One of the guiding principles of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services is its commitment to university–community collaboration. In this issue, we illustrate our faculty’s efforts to make this commitment a reality. University–community commitment brings relevance to the university’s work through a mutual exchange of information. By caring about community needs, the university finds meaning and instrumentality in its research and the community benefits from outcomes of that very research. This issue highlights two major examples of our commitment to community-based research. For more than two decades, Pacific Clinics, a regional social work service agency advancing excellence in behavioral health care, has impacted and been impacted by Hamovitch researcher John Brekke’s work. Additionally, two of our researchers have been instrumental in conceptualizing and sustaining the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, a world-leading evidence dissemination hub advancing the quality of child welfare work.

Criminal behavior and substance abuse is also a rapidly expanding field in our research portfolio. In this issue, we highlight the groundbreaking scholarship of researchers Avelardo Valdez and Erick Guerrero in this critical area of social work. Enjoy!

Professor John Brekke (center) has worked closely with James Balla (right), chief operating officer of Pacific Clinics, and Lou Mallory, a peer health navigator, to improve treatment for clients with serious mental illness.

Upon joining the USC School of Social Work in the mid-1980s as a young professor interested in serious mental illness, John Brekke did what any new neighbor would do—he began knocking on doors and introducing himself.

One of those doors led to Portals House, a regional agency that offered services to those with serious disorders such as schizophrenia. It seemed like a perfect place for the young researcher to put down roots.

“They had this whole beautiful continuum of housing, vocational, and social services,” Brekke said. “They remain a really wonderful organization, really on the vanguard of what is called psychosocial rehabilitation.”

The seeds planted during that initial meeting quickly grew into a long-lasting and rare partnership, characterized by mutual understanding and devoid of ego. It is fair to say that in the intervening decades, Brekke and officials at Portals House—now known as Pacific Clinics after a merger several years ago—have exemplified the community-based research model that many in the social work profession seek to emulate.

“There is a lot of verbiage about getting out of the ivory tower and working in the community,” said Susan Mandel, CEO of Pacific Clinics. “The sort of work John’s been doing has really brought that to life.”

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USC School of Social Work
“There’s nothing more powerful than seeing your neighbor, who you saw struggling for years and years, now working as a behavioral health professional at a local treatment agency and being a good role model for others struggling with addictions.”

Erick Guerrero

Researcher addresses inequity in substance abuse treatment

Growing up near some of Mexico City’s rougher neighborhoods, Erick Guerrero became intrigued by the people he frequently saw hanging around on the corners smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol.

Despite a certain level of stigma about their behavior, Guerrero noticed a sense of normalcy and acceptance by community members. These people, who were tied to the community through family, friends, or informal work, publicly displayed their struggle with addiction and mental health issues.

The implications of that struggle became apparent after some of these community residents never received help and eventually disappeared. “After a few months, you started hearing stories—that someone got into an accident, someone is in jail, someone died,” Guerrero said. “You start getting a sense that their drinking or their mental health problems were serious.”

Later, as a doctoral student and practitioner in Chicago, he noticed that low-income communities, primarily those with racial and ethnic minorities, suffered from similar issues of low help-seeking among residents and a lacking health care system.

Now an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work, Guerrero has dedicated his research career to finding better ways to reach those vulnerable populations in low-income communities, particularly Latinos and other minority groups that struggle to access care for substance abuse or mental health issues.

Rather than focusing on specific interventions that address a small subset of the community, he is interested in informing systemwide changes to reduce or eliminate obstacles that make it difficult for racial and ethnic minority populations to enter and remain in treatment.

“There is little research out there that documents the extent to which the current system of care meets the complex services needs of culturally diverse clients,” Guerrero said. “As this is the fastest-growing population entering behavioral health services, it is important to determine how to structure and organize the delivery of services to reduce the well-documented health disparities among minorities.”

Guerrero’s childhood interest in the health and behavioral consequences of substance use prompted him to focus on issues related to family dynamics, health, and well-being during his undergraduate studies in Mexico City. After a stint as a case worker, Guerrero decided to pursue a graduate degree. He completed a master’s program in clinical psychology at Governors State University in Chicago and spent the following 10 years working with court-mandated clients in community behavioral health.

As a clinical supervisor with a community-based clinic that served inner-city youth with gang affiliations, Guerrero managed a culturally diverse treatment team and handled a caseload of clients.

Although he enjoyed balancing counseling with management responsibilities, he began to notice that politics, poor use of existing resources, and an emphasis on administrative tasks played a bigger role in management decisions than the potential impact on clients. “It just totally missed the mark,” he said. “Management was totally disconnected from any potential relation to quality of care and we did not know how to leverage our team's diverse technical and cultural skills.”

Frustrated with how the uncoordinated
organizational context and team dynamics prevented the team from effectively engaging with diverse clients, Guerrero decided to pursue doctoral education related to building a culturally responsive work environment.

His background in psychology, economics, and management made him a solid fit for an interdisciplinary program at the University of Chicago that combined social work, business, and sociology. This diverse medley of disciplines provided the basic framework and tools he now uses to explore how substance abuse treatment organizations can improve their work with minority populations.

Guerrero’s research agenda has since evolved into a two-pronged approach: an effort to document service disparities in low-income communities in terms of substance abuse treatment, and a focus on action-oriented solutions.

“The literature is really nascent on what kind of organizational and management supports are necessary for a lot of these treatment programs, many of which are small, community-based operations that can be considered a vulnerable population on their own,” he said. Community service providers are open to change, he added, but often struggle with inconsistent funding, workforce challenges, and less access to training resources.

As new health care legislation takes effect, Guerrero is concerned that small providers will be ill-equipped to handle sophisticated billing requirements and may be edged out by larger treatment centers, which could have a serious impact on whether certain clients seek and remain in care.

“Latinos are very skeptical about engaging in certain systems, especially if they look a lot more formalized and big and more like impersonal hospital settings,” he said. “That is scary, especially for undocumented immigrants.”

If individuals decide to postpone care for ongoing substance use and mental health issues, he expects to see higher costs when they show up at emergency rooms with more severe problems.

Larger programs may have strong training in evidence-based practices, linkages with universities, and more resources, but Guerrero said they often struggle to achieve an adequate level of cultural and linguistic competence, negatively affecting client access and staff retention. In comparison, smaller organizations tend to have fewer resources, less technical training, and staff with lower levels of education, but typically are more diverse and draw their workforce from the communities in which they operate.

Although he is interested in exploring ways to improve both models, Guerrero believes that investing in integrated community-based behavioral health treatment is the best way to improve health in communities of color.

“There’s nothing more powerful than seeing your neighbor, who you saw struggling for years and years, now working as a behavioral health professional at a local treatment agency and being a good role model for others struggling with addictions,” he said. “That kind of interaction at an early stage for children and youth is very powerful.”

Recent research projects led by Guerrero on organizational capacity to serve low-income clients have focused on access, measured as the travel distance between treatment facilities and low-income areas of Los Angeles County; how program factors influence treatment differently among various ethnic groups; and how leadership, training, and cultural competence is associated with greater treatment access and retention among Latinos.

Guerrero’s ultimate goal is to develop organizational interventions that help treatment providers implement and sustain culturally competent practices that result in higher rates of recovery among culturally diverse populations. It’s a tricky...
Child welfare resource proves popular

When child welfare practitioners and administrators need more information about the effectiveness of certain tools and practices, they increasingly turn to a single source: the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare.

Since the website (www.cebc4cw.org) launched in 2006, the clearinghouse, known as the CEBC, has offered a straightforward and user-friendly approach to reviewing and rating the strength of evidence for a variety of practices and screening and assessment tools related to child and adolescent welfare.

“It all started with a request from the California Office of Child Abuse and Prevention,” said John Landsverk, the CEBC’s scientific director. “The idea was to make it very focused on interventions that were appropriate and could be beneficial for kids and families in child welfare.”

In essence, the project involves scouting peer-reviewed journals and other sources for additional programs or practices in targeted topic areas, assessing any available scientific evidence of the effectiveness of each practice, and assigning a score that reflects the strength of that evidence, if applicable. The web-based clearinghouse currently lists more than 250 interventions and 20 screening and assessment tools related to child welfare.

Although the website started with a focus on California, it regularly receives visits from users located throughout the United States as well as 190 other countries.

“It has really helped those who work within child welfare in terms of looking at practices and making decisions about what practices to implement in their community,” said Cambria Rose Walsh, who oversees day-to-day operations as CEBC’s project manager. “We’re the most comprehensive website on child welfare and evidence-based practices in the United States.”

The CEBC has been funded by the California Department of Social Services with oversight by the Office of Child Abuse and Prevention since 2004. Although not officially affiliated with the USC School of Social Work, the CEBC has a strong connection through Landsverk, who serves as a senior consultant for the school’s Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services.
as well as Haluk Soydan, the director of the Hamovitch Center and a key member of the CEBC’s scientific advisory panel.

Soydan had joined USC in 2005 and was looking to make connections with scholars in the region. At that time, Landsverk was working alongside Charles Wilson, executive director of the Chadwick Center for Children and Families, which houses the CEBC, during early discussions about forming the clearinghouse.

The trio met for an introductory lunch and hit it off. Soydan, who cofounded an international clearinghouse of evidence on social welfare, crime, and education interventions known as the Campbell Collaboration, was invited to sit on the CEBC’s Scientific Panel.

“I’m not a child welfare expert but I’m definitely an evidence person,” he said. “My main job was to help them to construct their scientific evidence rating scale. It took some time, but we shaped it pretty well.”

The CEBC’s scale ranges from 1, which reflects a program with well-supported research evidence, to 5, which represents a concerning practice. Each step on the scale has specific and transparent criteria, which are spelled out on the website in detail.

Landsverk noted there is an additional category of “not able to be rated” for those programs with no evidence backing their effectiveness. “That helped us really clarify that there has to be at least some evidence, something going on research-wise, or we’re going to dump it into this category,” he said.

Three reviewers independently sift through peer-reviewed publications that report on research studies related to each program or practice before assigning a rating. Their scores are compared and the panel helps to resolve any discrepancies. Of the 250-plus practices and programs listed on the site, only 20 have a rating of 1.

“We have tried to be as objective as we can and use the most rigorous standards we can,” said Jennifer Rolls Reutz, the CEBC’s research coordinator. “Our relationship with Haluk has really influenced the way the rating scale and CEBC have developed over time. We have more topical experience but he has more experience at the larger level of the clearinghouse and Cochrane and Campbell collaboration activity.”

Rolls Reutz said feedback about the rating system has been largely positive, with many consumers expressing appreciation for the straightforward, clear nature of the scale.

“They like the fact that we have a very simple numbering system,” she said. “We’re one of the few clearinghouses that assign a single number.”

In an effort to maintain the CEBC’s growth, staff members have set a goal of adding three to five topic areas within child welfare to the clearinghouse each year. The website now features more than 35 topics, ranging from anger management programs and depression treatment to parent training and interventions for neglect.

As awareness of the child welfare resource has grown—Rose Walsh noted the federal government regularly references the CEBC when requesting grant proposals in the field—its creators are starting to use its stature to stimulate research in critical areas. A statewide committee of child welfare experts and administrators determine which topics to focus on each year, Landsverk explained, and they occasionally select understudied areas in an effort to encourage scholarship on those issues.

During the initial years of the project, Landsverk said the advisory committee was surprised by the scant amount of research being done in child welfare in general, not to mention in key areas such as family reunification and adoption support.

“It’s not like psychosocial interventions coming out of psychology or mental health systems,” he said. “Psychology has a long tradition of randomized trials. That’s really not so true in schools of social work, and child welfare is by and large very connected to the discipline of social work.”

That attitude is beginning to shift as more social work scholars recognize the importance of backing up their methods with scientific evidence. Under the leadership of Dean Marilyn Flynn, the USC School of Social Work has prioritized using its stature to stimulate research in critical areas.

“It’s fairly common knowledge that rates of incarceration in the United States are some of the highest in the world, with racial and ethnic minorities especially impacted by this phenomenon.”

Avelardo Valdez

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“Valdez, Avelardo. "It’s fairly common knowledge that rates of incarceration in the United States are some of the highest in the world, with racial and ethnic minorities especially impacted by this phenomenon.” In: [Http://Tiny.Cc/A5v3Dw] (Accessed: 15th December 2023).
A summer funding program at the USC School of Social Work is proving valuable to both students who need real-world research experience and faculty members who benefit from additional assistance on research projects.

During the past five years, the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services has provided nearly $250,000 worth of funding to support student research assistants during the summer months, including $70,000 in funding this year.

“It’s increasingly important for our doctoral students to be involved in research and receive credit for their efforts through coauthorships,” said Suzanne Wenzel, a professor at the USC School of Social Work. “Those kinds of opportunities make them much more competitive in the job market and it gives them valuable experience for their future careers as independent researchers.”

School officials said the funding program reflects a larger effort to integrate doctoral students, as well as a segment of master’s-level students, into the research culture of the school. Participants who receive summer funding are encouraged to participate in all levels of the research process, from conducting literature reviews and interviewing subjects to analyzing data and drafting manuscripts.

Haluk Soydan, director the Hamovitch Center, credited Dean Marilyn Flynn’s efforts to support student research as a driving force behind the integration effort, which includes recruiting doctoral students to become involved in the school’s recently established research clusters on topics such as behavioral health, serious mental illness, and homelessness.

“It is learning by doing,” he said. “They are being introduced into an established research environment with junior and senior faculty beyond their own mentors, as well as postdoctoral students. You have a group of people, a critical mass if you will, of different ranks who contribute to the scholarship.”

Many of the funding proposals include explicit goals such as publishing research results in a peer-reviewed journal. During last summer, Wenzel worked with doctoral student Hsun-Ta Hsu to develop a paper that addresses racial differences in social networks among homeless youth.

The manuscript received favorable reviews and Wenzel expects it to be published soon. Hsu said the experience should

Gretchen Heidemann, a doctoral student at the USC School of Social Work, has received a prestigious fellowship to further her research on how women can successfully transition from incarceration back into society.

As one of six scholars selected for the 2012 Haynes Lindley Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship Award, Heidemann will receive $20,000 to support her study on factors that help or hinder formerly incarcerated women as they return to local communities.

“It was really nice to know that this foundation feels what I’m doing is important,” she said.

The John Randolph Haynes and Dora Haynes Foundation receives a large number of submissions for the award each year. The foundation seeks proposals that address significant social, political, and policy issues in the greater Los Angeles region.

The funding will allow Heidemann to cover basic living expenses and focus on her dissertation research during the coming year. She plans to survey approximately 100 women and conduct in-depth interviews with 30 this summer to outline both the obstacles they face during reintegration as well as sources of support that make the transition easier.

“I want to find out what has been hard for them, what has helped them, and what success would mean to them rather than imposing a definition of success,” she said. “I want to focus on how to help these women be successful, not only to keep them from returning

Professor Janet Schneiderman (left) received summer funding through the USC School of Social Work to support doctoral student research assistants Lana Smith (center) and Caitlin Smith.
Without this funding, I may not work with professors who share the same research interests as me.

In addition to providing students with critical experience in the research field, the summer funding program has a clear benefit for faculty members. Janet Schneiderman, a research associate professor who studies child welfare and health, received funds to support two student research assistants this summer.

She is currently exploring the use of pediatric health care services in the child welfare field by examining medical records and conducting a survey among caregivers. The additional help from students enabled her to widen the goals of the study.

“This allows us to expand the project, to not just look at information in the medical record and the survey but to actually call the caregivers and get information from them,” she said. “It allows me to stretch my federal funding to do more, to collect more data on projects that were previously planned but had limited funding.”

This is the second year that Caitlin Smith, a doctoral student in clinical psychology, has received summer funding to work with Schneiderman. Although the award amount is relatively small, she said it has allowed the research team to collect data on a variable that wasn’t part of the original study plan.

“We had this ongoing project but there was a gap between our ambition and what we had to work with,” she said. “This funding helped us take a good idea a step further.” The summer funds also allowed the team to adopt a more realistic timeline, she said, rather than rushing to complete the project in fewer hours.

As a fourth-year PhD student, Smith plans to ultimately pursue a research career focused on children supervised by the court system. Working with Schneiderman has allowed her to interact with child welfare officials, medical doctors, and county administrators, which she described as an effective way to learn about how to interact with people in different fields.

She has also helped write and submit three articles since last summer, and the research team—which includes Lana Smith, a doctoral student in social work—plans to publish their results from the current study as well. Schneiderman said the two students offered suggestions on items to add to the study that reflect their interests in the field.

“I think it’s vital for them to have that hands-on experience and to be able to identify questions that they have and get data to answer those questions,” she said.

Smith lauded the summer funding program, noting that it is often difficult to obtain smaller awards for research, given that most funding organizations are focused on ambitious projects that require hundreds of thousands of dollars.

“When there are these small grants of a few thousand dollars, it can really close the gap and take the research to the next level,” she said.

**HAMOVITCH p.i. | USC.EDU/SOCIALWORK/RESEARCH**

**FUNDING | from page 6**

give him an edge when he leaves USC and enters the job market.

“As a doctoral student, it is critical to have publications and research experience before graduation,” he said. “Furthermore, since I had just finished my first year when I received the funding, having an opportunity to work on a paper and to participate in a research project allowed me to put the knowledge I learned into practice, and also gain more understanding of what researchers’ lives are like.”

He will work with Wenzel again this summer, alongside fellow student Ahyoung Song, on several projects, including final revisions on the aforementioned paper as well as a study funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse on ways to prevent HIV and sexually transmitted infection among homeless women.

Hsu and Song both received $5,000 awards for the summer, enabling them to dedicate approximately 15 hours per week to their work with Wenzel. “Without this funding, I may need to find funding wherever available to support my family during the summer,” Hsu said, “which means I may not work with professors who share the same research interests as me.”

**“Having an opportunity to work on a paper and to participate in a research project allowed me to put the knowledge I learned into practice, and also gain more understanding of what researchers’ lives are like.”**

**Hsun-Ta Hsu**

**AWARD | from page 6**

to jail but to help them obtain the goals they set for themselves.”

Specifically, Heidemann will examine potential positive factors such as social support, resiliency, and self-esteem alongside possible negative influences such as discrimination, domestic violence, substance abuse, and mental health issues.

“What’s really exciting about this is that there are big changes going on in the criminal justice system in California,” she said, referring to the recent shift of responsibility from state prisons to county jails for individuals convicted of certain nonviolent and less serious crimes.

Heidemann expects to encounter some women who have been released since California’s “realignment” policy went into effect, and plans to compare their experiences with those of other women who experienced the criminal justice system before the transition.

After using a mixed-method design to collect quantitative survey and qualitative interview data, she aims to analyze the information this fall and complete her dissertation by next spring. As a requirement of the fellowship, she also will be responsible for drafting a summary report that outlines her findings.

Heidemann, who holds a degree in psychology from University of Cincinnati and a master’s degree in social work from UCLA, said she is interested in pursuing further research on programs that offer support to formerly incarcerated women but added that she is open to other opportunities once she completes her studies at the University of Southern California.
A new report by the USC Roybal Institute explores the challenges faced by minority elders in Los Angeles.

“Social isolation is a serious problem for older adults because it is related to a host of negative health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, all-cause mortality, and morbidity. The risk for depression and suicide is also much higher for older adults who are isolated.”

Karen Lincoln

Responses to the institute’s survey further revealed that the aging Latino and African American population faces multiple health challenges connected to the financial obstacles they face.

“Socioeconomic status definitely impacts health,” according to the report. “Half of those who reported income less than $15,000 a year had more than five lifetime illnesses.”

One of the more striking statistical findings was that 63% of older African Americans and 51% of older Latinos who were surveyed lived alone. Only 22% of seniors statewide reported living alone in the statewide California Health Interview Survey.

Studies have shown that a lack of social support and meaningful social relationships is related to poor health and overall well-being.

“Social isolation is a serious problem for older adults because it is related to a host of negative health outcomes, including cardiovascular disease, all-cause mortality, and morbidity,” Lincoln said. “The risk for depression and suicide is also much higher for older adults who are isolated.”

The prevalence of individuals who...
**GUERRERO | from page 3**

process with many factors to consider, such as management practices, leadership styles, funding priorities, regulation issues, and staff education and training.

“If we are to change a system, we need to figure out how the system behaves, what type of incentives are necessary to encourage a system to adopt a new practice and run with it, and how we can best align policy, management, and practice to achieve the best results in a system of care,” he said.

Guerrero has developed close relationships with treatment program managers in Los Angeles County to ensure that his work is relevant to everyday practice.

In addition, as USC and the School of Social Work launch new initiatives to connect with countries such as Mexico, Brazil, and Chile, and Guerrero is hopeful that some of the strategies he is developing in Southern California will benefit his hometown of Mexico City. He has developed projects with city officials there as they begin to create a formal substance abuse treatment system in a city of 20 million people.

“Some of the frameworks I’ve used here, especially in communities of color, can be translated to what is happening in some low-income communities in Mexico,” he said. “It’s a dream of mine to come back to the community where I was raised, whose residents continue to struggle with poor access to behavioral health care, and be able to develop a sophisticated infrastructure for prevention, treatment, and recovery from substance use and mental health disorders.”

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**CEBC | from page 5**

research on innovative interventions and has established research incubators known as clusters, including one in the area of child development and services.

In addition to promoting research on important issues, the CEBC team is beginning to move into the arena of applying implementation research—that is, determining the best way to launch a particular program or practice in a specific setting to increase its success.

“It’s not enough to get the information out to the communities,” Rolls Reutz said. “We have to help them take the information and use it in a way that benefits their communities.”

Through a pilot study, the CEBC is exploring the specific child welfare needs of one county in California and developing ways of selecting a program to meet those needs. The team hopes to identify concrete tools that aid the implementation process, particularly in early stages of exploration and adoption.

Eventually, the clearinghouse hopes to offer a review of various implementation strategies that have been tested for effectiveness, and CEBC staff members envision offering training sessions to communities and child welfare agencies on how best to select and develop service programs.

“Clearinghouses have a relatively limited scope,” Landsverk said. “They disseminate information about the evidence base for interventions, but those things are fairly well disseminated by now. The issue now is not whether you know about them, but whether you can bring them in and make them work in service settings.”

As the CEBC continues to expand its reach, other institutions have taken notice. When helping to develop similar clearinghouses in Sweden and China, Soydan borrowed heavily from the guidelines established at the CEBC, which he described as rigorous, transparent, and sustainable.

“Not only is the clearinghouse a model for other programs, he said, but it also serves as a resource for students learning about evidence-based practice or studying child welfare-related topics.

“They are very serious about their work,” he said of the CEBC team, “and they have created a beautiful product.”

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**ROYBAL | from page 8**

screened positive for serious psychological distress was much higher among the Roybal survey’s participants than among participants in the statewide survey.

Yet researchers were encouraged by the fact that more than half of those who lived alone also indicated they had contact with family or relatives nearly every day.

Nevertheless, signs of progress remain tempered by the looming possibility of deeper funding cuts to services supporting older adults by federal, state, and local governments looking to balance their ledgers.

“Given the significant cuts to funding for services and programs that provide opportunities for social interaction for older adults, social isolation will be a serious public health concern in the very near future unless we find ways to provide supportive services to those who are aging in place and living alone,” Lincoln said.

Although the statistical results from the survey are not intended to be representative of the complex demographics of South and East Los Angeles, institute leaders hopes the report will offer insights and provide guidance to local policy makers, leaders of service organizations, practitioners, and elected officials.

“We have been engaged in disseminating our report to local agencies and community stakeholders to provide information that may prove useful for them in advocacy and services planning,” Vega said.

The USC Roybal Institute is dedicated to translational research and training that promotes and sustains optimal physical, mental, and social functioning of older persons from low-income and multiethnic backgrounds so they may age successfully in their communities.

The survey was funded by the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute and the USC School of Social Work’s Frances G. and Ernest P. Larson Endowed Fund for Innovative Research.

The report, titled Current Conditions among Older Latinos and African Americans in Low- and Middle-Income Los Angeles Neighborhoods, is available in English and Spanish on the Roybal Institute’s website, roybal.usc.edu, under the Publications tab.
BREKKE | from page 1

The foundation for this mutually beneficial relationship can be traced back to Brekke’s experiences at a state hospital for people with serious mental illnesses, where he volunteered while earning degrees in psychology and social work from the University of Hawaii.

His exposure to the most severe cases of mental illness caused Brekke to question how well scientists and doctors truly understood psychotic behavior and its underlying causes.

“I was watching these extraordinarily profound disorders and I kept thinking, how do you explain this tremendous breakdown based on mothering or based on a dysfunctional family?” he said. “There’s got to be more to it than ambivalent parenting.”

The biology of mental illness had yet to be significantly charted during the 1960s and 1970s. Because antipsychotic medication worked, researchers knew there had to be something occurring on a chemical level. However, there was no particularly thoughtful approach to antipsychotic drug use, and breakthroughs were made simply by giving patients different medications and seeing what worked best.

“As a historian friend of mine likes to say, it was serendipity,” Brekke said.

With this interest in brain functioning tingling in the back of his mind, Brekke began his doctoral studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he was exposed to what would become one of the most significant community mental health interventions in recent decades.

The Program for Assertive Community Treatment, known as PACT, represented a major shift in how services were provided to people with serious mental illness. Characterized by highly individualized and intense service delivery, the new approach further inspired Brekke to focus on innovative ways to improve treatment of severe mental disorders.

Perhaps it was serendipity that brought him to Portals House, which had founded its treatment on those same principles of intense psychosocial rehabilitation and solid clinical practices paired with housing and vocational training support.

“John believed in that and it was our service model,” said Jim Balla, executive vice president and chief operating officer of Pacific Clinics. “It made it a natural attraction.”

At that time, very few researchers were interested in functional outcomes such as the ability of clients to live independently, hold down a job, and interact successfully with others in society. Most scholars were focused on clinical outcomes like reducing symptoms and rehospitalization rates.

But Brekke was interested in how different service characteristics could improve the everyday lives of patients with schizophrenia and other mental health disorders. Did the intensity, specificity, and duration of services affect how well clients responded to treatment?

“What we found was you couldn’t expect to see strong functional outcomes without intensive service delivery,” he said. “We also found that staying with the services was very important, particularly for work outcomes and hospitalization outcomes.”

He launched a comprehensive longitudinal study that followed patients at Portals House for three years, measuring how their functioning responded over time. After interviewing clients every six months and listening to descriptions of how they viewed their treatment, it became even more apparent to Brekke that receiving individualized and intense services made a significant difference compared to visiting with a case manager every few weeks.

“It was extremely clear to them that when they were in one of these intensive environments, they just got a lot more help and they were able to make much more progress,” he said.

The findings of his early work with Portals validated the organization’s approach to care and drew attention from other researchers in the field. Brekke’s research also attracted federal funding from the National Institute of Mental Health, which was striving to respond to President George H. W. Bush’s declaration of the 1990s as the “Decade of the Brain.”

By then, Brekke’s long-standing interest in the biology behind serious mental illness manifested itself in research projects on the neurocognitive and biological aspects of schizophrenia—specifically, whether they predict functional outcomes and response to treatment.

On the neurocognitive front, he was interested in the impact of memory, attention, information processing, and mental flexibility. Brekke also wanted to explore the readiness of clients to engage with

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“I was watching these extraordinarily profound disorders and I kept thinking, how do you explain this tremendous breakdown based on mothering or based on a dysfunctional family?”

John Brekke
environmental stimulation and how they reacted to environmental stressors.

“We really wanted to understand whether these variables could be used to predict how well people respond to intensive rehabilitation environments, the idea being that if they did predict outcomes, we should really understand that and use it to create new interventions.”

By exploring brain functioning over time, he was able to link improvement in neurocognition to improvement in functioning, and vice versa. If agencies such as Pacific Clinics can be trained in interventions that reverse cognitive decline, Brekke said, their clients are more likely to experience significant functional growth.

“It’s not unlike playing computer games or crossword puzzles; we know those things can improve brain functioning,” he said. “It’s the same notion applied to people with serious mental illness.”

It was during this time that federal officials began pushing for stronger partnerships between academia and clinical practice. Although Brekke had developed a solid relationship with Portals during his initial research, the clinic had served largely as a recruitment site for study subjects.

Backed by a federal grant, Brekke and agency officials sought to bolster their shared infrastructure and approach treatment issues in a mutually beneficial way that focused on translating Brekke’s research into real-world practices.

“That was prior to the translational buzzword,” he said. “It wasn’t just foisting academic knowledge on the practice world, it was trying to create a true partnership, and Pacific Clinics was ideal.”

It was a drastic departure from the typical research model, in which the researcher sees the community-based agency simply as a source of data.

Laura Pancake, who worked closely with Brekke during his early years at Portals and now serves as corporate director of employment services at Pacific Clinics, described her experiences with other researchers who wanted to push certain projects or approaches that didn’t make sense in the clinical setting, or who just wanted to look up data in the agency’s information management system and didn’t get involved with clients or staff.

Her experience with Brekke was completely different, she said, describing how he embedded himself in the agency and truly listened to the concerns of staff members and clients.

“He is able to relate to the CEO all the way through to the consumers, and with staff at all levels,” she said. “It just really helps facilitate the process because people trust him. When he’s dealing with you, it’s all about you and your agency and your people. It’s phenomenal.”

Pancake now serves as a liaison of sorts between Brekke and Pacific Clinics, serving as the point person for new research proposals. During her two decades of interaction with Brekke, she said he has remained incredibly humble and easy to work with.

Balla echoed those sentiments, noting that although some researchers pursue their work in the community for academic reasons, such as being published in prestigious journals, Brekke has maintained a focus on practical outcomes and ensuring that his research has a positive impact on the lives of clients.

“John is certainly a step above in his genuine caring commitment and professional treatment of clients with serious mental illness. He’s a gifted clinician, a brilliant researcher, and has the best bedside manner I have seen.”

James Balla
Marilyn Flynn, dean of the USC School of Social Work, has received the International Rhoda G. Sarnat Award for her efforts to advance the public image of professional social work. The Sarnat Award is given annually by the National Association of Social Workers Foundation and includes a $3,000 cash award.

Assistant professor Eric Rice has received the Early Career Award for 2012 from the Society for Prevention Research's Early Career Preventionist Network. This award honors someone who has shown a commitment to prevention science through outstanding contributions to research, policy, or practice.

Erick Guerrero, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, has received the Mark Moses Distinguished Fellowship Award, given each year by the National Network for Social Work Managers to recognize outstanding practitioners and academics in the field of social work management.

Maria Aranda, an associate professor at the USC School of Social Work and the USC Roybal Institute, was inducted as a fellow with the Gerontological Society of America as part of its Social Research, Policy and Practice Section. Fellowship is the highest level of membership within the GSA, the oldest and largest interdisciplinary organization devoted to research, education, and practice in the field of aging.

The International Monetary Fund selected professor Michálle Mor Barak to deliver the keynote address at its recent conference on diversity, marking the first time a social work scholar has been selected for the honor.

Michael Hurlburt, an assistant professor with the USC School of Social Work, has been named Public Citizen of the Year by the San Diego and Imperial County Chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

Clinical professor Ralph Fertig has been appointed to the City of Los Angeles’ Ethics Commission by City Controller Wendy Greuel. In his role as one of five commissioners, Fertig will help administer and enforce city ethics, campaign finance, and lobbying laws to ensure elections and government actions are fair, transparent, and accountable.

Professor Suzanne Wenzel received a $487,752 grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse to develop an evidence-based intervention for HIV risk prevention among homeless women. The two-year project will involve focus groups with homeless women, service providers, and experts to help formulate an intervention that is highly accessible, effective, and can be translated into routine practice.

The National Institute of Child & Human Development awarded a $667,852 career development grant to Sonya Negriff, a research assistant professor, to explore the association between online social networks and risky behavior in maltreated adolescents. The study will examine how social interaction on sites like Facebook can influence substance use and sexual behavior, with the ultimate goal of informing the development of intervention and prevention practices.

A $25,000 grant from USC’s James H. Zumberge Research and Innovation Fund will enable Kelly Turner, a research assistant professor, to test a new way of preparing students to work with veterans and other military clients. Turner’s proposal will compare the effectiveness of role-playing versus the use of standardized patients in the development of key clinical skills.