly phone calls and meetings for more than a decade, creating a unique and lasting collaboration.

“This has been one of the longest community-based research partnerships I know about,” she said. “I certainly couldn't have done this work without my RAND and UCLA colleagues.”

The extended funding, provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, will support the center through September 2016.
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The school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services is funding postdoctoral fellows to both assist with ongoing research endeavors and provide valuable experience as the scholars move forward in their careers.

A postdoctoral position is very advantageous for recent doctoral graduates, according to program officials, because it provides greater access to funding as part of an established research program than scholars might receive in other positions. Many graduates may also need more research experience and published articles before they can successfully compete for a tenure-track position.

Cara Pohle, a postdoctoral fellow in the Child Development and Children’s Services cluster, was looking for such an opportunity when she graduated from USC’s doctoral program. “I had a lot of teaching experience during my PhD work, but I was lacking publications. I needed to build a stronger trajectory, so a postdoc position was a better fit for me,” Pohle said. “I liked the idea of having time to follow my own agenda and focus on my own research and publishing more. And you can’t beat being at USC because of all the research that is happening.”

All postdoctoral students at USC are paired with a doctoral faculty mentor in their specific cluster or topic of interest. The mentors help to shape individual development plans for each scholar and guide them through the process of creating a successful research, grant, and publication portfolio.

“It’s a big investment,” said William Vega, provost professor and executive director of the school’s USC Roybal Institute on Aging. “We spend a lot of time helping to create a process of how to think about science. They all have PhD experience and are assumed to have that basic knowledge, but now can they become concise and efficient in forming their research topic? You have to retrain your neurological system to think about these things.”

In their work with postdoctoral fellows, Vega said faculty mentors emphasize clarity of thought and how to find the balance between their personal career goals and the interests of the field of social work. “Are they part of an interesting area in the field and committed to it? Can they make a contribution and is there receptivity for funding and publications?” Vega said. “Their research needs to have legs and forward motion and it must overlap with the interests of the faculty. The mentor must set expectations to monitor and hold them accountable.”

The relationship between scholar and mentor can prove to be symbiotic, as exemplified by the experience of one postdoctoral research fellow in the Serious Mental Illness cluster, Andrew Subica.

Born and raised in Hawaii by parents with Japanese and Portuguese backgrounds, Subica became interested in racial and cultural disparities after experiencing life as an ethnic minority for the first time when he moved to Pomona, California, for his undergraduate studies. He returned to Hawaii to earn his PhD in clinical psychology and began working in clinical practice with people experiencing mental health issues.

His first postdoctoral position was in central Texas at a Veteran’s Affairs center, where he worked closely with people with severe mental illness. “Clinical was rewarding, but it was also very individual based,” Subica said. “Research reaches a larger population, and you can create interventions. I wanted to try that and decided I did want to follow a tenure track. The university brought me in to look at serious mental illness and culture, two things I had interest and experience in.”

Subica says he was attracted by the mentoring aspect of the postdoctoral program, and his experiences at USC have been valuable as he pursues his research interests. He was paired with associate professor Ann Marie Yamada, whose own interests in cultural competence and severe mental illness made for a great match.

Together, they recently submitted a grant to develop a spirituality-infused intervention for those with serious mental illness and formed a relationship with the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health to integrate the intervention’s framework into care. “Without the program at USC, I wouldn’t have had the spirituality aspect without working with Dr. Yamada,” Subica said. “This is a specialized aspect of cultural practice specific to Los Angeles and gives us the chance to build on each other’s work and contribute to the literature and care of this population. “You don’t get better unless you have good supervisors, and I wouldn’t know where to go and where to look on my own to carve out a career. I couldn’t have had this type of mentorship in the clinical setting,” he said.

The school’s recently formed research clusters are striving to develop a culture of intellectual thought in areas important to the social work profession, said Vega. The postdoctoral program is an excellent foundation on which that culture can grow. “Maturing the program will require the development of regular scholarly events, such as guest lectures, proposals, and
presentations by the postdoc scholars,” Vega said. “What people find is commonality across interests. They can learn from each other and have a critical interchange of information that is fostered by the bringing of people together.”

Vega said it will take time for the program to mature and build a solid reputation. The school has the resources to make sure that occurs, he said, but how quickly and effectively the infrastructure and training process expand will be big determinants of the program’s success.

“We need a growth curve to show that we are progressing nicely and hitting milestones,” he said. “We want our program to be one that assumes uniformity in expectations and what the scholars are getting here. We can build a reputation of good research and publications.”

Flynn said the future of the program will also depend on how much support the school can continue to offer and how successful the postdoctoral scholars are at competing for limited funding.

“We have a core, and the potential for growth is infinite depending on research opportunities,” said Flynn. “But I am tremendously excited. This program is important for the future of the school, and the caliber of our scholars is high, so I am quite proud.”

“Providers in one field are not trained in the other, and they don’t want to deal with the issues that don’t directly involve them.”

For medical providers, being distanced from SMI patients led to increased stigma, further intensifying their lack of desire to manage the complex needs and behaviors of SMI patients. Stigma and other negative attributes can create a sense of devalued worth and character in these patients and cause a cycle of self-defeating thoughts that lead to shame, a lack of independent ability, and avoidance of services altogether.

Yet, increased need and erratic behavior are often legitimate realities for this population, and poor cognitive functioning and issues with communication can serve as personal roadblocks if the patient is required to locate their own health care provider, wait in lines or busy waiting rooms, or navigate entry systems and paperwork.

“A patient will go to the emergency room and be forced to wait for hours to get seen for 8 minutes. If they do not have an aversion to public and crowded areas and don’t get up to leave, the care they are given is often slight,” said Brekke. “They don’t get many lab tests, and the providers hand out prescriptions or treatment plans that seriously mentally ill people don’t understand or follow.”

Identifying these personal, professional, systemic, environmental, and sociopolitical issues allowed the team to understand the challenges and set a framework for solutions. Using peers to help diminish debilitating fears and stigma is a promising approach, Brekke said, noting their ability to build a rapport and earn the trust of clients with SMI, which is vital for this population to achieve successful outcomes.

Brekke’s team currently has a contract with the Los Angeles Department of Mental Health to train 80 staff members in the health navigator model. The researchers hope to have the implementation manual ready after the two-year grant term so it may be used during training sessions for mental health professionals and tested on a larger scale, which will improve its generalizability and sustainability.

“The goal is to link to better health care, but it is also to give the patients the skills to do this work over time and self-manage their own health care to the best degree possible.”

John Brekke
Michale Mor Barak, professor and director of the USC School of Social Work PhD program, received a $35,000 grant from the Borchard Foundation to hold an international colloquium at the foundation’s Center on International Education in France. One of four annual grants designed to improve cultural and academic exchange between France and the United States, the funding will support Mor Barak’s presentation titled “The Paradox of Multiculturalism Policies and Diversity Management: A Comparison of Public and Business Policies in Europe and in the U.S.” The colloquium will involve a discussion by scholars, business leaders, and policy experts. This is the second grant awarded to Mor Barak by the Borchard Foundation, a rare occurrence for this highly competitive honor.

Hortensia Amaro, dean’s professor with the USC School of Social Work, has been selected to receive the 2012 Ernest R. Hilgard Lifetime Achievement Award from APA Division One: Society for General Psychology. The society aims to create coherence among diverse specialties in the field of psychology through the incorporation of ideologies and perspectives from various sub-disciplines into research, theory, and practice. Amaro was selected from an impressive list of academic scientists, professional practitioners, and psychologists. The award highlights contributions to integrating diverse disciplines into the area of psychology.

Helen Land has been named senior editor of the Journal of HIV/AIDS & Social Services. The publication will be added to the school’s journal holdings, which now includes seven academic journals. An associate professor, Land has focused her research on issues of stress, coping, and spirituality as they relate to groups affected by HIV/AIDS, poverty, violence, and other social problems.

Associate professor Karen Lincoln has been elected to the board of directors of the Society for Social Work and Research, the pre-eminent professional organization for those in the field of social work. As a member-at-large, Lincoln will help guide the society as it pursues its mission of supporting research on social work practice and policy and promoting social equality.

Drug and Alcohol Dependence has recognized Charles Kaplan, associate dean of research, as being among the top 5 percent of its reviewers. The highly ranked journal is following a recent trend to acknowledge the significant contributions of reviewers.