The USC School of Social Work and its Hamovitch Center continue to spearhead innovations in support of underserved populations both at home and abroad. The Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR) is yet another groundbreaking approach that defines the uniqueness of the Hamovitch Center. This issue’s cover story highlights the activities of CIR, conceptualized and initiated under Dean Marilyn Flynn’s leadership and led by Dr. Anthony Hassan, a retired Air Force officer with 25 years of experience in military social work and leadership development. CIR is now the go-to national resource for military social work.

We also profile the career path of Professor Kathy Ell, whose outstanding contributions to social work research and the betterment of social work practice are intimately embedded in the development of the Hamovitch Center. A champion of evidence-based practice, Dr. Ell continues to advance high-quality social work to the benefit of clients in the social, health, and mental health sectors.

This issue also features the exciting work of the Hamovitch Center’s highly qualified team of statisticians and data managers, who ensure our research projects have robust, state-of-the-art designs, and that scientific information is handled correctly. Enjoy!

Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.
Director of the Hamovitch Center

[ news ]

Center aids wounded warriors

As two of the longest-running military conflicts in U.S. history begin to wind down, soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan face an uncertain future. The economy is sluggishly retreating from the brink of collapse, jobs are scarce, and many veterans dealing with psychological problems are struggling to access quality care. Longer deployments, fewer breaks, and multiple tours of duty have translated into a dramatic increase in “invisible wounds,” a term used in a 2008 RAND study to describe mental health conditions and cognitive impairments such as posttraumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, and major depression that have become the hallmark of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Soldiers are different because they go to war, they are sanctioned to kill, and they probably see violence and atrocities that most people will never see,” said Anthony Hassan, director of the USC School of Social Work’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families. “These things take a toll on families. They take a toll on individuals.”

By the late 2000s, it became increasingly clear that the military, civilian, and academic sectors were fundamentally unprepared to address the unique needs of returning soldiers. Critical gaps included an insufficient mental health workforce and a lack of training in effective treatments for depression and posttraumatic stress.

CIR | continued on page 10

[ inside this issue ]

Professor’s research driven by passion for helping underserved populations page 2

School infuses military research into master’s program curriculum page 4

Doctoral student focuses on key methods of child welfare system reform page 6
Professor melds health and social work

One evening decades ago, a young Kathleen Ell sat in her bedroom listening as a group of church elders discussed ways to get rid of a new minister who wanted to allow blacks into the congregation.

No more than 13 years old at the time, Ell put on her robe and marched into the dining room, where she faced the board of elders, two pastors, and her father, who served as president of the congregation.

“I walked right in and said, Jesus wouldn’t be very happy with the conversation you’re having right now,” she said. “There was silence. Absolute silence. Then my father said, the kid’s right.”

The following Sunday, she stood proudly with her father by her side as members of the congregation came up to thank her. The minister ultimately remained at the church and led the effort to open its doors to people of all ethnicities.

Ell points to that moment in her childhood, when she recognized the immorality of discrimination, as the spark that lit her passion for addressing problems faced by underserved populations. As a professor at the USC School of Social Work, she has dedicated her prolific research career to finding solutions to depression and other psychological issues surrounding life-threatening illnesses among low-income and ethnically diverse groups.

“I’ve been asked why I want to work with them, that it’s much easier to work with the middle class,” she said. “It’s obviously a very strong internal concern of mine, and that’s not going to change.”

As an undergraduate student at Valparaiso University, Ell studied sociology, history, and psychology, in addition to gaining experience working with impoverished populations during a social work field assignment in the public school system in Gary, Indiana. Following graduation, she took a position as a social work assistant at Barnes Hospital in St. Louis, where she spent her time in a basement ward for low-income patients.

Every day for three months Ell sat by the bed of her first patient, Mary, a black woman with leukemia who had few visits from family or friends. Despite receiving good medical care, Mary experienced significant pain and struggled with depression.

“My aim was to give her someone to talk with, other than doctors or nurses or her sister, who could not come in regularly,” Ell said. “We both knew she was dying and that pain would continue. It was an opportunity to take her mind off being alone and in pain.”

When Ell entered the hospital one day and saw Mary’s bed was empty, she immediately knew what had happened and left the ward in tears. Support from colleagues helped her come to terms with the experience, and she quickly developed a desire to bring solace and comfort to those in pain.

In the mid-1960s, Ell took a position at the LAC+USC Medical Center in Los Angeles. After a break to earn her master’s degree in social work from UCLA, she returned to the medical center and began working in the coronary care unit, where she noticed a distinct pattern among her patients.

“I just had a sense that people who I diagnosed as depressed were more likely to die,” she said.

Encouraged by physicians at the hospital, Ell sought and received funding for what became one of the earliest studies linking death and depression among heart disease patients—now a proven phenomenon for a variety of other health conditions. Responding to her breakthrough, USC medical faculty strongly encouraged her to enter a doctoral program.
After completing her doctorate at UCLA in 1978, Ell continued her work on psychological disorders and health outcomes, becoming the first social worker to receive research funding from the Los Angeles division of the American Heart Association.

In 1993, she was asked to serve as an advisor to the National Institute of Mental Health for six months. She ended up staying for two and a half years and became the director of the Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research, spending her time meeting with members of Congress to promote social work as a research profession.

On one occasion, she was asked to help the Pentagon revamp a training program to prepare female service members for the possibility of being raped or taken prisoner during combat. The training method at the time, Ell said, was to have several muscular male soldiers hold the female soldier down on a table and simulate a rape.

“I tried very hard not to fall off my chair,” Ell said. “I asked if this was very effective and they said no, and that in some cases it was psychologically very stressful and in some cases required counseling follow-up.”

Working in tandem with the Department of Defense, she put together a research team and developed recommendations to improve the training program, as well as a variety of other military initiatives designed to address various mental health-related issues.

When Ell returned to USC in 1996, she focused her research career on behavioral health care and continued emphasizing research as a key aim of the social work profession. Successful in obtaining numerous funded grants, she encouraged postdoctoral faculty and predoctoral students from both medicine and social work to participate in her studies with an aim of fostering their research careers.

A key element of Ell’s research has been a focus on interdisciplinary studies and randomized clinical trials that include qualitative analysis and cost-effectiveness elements.

“For a practice-based profession, you need to test whether what you’re doing is effective versus alternatives,” she said, calling randomized trials the “gold standard” of practice-based research. “How many people would want to get into a plane that hasn’t been tested?”

A critical component for Ell is the applicability and uptake of interventions in community health systems, given recent reports indicating that the gap between creating effective tools and implementing them in the real world can be as wide as 20 years. She has led the School of Social Work’s involvement in the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute, which seeks to speed research into practice.

Additionally, her study findings and tools have been highlighted on the National Cancer Institute’s website and the Innovations Exchange of the Agency for Health Research and Quality, which compiles and features groundbreaking innovations that improve health quality and reduce disparities.

Ell’s success in developing innovative approaches to health care has allowed her to continue to receive significant funding for new studies. A major project she is currently pursuing involves a study of 1,500 patients with diabetes among nine clinics in the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services.
School fuses military research, education

As service members begin to transition from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, preparing a new generation of social workers to address issues such as post-traumatic stress, depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders is critical.

"With the number of veterans who have returned and need some kind of assistance with reintegration, we definitely need to train more people to work with them," said Jan Nissly, a research assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work's Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families (CIR).

As the first university in the nation to offer a specialization in military social work, the USC School of Social Work has created a unique alliance between research and education designed to improve understanding of military culture and rapidly equip students and clinicians with the most effective skills for working with military personnel and their families.

In addition to offering specialized coursework and military-related field placements to master's students interested in military social work, the school is bridging the gap between research and curriculum through a $5.6 million research project funded by the Department of Defense.

Headed by CIR, the project involves evaluating the school’s curriculum to determine whether students gain knowledge about military culture and practice, self-efficacy as a social worker, and clinical skills specific to military-related clients. Another major component of the project is the creation of a virtual patient, a simulation program designed to help students develop practice skills before they begin interacting with real clients.

“I think a lot of it is just helping people understand the lived experience of what it’s like to be a service member or a family member,” Nissly said.

As part of the curriculum evaluation, CIR researchers developed a set of video vignettes with an Army veteran depicting several therapy sessions. Students involved in the study are shown the clinical vignettes before, during, and after their training in the master’s program.

Kelly Turner, a research assistant professor heading the evaluation portion of the project, explained that students are asked how they would respond in various situations—what they would say next, what informed their thinking, and what they would do differently if they were treating a civilian.

“It’s giving us a little peek into the mechanism of how clinical skills develop,” she said. “We’re starting to see profiles of what a beginner says, what somebody who is getting the hang of it says, and what an expert says.”

Researchers plan to compare responses by students enrolled in the military subconcentration to those of students receiving general social work training to determine whether the military-focused curriculum is effective.

**MILITARY | continued on page 5**
Results from the study, which concludes this summer, could help school leaders adjust the program to address common misconceptions about military culture.

Developing practice skills tailored to military populations is a difficult process, Turner said, as clinicians must be adept at understanding and reacting to the unique perspective of each client instead of simply running down a checklist of questions.

“Social work is about rapport-building and trust, so a checklist doesn’t quite cut it,” she said. “And when you recognize that the military is this really diverse group, it’s a lot for a beginner to wrap their head around.”

Hannah Stryker, a master’s student who serves as cochair of the school’s Military Social Work Interest Group, acknowledged that improving cultural competency is critical to providing the best and most-effective treatment options.

A Reserve Officers’ Training Corps cadet who will commission as an active duty military social worker this summer, Stryker is all too familiar with ignorance about military culture. She recalled one incident in which she attended class in uniform.

“Someone actually asked me, do you ever feel like a woman?” she said. Stryker is hopeful the military social work program will eventually help eliminate some of that cultural misunderstanding.

One effort led by the student group involves immersion trips to military installations. Students have recently visited the Los Alamitos Army Airfield and a Marine Corps recruiting depot in San Diego, where they met with both military social workers and service members.

“The goal is to get that one-on-one perspective, not just from what it is like to be a social worker with this population, but what it is like to have been in the mental health care system as a soldier,” she said.

“What type of things worked, what type of things didn’t work, what did you hate, what did you love?”

Stryker also participated in CIR’s curriculum evaluation project, and said the center’s effort to integrate the research culture into the master’s program has been impressive.

“They got so many people involved in that study and they made it really convenient,” she said. “CIR has such a good, positive presence here and they do so much for our students.”

Researchers hope to do more to enhance the connection between the center and students, particularly through the development of the virtual patient. In collaboration with the USC Institute for Creative Technologies, CIR is designing the avatar-based simulation program to portray the impact of combat stress on veterans.

Once the program is operational, students will interact with the virtual patient to improve their clinical skills and competence with military populations. Nissly acknowledged the logistics of developing a realistic simulation have been challenging.

“The complexity of the dialogue that we need in order to train social workers and behavioral health professionals is so extreme,” she said.

Researchers plan to have the virtual patient ready for classroom use within the next year, which would make it the first application of virtual reality in a social work setting.

Nissly is hopeful the technology will help students recognize the unique experiences of returning service members.

It could be something as simple as understanding that veterans with combat-related mental health issues then. Months and needed his memories and anger to survive. “Maybe it’s dysfunctional and it does not work at home, but it’s what he was telling me he needed to stay alive and protect his unit.”

When she learned the Marine would be separating from the military upon his return from his next deployment, she encouraged him to seek help for any mental health issues then.

As a follow-up to the theoretical paper, Weiss is involved in an empirical study involving 2,500 veterans attending a private college to determine whether the degree to which service members embrace a military worldview or identity impacts their help-seeking behaviors and adjustment to civilian life.

Her ultimate goal is to create a tool that clinicians can use to determine how strongly a veteran identifies with the warrior ethos. That insight could help social workers tailor their approach to care in a way that supports the individual perspectives of their military clients.

“Nobody has tackled the issue of military identity and worldviews and its impact on repeated combat deployments and reintegration,” she said. “It’s finally getting the attention it deserves.”
A new book by Margaret Fetting, an adjunct professor with the USC School of Social Work, draws on her 30 years of clinical experience in chemical dependency treatment to offer a comprehensive and reflective overview of the substance use field, as well as an imaginative treatment model.

In “Perspectives on Addiction: An Integrative Treatment Model with Clinical Case Studies,” released in December by Sage Publications, Fetting outlines the underlying causes and consequences of substance use disorders and presents a reader-friendly guide to developing effective treatment skills.

“It’s a lively, nuanced and creative way to capture what is sitting across from you as a clinician,” she said.

Designed for students and professionals who come in contact with and treat individuals and families struggling with substance use disorders, the book expands traditional definitions and offers meaningful insights inspired by the author’s students, theorists, and those in recovery.

“The book has been a work-in-progress all this time with influences from my clinical work and my students,” she said. “I get a lot of input from both students and patients, which I value a great deal.”

Edward J. Khantzian, of Harvard Medical School, wrote in a review of the book that Fetting covers all the bases of drugs, societal contexts, theories, and treatment methods, and astutely addresses the dogmas and controversies.

As a police officer on the streets of Atlanta, Jaymie Lorthridge had her fair share of tough calls. Among the most difficult were those involving children in unsafe situations. Unless she responded to the same location for another incident, Lorthridge rarely had the chance to see what happened to those children after they left her custody.

One particular experience has stuck with her through the years. Called out to an apartment for one reason or another, she found a tiny baby, several months old at most, left alone on a bed in the empty residence.

“I was thinking, how long has this baby been here? Is anybody going to come back?” she said. “This child is so young. What kind of future are they going to have if they are already being abandoned?”

Her desire to have a positive impact on the lives of children on a long-term basis prompted Lorthridge to leave her job in law enforcement in 2002. A year later, she had enrolled in the master’s program at the USC School of Social Work.

Now 35, she is set to complete her doctorate in social work at USC and has focused her research efforts on how best to make major changes in child welfare.

Her passion for large-scale solutions to critical issues plaguing the child welfare service system has not gone unnoticed. She was among 15 scholars selected nationwide for the highly competitive Doris Duke Fellowship for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect, a two-year program that aims to develop a new generation of leaders in child welfare policy and practice.

The fellowship, which includes a $25,000 stipend, will enable Lorthridge to focus her attention and energy on her dissertation, which she plans to complete by this summer. In essence, her research involves outlining the key aspects of change that are critical to successfully reforming child welfare services and policies.

“When you are talking about a system and a reform to the system, there are lots of moving parts,” Lorthridge said. Her dissertation will utilize data from the child welfare system in Los Angeles County, an incredibly diverse and expansive region.

“What works in San Fernando Valley may not work very well over in Santa Fe Springs,” she said. “You want to make sure any reform that the system makes, even though it’s very broad and it’s applying to all locations, it’s going to work for all of those locations.”

Lorthridge is familiar with the Southern California region, having grown up in the Inland Empire. She moved to Atlanta to attend Spelman College, where she earned a degree in psychology before joining the police force.

As a master’s student, she worked on a child welfare prevention research project during her required field placement and quickly became hooked on the topic. When she decided to pursue a doctorate at USC, Lorthridge found a mentor in Jacquelyn McCroskey, a professor with the USC School of Social Work.

The two share a common interest in using social work research to improve large-scale public systems, and Lorthridge has worked...
Angeles County’s Department of Children and Family Services. Fellows are selected on previous research to examine reform of child maltreatment at its root before intervention is necessary—made her a perfect candidate for the Doris Duke fellowship. Fellows are selected from an array of disciplines, ranging from social work and public health to economics and psychology, but must be interested in and passionate about pursuing initiatives that advance the prevention of child abuse.

PHD

In addition to purchasing textbooks and other needed supplies, Lorthridge has used the fellowship stipend to support herself rather than taking on additional research or teaching responsibilities. That has allowed her to focus on her dissertation, which builds upon system-level change in social work fields such as child welfare, Lorthridge has also been pulling knowledge from other disciplines such as business, computer science, and even astronomy. It is much easier to manipulate variables and observe effects in physical systems, she said, particularly compared to complex social systems that often have multiple uncontrollable variables that require more time to track.

Lorthridge didn’t initially envision pursuing a doctorate in social work when she came to USC, but encouragement from Jan Nissly, Devon Brooks, and other faculty members steered her in that direction, as did the opportunity to learn from top scholars throughout the university.

“When you have that USC education behind you, it opens doors and sets you apart,” she said.

As she gets closer to completing her dissertation, Lorthridge has started considering her future plans. Although she is looking into tenure-track faculty positions, she is also interested in pursuing additional studies.

“More than ever, post-doctoral opportunities are really a valuable tool for new graduates,” she said. “It allows you to continue the learning process in a very focused manner.”

Her time as a police officer has also sparked an interest in issues surrounding child trafficking, and she has been following related legislation and initiatives on a nationwide and statewide level. As a result, she is considering getting involved with a nonprofit organization working to address the problem.

“I’m committed to going where I think I can make the most contribution. I want to go to an organization where the culture and the mission is to keep bridging frontiers.”

Jaymie Lorthridge

Now available from Sage Publications.

Fetting also integrates aspects of psychoanalytical theory into her developmental model of recovery—an approach that has plagued the field of addiction theory and practice.

“She effectively captures and conveys the treacherous aspect of relapse, but also the hopeful prospect for the clinician and patient to find pathways for transitioning from using addictive substances to considering imaginative avenues for recovery,” he added.

By highlighting therapeutic action moments that describe effective interaction between patient and clinician, Fetting demonstrates growth and change experiences during four developmental stages of recovery. In addition, the book presents 12 progressive profiles of substance use and its disorders, compared to just two categories for substance abuse and dependence in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

Adjunct professor Margaret Fetting’s new book on substance use offers a unique and interactive treatment model that enables clinicians to correctly diagnose and treat chemical dependency.
Researchers benefit from center’s statistics experts

A theory not backed up by cold, hard facts is just that—a theory.

But in the realm of social work, securing strong evidence to reinforce an assumption is not always an easy task. Variables are numerous and often difficult to measure. Investigators typically examine specific groups rather than the general populace, further complicating the process.

However, researchers at the Hamovitch Center have an edge when it comes to the often perplexing world of data: a team of experts in statistical design, data management, and analysis that serves to ensure studies are robust and empirically sound.

And although investigators have benefited from biostatistical assistance provided by center staff for years, a recent effort to strengthen and expand the statistics team is significantly bolstering the level of support.

“Now it’s a more coherent effort,” said Chih-Ping Chou, the center’s senior biostatistician who holds a joint appointment as a professor of preventive medicine in the Keck School of Medicine of USC. “We can help not just on the grant writing and statistical analysis, but we can also provide more comprehensive data management.”

The reimagined Data Analysis and Management Core is designed to address a wide array of research needs at the center, ranging from basic technical assistance with grant proposals to consultation on advanced statistical techniques.

In addition to assisting faculty researchers as they envision and develop their study designs, the team helps validate new measurement scales and tools created by investigators, strengthening the value of study findings. Once data is gathered, core members offer support with analysis and manuscript preparation, as well as the design and management of databases. Finally, the team is seeking to enhance multidisciplinary skills by training researchers and students in statistical methodology.

“We’re developing our own entity as a core, almost like a mini-department of social statistics,” said Charles Kaplan, the center’s associate dean of research who is responsible for overseeing the statistics group.

The effort to increase statistical support at the center can be traced back several years, to when school leaders began encouraging faculty members to submit study proposals. A key component of crafting a successful grant proposal is outlining a clear and concise plan for data collection and analysis, Chou said.

As the head of statistical analysis and measurement cores for multiple federally funded transdisciplinary research centers based at USC, Chou has a strong background in study design and analytical approaches with regard to grant writing. He described his primary role in the Hamovitch Center’s statistics core as providing assistance to researchers at the conceptual level—as they prepare their study proposals and design their data analysis plans.

Conversely, as the center’s biostatistician, Lei Duan is more involved in the day-to-day process of analyzing data and outlining specific statistical methods for research proposals and journal manuscripts. Duan studied under Chou as a doctoral student and worked as a statistician on cancer research studies before joining the Hamovitch Center.

“I enjoy the challenge here,” she said, explaining that studies involving psychological or behavioral health data utilize a wider array of models and skills than epidemiological research. In social work, researchers often work with quasi-experimental data and complex models in which multiple variables must be considered simultaneously to ensure the correct relationship is being examined.

“You have to do a lot of validation to make sure everything is correct,” she said, adding, “I want to use the most advanced techniques to solve the problem, to solve the research questions.”

As the team’s new data manager, Pey-Juan Lee, is largely responsible for organizing and managing information once it has been gathered. In recent years, she has provided database support for several specific grant-funded projects.

However, as the statistics core expands its data management resources, Lee is looking...
**ELL | from page 3**

Working with Dr. Shinyi Wu of the USC Viterbi School of Engineering, a health economist, county health officials, and physicians, Ell is comparing the impact of various forms of depression treatment, including a telephone diagnostic and symptom monitoring system designed for both English and Spanish speakers.

Patients receive an automated call and respond to questions about their mental health. If they report medication problems, suicidal ideation, or need to talk with a care manager or social worker, they receive a call back within 48 hours—or in the case of suicidal thoughts, within 15 minutes—by one of three on-call psychiatrists.

“The health care system is drowning throughout this country and we need to do things differently than we have been,” Ell said. If the program is found to be effective, she believes it could fill a major gap in diabetes and depression care.

Additionally Ell is spearheading a study led by the school’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families that involves testing a reintegration skill training program for a socioculturally diverse California National Guard aviation unit that returned from a tour in Iraq in August 2011. She is also pursuing a study comparing in-office, in-home, and tele-health treatment for posttraumatic stress disorder among service and family members.

“PTSD and related depression and substance use is a major problem within both active duty and veteran populations,” Ell said. “Unfortunately, many do not seek treatment or drop out of treatment very early due to concerns about stigma.”

“In addition, existing government and community service systems lack adequate and well-trained staff to meet the heavy need, and family members also lack access to care. There is also a need to take into account the racial and ethnic diversity of these populations.”

At 71, it’s clear Ell is just as passionate about her desire to improve health services for disadvantaged populations as when she joined USC more than three decades ago.

“I guess I’m not ready to retire,” she said, adding that she constantly strives to adapt her ways of thinking. “I move with the changing times. Based on what we learn, we move in new directions.”

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**MILITARY | from page 5**

just didn’t know what to do about it then,” he said. “I saw a lot of drinking, and that was the biggest concern for me.”

After earning an undergraduate degree in global studies from UC Santa Barbara, Flores began receiving emails from former commanders and others in the military urging him to look into the military social work program at USC. Prompted by a desire to become a better leader and help those dealing with traumatic experiences, Flores enrolled in the program and completed his degree last year. He said he is encouraged by the school’s focus on military cultural competence.

“Education on the actual culture of the military is something that is definitely needed,” he said.

In addition to remaining on active duty as an individually mobilized soldier, Flores works with Veterans Affairs in West Los Angeles, where he helps veterans find temporary and permanent subsidized housing.

Although he has an instant rapport with service members due to his experience in the military, he said others struggle due to a basic lack of knowledge about the military. And despite his Army background, Flores acknowledged that he benefited greatly from his education at USC.

“I don’t know what in the world can prepare you for this job, but it was definitely a huge advantage to have that background,” he said. “I started from a blank slate and they helped me build up a toolbox of methods and techniques that I could put together to fit each individual veteran.”

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**STATS | from page 8**

forward to meeting with faculty members and determining what services are in demand.

“We want to see what kind of [data management] services our school researchers need the most,” she said.

In essence, the team plans to develop a web-based data warehouse to expedite the data entry process, Kaplan said, in addition to compiling and sharing information across research projects. The new system also would address security and reliability issues. “Before now, it’s largely been left up to the individual researchers to back up their data,” he said.

As the statistics team begins to take on more responsibilities, core leaders acknowledged that developing training seminars on statistical software and methodologies will be critical to the success of the venture.

In addition to offering training sessions to investigators and staff involved with research projects, Chou said the team plans to reach out to students interested in research and social statistics.

“I feel that the PhD students will provide a very good resource, especially if they are working as research assistants,” he said.

And although the statistics core is still in the process of building up its service capacity, Chou said the team is excited to begin working with researchers on new projects, as well as developing a better understanding of what resources will be needed for the future.

“I think this will be a very iterative process,” he said, “and I also hope that through this process, we can also involve students even more.”

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**USC researchers are creating a virtual patient to help students develop military-related clinical skills.**
Dr. Anthony Hassan is leading an effort to address critical gaps in military and veteran health care.

**CIR | from page 1**

Despite spearheading the effort to create a military specialization in the School of Social Work, Dean Marilyn Flynn realized that a more comprehensive and innovative approach was necessary. “Traditional methods of preparing a workforce for these returning service members just wasn’t going to be scalable fast enough,” she said. “People didn’t understand military culture. There was not enough preparation even for people who had worked in [Veterans Affairs] or other military settings for what they were going to be experiencing in working with these service members.”

After securing funding from the federal government, the Lincy Foundation, and other sources, Flynn and school leaders unveiled the Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, known as CIR, in 2009.

Designed to bridge the gaps between innovative technology, groundbreaking research, military culture, and behavioral health care, the center has pursued a singular mission of strengthening the transition of American soldiers back into their families, their communities, and society.

“These veterans are going to be with us in our community for 40 or 50 more years,” Hassan said. “We’re going to talk about these veterans for a long time to come. Just because the war is over, doesn’t mean their needs are.”

In order to find new and effective ways of meeting those needs, school leaders have pursued a wide array of initiatives focused on research, curriculum development, and training. Scholars developed the first set of guidelines for military social work practice in the nation, videotaped a set of clinical vignettes with actual veterans to help students enhance their practice skills, and launched an ambitious project to create virtual avatars that simulate the experience of working with service members and their families.

Through a partnership with the Institute for Creative Technologies, CIR hopes the virtual patient project will strengthen learning outcomes in both online and face-to-face environments. The artificially intelligent avatars are programmed to exhibit the effects of combat stress and deployment, allowing students and clinical therapists to hone their abilities before working with actual clients.

“It is really designed to rapidly increase the number of mental health professionals in the community who can meet the needs of veterans and military families,” Hassan said of CIR’s educational component. “I want to make sure if you are a mental health provider of any sort and you are in our community caring for veterans, you understand military culture, you understand evidence-based practices that work for veterans, and you deliver those practices in a culturally competent manner.”

Research initiatives have ranged from a large-scale project to help public schools in San Diego address the needs of children from military families to an evaluation of an educational game for spouses of veterans focused on developing motivational skills and a better understanding of the challenges that veterans face when trying to access health care.

Another major venture involves a local California National Guard aviation unit that recently returned from a deployment in Iraq. Researchers and clinicians are working with soldiers in the unit and their families to provide skills training and a support network to help them reintegrate into their civilian lives.

Col. David Sutherland, whose duties as special assistant to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff include overseeing veteran and family support, recently visited the USC School of Social Work and said he is impressed by its innovative and flexible approach to military-related research and training.

“I was very inspired when I saw what the school was doing with its approach to the avatar and the different research going on,” Sutherland said. “I haven’t seen it replicated in many places.”

A key aspect of understanding the veteran experience is recognizing the struggle many returning service members face when trying to rekindle a sense of belonging and trust with family members and their community, Sutherland said. Having led coalition forces in Diyala Province during the Iraq war surge, he has experienced that struggle firsthand.

“I still have trouble going into crowded areas and buildings like movie theaters,” he said. “We have huge trust issues and those trust issues are multiplied when we come home to a clinician who doesn’t even know how the room should be set up or how to ask questions.”

Sutherland advocated for a holistic approach to military research and clinical
training, with a focus on education, employment, and access to quality health care. He also highlighted the critical need to view each returning service member as an individual with unique issues.

Recalling several incidents during his deployment in Iraq, Sutherland described the response of one officer who was shot in the shoulder and lost 70% of his muscle. First, the soldier apologized for being shot. “The next thing he said was that it was a waste of a perfectly good tattoo,” Sutherland said. When a female officer lost her leg, she also apologized to Sutherland. But then she asked if he thought her husband would ever find her attractive again.

“Each individual needs to be looked at in a unique way,” he said. “We can't have a cookie-cutter approach.”

Hassan is emphasizing individualized support in CIR’s interaction with the National Guard unit—the 1-140th Aviation Battalion that returned to Southern California in August 2011 from a yearlong deployment in Iraq. In addition to tracking the unit during the course of 12 months, he said researchers and clinicians are providing assistance with a wide range of issues, from offering information on parenting adolescent daughters to obtaining counseling for soldiers struggling with marital issues.

“We're leveraging community resources to really help this one unit and let them know this is not just a one-time event,” he said. “We're not just collecting data. We're actually developing a relationship with you and providing you with needed resources at the time of need.”

Reintegration is particularly difficult for those in the National Guard or Army Reserve, Hassan said, as they aren’t stationed on a base and often feel isolated without their fellow soldiers. In addition, 40% of the 280 soldiers in the aviation unit are unemployed.

“We know that unemployment doesn’t have positive mental health outcomes,” he said. “We know they can end up in divorce, they can end up in financial ruin, they can end up with depression, they can end up homeless.”

Anthony Hassan
CIR | from page 11

strained by his tour of duty, and on top of everything else, he faced the arduous task of finding a job in one of the worst economic climates in decades.

“When I came home, I had nothing. I had no job, no money,” Mirano said, describing how his family was forced to move in to a one-bedroom apartment. “That caused a lot of problems. To be honest, me and my wife were on the verge of divorce.”

He finally got in touch with Hassan and other clinicians involved with the project. They connected him with marriage counseling resources and employment opportunities. Mirano recently moved into a bigger 4-bedroom home, has several job prospects, and is working on his relationship with his wife.

“The greatest part of it is you don’t feel alone,” he said of CIR’s project. “I felt alone for a long time and I finally reached out to them.”

He advocated for expanding the program not only to other returning National Guard units, but to other branches of the military as well. Mirano is familiar with the effects of combat on veterans, having seen several of his relatives struggle with psychological problems.

One of his cousins is being discharged due to PTSD after six deployments, just two years away from retirement. Another cousin lost the use of his leg and is also affected by PTSD.

“If he would have had this program, he wouldn’t have gone through so much of the turmoil that he did,” Mirano said. “Trying to find the answers without any help is not easy.”

Breaking through the tough exterior that many returning soldiers put up is half the battle. Mirano acknowledged that Hassan’s military background is helpful—he served in the Army as a radio operator and staff sergeant for 11 years before earning his master’s degree in social work and spending 14 years in the Air Force in various capacities, including stints running several mental health clinics and overseeing the leadership program at the Air Force Academy.

In addition to his service record and deep understanding of military culture, Flynn said Hassan’s commitment to higher education and transformational leadership made him the perfect candidate to lead CIR’s efforts. “He is bright and engaging and not afraid of large challenges,” she said.

As the center continues to expand and increase public awareness of the need to support returning soldiers, Flynn hopes to develop stronger partnerships with military leadership, Veterans Affairs, and community-based organizations, in addition to securing an endowment for the center to ensure its work continues in perpetuity.

And although she is encouraged that social work students and professionals appear eager to do their part to provide service members with the resources they need, Flynn is not interested in using CIR to enhance the profession’s reputation.

“This is not about promoting social work,” she said. “It’s about making sure that people who have been exposed to this very, very unusual experience of war, this sometimes defeating experience of war, have an opportunity to come back and have useful and honored lives.”

[ accolades ]

A new book by associate professor Mary Alice Jordan-Marsh, “Health Technology Literacy: A Transdisciplinary Framework for Consumer-Oriented Practice,” has received the American Journal of Nursing’s Information Technology Book of the Year Award. The book outlines a client-centered treatment model that focuses on the resources used by consumers when making decisions about their health care. Technology such as online social networks, the Internet, smart phones, and games are playing an increasing role in health care treatment and support, and Jordan-Marsh’s book helps both patients and professionals navigate those resources as they consider their treatment options.

Doctoral candidate Anamika Barman-Adhikari has been honored with the 2011 Robert Keefe Social Work Section Student Award by the American Public Health Association. The award recognizes the top research abstract submitted by a student, and Barman-Adhikari won for “Navigating for Sexual Health Information Online: Decoding Homeless Youth’s Help-Seeking Behavior in Networked Spaces,” an abstract derived from research on the influence of technology on the health behaviors of homeless youth.

Professor Ron Astor has been selected as a fellow of the American Educational Research Association, a program established to honor outstanding education researchers and emphasize the importance of research in the field.

Carol Ann Peterson, an adjunct associate professor, has received the Humanitarian Award from Face Forward, a nonprofit that provides reconstructive surgery to women and children who have been the victims of violence. Peterson has worked with organizations to increase awareness of domestic violence in the workplace, leads domestic violence training sessions for government entities, and has spearheaded key legislative efforts to improve domestic violence awareness and prevention.

Professor John Brekke has been appointed to the board of directors of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare after becoming the third USC faculty member to be elected to the academy.

The Orange County chapter of the National Association of Social Workers has selected Patricia Lenahan, an adjunct lecturer, as the Social Worker of the Year. The award honors a member of the association who exemplifies the profession’s strong ethics in the practice of social work.