Grant to help link data on child well-being

A young couple raising an infant in Los Angeles County may rely on dozens of social service agencies and public departments, from assistance with child care and food costs to preventive health examinations and parenting classes. But that continuum of support can be disjointed, overwhelming, and even ineffective.

Limited data are available to policy makers or agencies to help determine how young children and their families move from one public system to another. Each organization captures data about a child's experience with a particular agency but is often unable to follow that child's progress in subsequent years or track contacts with other departments that might prove vital to improving well-being and avoiding negative outcomes such as maltreatment or poor academic performance.

Backed by an initial $1-million grant from First 5 LA, researchers at the USC School of Social Work will seek to remedy that issue by developing a research repository to integrate data across state and local agencies, in addition to fostering ongoing collaboration among researchers, policy makers, agency administrators, and community leaders to improve services for children and their families.

CHILDREN | continued on page 10
Professor driven to assist people experiencing homelessness

_By Charli Engelhorn_

Although Suzanne Wenzel has only been a faculty member with the USC School of Social Work since 2009, her achievements are staggering.

In four short years, she has served on and chaired the school’s Faculty Council, served as a member of its Research Council, and directed the Homelessness, Housing, and Social Environment research cluster since 2011. Most notably, Wenzel is currently serving as chair of the Research Council for a two-year period.

“One responsibility of the Research Council is to promote peer-reviewed scientific research and thus to enhance the school’s research enterprise,” Wenzel said.

Wenzel’s experience in this area surpasses all requirements for the position and highlights why she is a great fit to lead the council.

Throughout her lengthy career, she has been sole principal investigator of nine National Institutes of Health (NIH) grants. In addition, she has performed peer-review services on numerous occasions for the NIH and other organizations such as the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the Israeli Science Foundation, and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

The path to this level of achievement is paved with 90 publications, 34 research projects, and service as a reviewer for more than 40 academic and scientific journals. Although she is part of the USC School of Social Work, she earned her doctoral degree in community psychology at the University of Texas at Austin. Acolades for her work in that field are also substantial and include appointments as a fellow in the Association for Psychological Science and the Western Psychological Association.

Throughout all of these appointments and accomplishments, Wenzel has been driven by a singular force: a desire to improve the mental and physical health and well-being of individuals experiencing homelessness. Wenzel has spent her career as a researcher and scientist addressing health promotion and disease prevention for homeless individuals and understanding how access to services and housing influences these factors.

“To experience homelessness is to experience an extreme manifestation of poverty, vulnerability, and marginalization,” Wenzel said. “Mental illness and substance use can certainly be destabilizing influences, but we must remember the significant role that lack of material resources plays in the trajectory toward homelessness and housing insecurity.”

Wenzel became interested in the issue of homelessness during her doctoral work at UT Austin. Her studies in community psychology, often seen as the activist arm of the profession, focused on person-in-environment concepts and looked to changes...
in communities as catalysts for preventing mental health issues. “I was drawn to the empowerment models that were prevalent in the field at the time,” Wenzel said. “I began working with families and single persons experiencing homelessness, which led to the development of a dissertation study based on the U.S. Department of Labor’s Job Training Partnership Act demonstration program designed to get homeless people back on their feet through employment.”

Wenzel said that although the program was innovative for its time, it lacked sufficient training activities and provided wages that were too low to enable individuals to support themselves or attain housing. Her desire to address these issues propelled the remainder of Wenzel’s career.

“Housing subsidies or vouchers were not available, and there was no linkage to appropriate services for the participants who were struggling with alcohol problems, depression, or trauma,” she said.

In her role as a senior behavioral scientist at the RAND Corporation before coming to USC, Wenzel investigated the disproportionate prevalence of HIV, trauma, drug and alcohol use, and mental health problems among homeless people to assess associated risk factors and develop strategies to improve quality of care. She is a strong believer in the significant role that housing can play in reducing many health-related issues and risk factors for homeless individuals.

“Housing is not only an ethical solution, but also a cost-effective one,” said Wenzel. “Studies in multiple cities have shown that costs associated with being homeless are far greater than the costs of housing individuals who have been homeless over a long period or across multiple episodes.”

Although Wenzel believes these studies represent great progress since the days of focusing on temporary shelters as a suitable solution, she remains convinced that a lack of understanding regarding how to effectively provide housing and supportive services is still an issue.

To deepen this understanding, Wenzel and her colleagues in the Homelessness, Housing, and Social Environment research cluster led a symposium on housing services at the 7th International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health recently held at USC, during which research faculty members from around the world discussed issues relating to housing and how it is provided in their communities.

Wenzel also organized and chaired a 2012 forum titled Integrated Care and Housing for Homeless Persons in Los Angeles to discuss the status of housing and service provision and identify key challenges and strategies for advancing and sustaining supportive housing solutions for homeless people in the local community. The forum brought together experts to discuss this complex topic.

“We know that permanent housing and integrated, wrap-around services constitute a solid solution to homelessness, but we are still learning how to effectively do this,” Wenzel said. “The forum was a productive cross-research activity in that it involved the clusters on Homelessness, Housing, and Social Environment; Behavior, Health, and Society; and Serious Mental Illness.”

Wenzel serves as a mentor to doctoral students in the USC School of Social Work and teaches research methods at the doctoral level. As a result of her successful service in these roles, coupled with her research and peer-review experience and adeptness as an investigator, author, and scientist, the NSF has further recognized Wenzel’s outstanding career by extending an invitation to her this fall to serve on the foundation’s graduate fellowship panel.

“It is an honor to be able to help select the next generation of NSF graduate scholars in the sciences,” she said.

Wenzel said she has found it gratifying to serve the school on the Faculty Council and Research Council as both an elected member and chair and to serve the university as a whole through the Academic Senate and in other roles. Her position in the school has also increased her opportunities to work with graduate students at the doctoral and master’s levels.

“Since joining the USC School of Social Work, my career and professional experiences have become more varied,” Wenzel said. “Mentoring and instructing are roles I find fulfilling and enjoy very much, and it’s been fantastic.”
Healing wounds

As the newest member of the USC School of Social Work faculty, retired colonel Carl Castro is looking forward to tackling the toughest problems confronting military service members and veterans.

“The most pressing challenges the military has right now from an active-duty perspective are this high suicide rate in the Army, sexual assault issues facing all the services, and facilitating the transition from a wartime military to a peacetime military,” he said. “That dovetails into issues facing veterans and service members entering civilian life.”

In his new role as assistant professor and director of research at the school’s Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans & Military Families (CIR), Castro is interested in improving how social workers and other behavioral health care professionals develop skills for working with members of the military, such as recognizing the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, establishing a therapeutic relationship with soldiers and veterans, and conducting suicide risk assessments.

He stressed the need for researchers, clinicians, and policy makers to consider not only the current mental and behavioral health issues facing the military, but also the inherent nature of serving in the armed forces.

“You quickly realize that facing the challenges of killing somebody and trying not to be killed in the process, of witnessing death and destruction—those things place a tremendous toll on the physical and mental health of a service member,” Castro said.

By developing a better understanding of those enduring issues, he said researchers can begin to craft more effective prevention programs and treatment. That is one goal of a large-scale survey being led by Castro of approximately 4,000 veterans in Los Angeles County.

“We hope to determine what the needs are of these veterans,” he said. “If they are being met, that is going to be fantastic news for everybody, but if we see an area with unmet need, we’ll be able to determine where we can target resources.”

He is also interested in pursuing research on issues such as pain medication misuse and violence and aggression associated with military service.

CASTRO | continued on page 5

Video game project to help wheelchair users

For individuals who rely on self-propelled wheelchairs, upper body injuries can be catastrophic.

More than 70 percent of people in manual wheelchairs develop shoulder pain or injuries due to repetitive movements and overuse, often resulting in decreased mobility, reduced physical activity, increased weight, and other negative consequences that can decrease their quality of life. Motorized wheelchairs are an option but have their own pitfalls, such as limited battery life and transportation difficulties due to their bulky size.

A unique collaborative project led by researchers at the USC School of Social Work, the USC School of Cinematic Arts, and Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center (Rancho) is seeking to prevent and treat shoulder injuries among people in wheelchairs with spinal cord injuries by engaging them in exercises through an interactive video game titled Skyfarer.

“If you want to stay in a self-propelled wheelchair, you have to sustain upper body strength. You have to do these boring exercises all your life,” said Maryalice Jordan-Marsh, an associate professor with the School of Social Work. “Over time, people get tired of it. Our job was to figure out how to intrigue people to do these exercises.”

Marientina Gotsis, a research assistant professor of interactive media and games at the School of Cinematic Arts and director of the Creative Media & Behavioral Health Center, invited long-time collaborator Jordan-Marsh to partner with a multidisciplinary team of physical therapists, artists, engineers, and designers to develop the game.

The research team created an adjustable rig outfitted with specialized sensors attached to adjustable stretch bands and weights. The sensors track movements and send data to a calibration and game-based exercise software system.

In addition to offering an engaging environment, the game helps users perform their exercises correctly. Phil Requejo, Rancho’s director of rehabilitation engineering, said Skyfarer is based on an exercise regimen shown to alleviate shoulder pain among long-time wheelchair users.

“By doing this exercise program, this protocol that is prescribed for people with shoulder pain, it actually reduces their pain after a certain time, in a matter of weeks or months,” he said. “We are taking this evidence-based approach and combining it with immersive technology. The whole idea is to increase enjoyment and promote adherence and long-term use.”

An evaluation conducted at the rehabilitation center determined that the game-based exercise regimen had similar biomechanical results as the standard exercise routine, Requejo said, adding that the research team plans to test Skyfarer with people experiencing shoulder pain to determine whether the game affects their level

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Professor uses technology to improve school transitions for military families

By Charli Engelhorn

A new grant from the U.S. Department of Defense Educational Activity has been awarded to a partnership between the USC School of Social Work and a consortium of five Southern California school districts to help determine the best welcoming practices that address the transition needs of military students in public schools.

Research shows that military-connected students may transfer as many as nine times during their school careers, but few evidence-supported interventions focus on the specific transition-related needs of students from military families, said Ron Avi Astor, the Richard M. and Ann L. Thor Professor of Urban Social Development and principal investigator of the new study.

“Our prior work with schools suggests that it is critical to have everything happen in a certain time frame for military-connected students and their families,” Astor said. “What happens that month and week before moving and when the parents sign their kids up for school? What happens the first day of school for the student? Are the kids by themselves, are there other kids to help guide them, or are they being placed in the proper classes?”

These questions highlight the need for new evidence-supported strategies that target the transition process of military-connected students in and out of public schools. There are approximately 5 million children whose parents have served in the military since 2001, and only a small proportion of them attended schools overseen by the Department of Defense. Military-specific schools have a greater understanding of military culture and are able to manage issues related to frequent school changes and deployment, Astor said.

Test scores suggest that students in these schools perform better academically than the national average, and the schools are more flexible in accommodating specific needs such as taking time off before a deployment.

“Multiple deployments are a major new factor for military families,” Astor said. “Some districts have students who have experienced five to nine deployments, and public school educators need to understand the impact of these deployments for kids. The stress and frustration caused by a teacher not understanding what their family has been through have many negative outcomes for these students, including the decision to transfer or drop out.”

The first part of the four-year, $4.99-million partnership award will involve assessing the specific needs of the five Southern California school districts and military families for use in the development of an electronic application for computers, tablets, and smartphones. This application will be used by parents, school officials, and community organization leaders to help ensure a smooth transition process when children switch schools.

During the application development, transition teams created for each district will include superintendents, student assistants, parents, students, and an information technology associate to transfer academic files and resolve technical issues.

The goal is for the electronic application to reduce stress for these families during periods of transition by informing them about required documentation and eligibility criteria for a new district before they arrive. Parents will be able to enter their contact information, and the app will curate necessary forms and information.

“Some districts have students who have experienced five to nine deployments, and public school educators need to understand the impact of these deployments for kids.”

Ron Astor

“Facing the challenges of killing somebody and trying not to be killed in the process, of witnessing death and destruction—those things place a tremendous toll on the physical and mental health of a service member.”

Carl Castro

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Castro most recently served as director of military operations in the Medicine Research Program at Fort Detrick, Maryland. He was chief of military psychiatry at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research and commander of the U.S. Army Medical Research Unit-Europe, in addition to completing multiple deployments to Bosnia.

A graduate of Wichita State University, Castro also earned master’s and doctoral degrees in psychology from the University of Colorado. He led the first major study of the psychological effects of an ongoing war involving the United States, surveying 6,200 soldiers and Marines shortly after they returned from battle.

Castro said he is inspired by the USC School of Social Work’s ongoing emphasis on military social work and efforts to improve the lives of service members and veterans.

“It’s absolutely thrilling to see everybody coming together and focusing on these issues,” he said. “The real challenge is to not lose the momentum we have as the wars are ending. We want to learn as much as we can now and capture those lessons learned and figure out how to take care of veterans so we don’t have to relearn it every time.”

TRANSITION | continued on page 12
Major depression coupled with other chronic health problems such as heart disease or diabetes can place a severe burden on low-income, culturally diverse individuals who are less comfortable interacting with doctors and navigating complex health care systems.

A new community-based research project led by Kathleen Ell, the Ernest P. Larson Professor of Health, Ethnicity, and Poverty at the USC School of Social Work, will test whether training community members to provide basic health information and promote healthy behaviors represents an effective strategy to help individuals access treatment and improve health outcomes.

“Multiple chronic illnesses, particularly among these underserved populations, are a real challenge,” Ell said. “Managing one illness is tough enough. Managing multiple illnesses is complicated in many ways.”

The three-year study, supported by a $1.3-million award from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), will involve recruiting 350 patients with major depression and chronic illness from two health clinics overseen by the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services.

Some participants will be randomly selected to receive typical clinical services, whereas others will participate in A Helping Hand, a program in which community-based promotoras offer training and advice to help patients interact with health care providers, adhere to treatment, manage stress and fatigue, attend clinic

Not only do individuals with serious mental illness die an average of 25 years earlier than the general population, but those deaths are also often attributed to preventable medical conditions.

Improving how those individuals interact with the complex and often uncoordinated health care system is a key component of a new intervention being tested by John Brekke, the Frances G. Larson Professor of Social Work Research at the USC School of Social Work. Backed by a $1.2-million award from the Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI), he is exploring the effectiveness of peer navigators, or those who have personal experience with mental illness and the treatment system.

“They help individuals with serious mental illness gain access to primary preventive and specialty health care services,” Brekke said. “They do everything from help them find and engage with doctors, make appointments, and get follow-up care. It helps them maintain these health care relationships over time on their own.”

A disconnection between mental and physical health care providers is considered a critical factor that leads to health disparities among people with serious mental illness, he said. An intervention known as the Bridge employs peer navigators to help current health care consumers improve their health status and satisfaction with care.

A recently completed pilot project revealed promising results, including a significant reduction in overall health problems

Tracking teens

A new study led by assistant professor Tamika Gilreath has revealed not only how many California teens are using illicit substances, but also how often they use those substances and whether they are using alcohol and drugs together.

Using data from a school-based survey conducted from 2005 to 2007, Gilreath and her colleagues examined polysubstance use and frequency of use during the previous 30 days to bring a new level of detail to statewide statistics on the prevalence of alcohol, marijuana, and tobacco use among high school students.

“You hear the stats on CNN that 50 percent of high school kids have smoked marijuana in the past 30 days,” she said. “But how many of them are smoking marijuana 10 or more days in the past month? Those are the kids we need to be most concerned about.”

That level of analysis is rare in large population studies, Gilreath said. Most researchers focus on whether teens have used drugs at any point and often only explore one substance at a time.

By splitting survey participants into various classes, including nonusers, alcohol experimenters, mild polysubstance users, and frequent polysubstance users, she found several unique characteristics of teens in California compared to their peers throughout the United States.

For instance, 61 percent of high school students in California were classified as nonusers, compared to just 27.7 percent nationally. In addition, California teens were more likely to use marijuana and less likely to smoke cigarettes.

“It’s great that we have these national

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appointments, and advocate for personal treatment preferences, among other strategies to improve their health.

María Aranda, an associate professor with the USC School of Social Work and project coinvestigator, said promotoras are particularly well suited to deliver health care information about depression and chronic illness while respecting cultural and community traditions.

“These community health care workers have amazing characteristics and an amazing aptitude for bringing needed services to underserviced populations,” she said. “They can break down some of the typical barriers in terms of health care access and coordination of health care systems.”

Cultural and language barriers as well as health literacy issues may prevent patients with comorbid illnesses from developing strong relationships with care providers. That can lead to increased stress, poor adherence to recommended treatment, worsening health, and even premature death.

The project will focus on individuals who lack health insurance or have Medi-Cal coverage, find it difficult to travel to health care appointments due to transportation issues, and can’t always afford prescribed medications. When these patients do make it to safety-net community clinics, Ell said they often face delays and limited interaction with health care workers.

“The primary care physicians in these clinics are overwhelmed,” she said. “Most of these clinics see something like 12,000 patients a month. Sometimes patients spend the whole day in the clinic and get seen at 4 o’clock even if they came in at 8 in the morning.”

Ell and her research partners are hopeful that promotoras will fit into that integrated care model and serve as a liaison of sorts between patients and primary care providers.

“Many promotoras have recovered from or have been influenced by the same type of health conditions that the consumer or patient population is facing,” Aranda said. “They can be peer navigators.”

Study participants randomly enrolled in A Helping Hand will work through a series of modules with promotoras on issues such as developing a positive mood, managing medications, eating healthy and exercising, addressing pain and fatigue, and managing conflicts with family members and caregivers.

Using a variety of assessment tools, the research team will determine whether promotora support improves patient outcomes such as depression self-care and management, satisfaction with care, symptoms of chronic illnesses, and hospitalizations and emergency room visits.

As part of the PCORI award, Ell will be responsible for convening an advisory council of key stakeholders to oversee the project, including patients and family members, caregivers, community clinic administrators and staff members, and representatives from community-based health care agencies with an interest in the study.

Another important stakeholder group is Visión y Compromiso, which provides training and policy advocacy for a network of promotoras and community health workers.

“One of the key elements of this study is the fact that we’re going to have a very close community partnership with our research collaborator, Visión y Compromiso, and its director, María Lemus,” said Aranda. “She has a time-honored tradition of providing state-of-the-art promotora services in the state of California and elsewhere.”

This project is one of three PCORI awards received by researchers with the USC School of Social Work since the independent nonprofit organization was authorized by Congress in 2010 to fund research that helps patients, caregivers, and clinicians make evidence-based health care decisions.

“Most of these clinics see something like 12,000 patients a month. Sometimes patients spend the whole day in the clinic and get seen at 4 o’clock even if they came in at 8 in the morning.”

**Kathleen Ell**

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estimates, but it’s important for us to know what’s going on statewide, and I would dare say that there are regional differences,” Gilreath said. “There are parts of California that are much more conservative. Not every part of the state is like Los Angeles.”

In general, her results, published in *Substance Use & Misuse*, indicated that school-based intervention programs in California should focus on alcohol and marijuana concurrently.

In addition, students classified as frequent polysubstance users had a 30 percent likelihood of using alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, or some combination of substances 10 or more times during the previous month, Gilreath said, placing them on a path toward substance use disorders in adolescence and adulthood.

Because schools have access to these data, they can determine what particular issues their students are facing and implement the most meaningful interventions at a local level, Gilreath said.

“It’s not so much that they go find this particular group of high-risk kids, but if they do a schoolwide intervention for substance use, maybe they tailor it to marijuana use because that’s what is being predominantly used,” she said.

That may enable more efficient use of resources, Gilreath added, explaining that if data indicate that only a small group of students in a particular school district have serious substance use issues and need more on-one-one time with counselors, school leaders can implement a simpler intervention at the district level and provide more funding for counseling.

She noted that data can also be compared over time to explore outcomes among schools that have used various drug and alcohol prevention programs.

Gilreath plans to pursue further studies on the effects of race and ethnicity on substance use among teens in California, as well as differences among Asian American subgroups and how children from military families engage in substance use.

“It’s important to have more details and nuances about the different ways in which people behave and interact with the world,” she said. “It’s important to know the difference between someone who says, yeah, I smoked marijuana last month, and the person who says, I smoked marijuana 20 days out of 30.”
With the end of their first semester as doctoral students in the USC School of Social Work upon them, the eight first-year students are likely reveling in a tremendous feeling of pride, as well as relief.

For some students, entering the doctoral program was a successive continuation of their educational careers. However, for most, the decision to enter the classroom after a long respite was based on years of professional experience.

“I haven’t been in school for 10 years,” said Melissa Bird, who received her master’s degree in social work from the University of Utah. Before joining USC, she worked as a lobbyist for Planned Parenthood of Utah, writing advocacy legislation.

After deciding to pursue her doctorate degree, USC quickly became her top choice when she noticed the faculty included Bruce Jansson, the Margaret W. Driscoll/Louise M. Clevenger Professor of Social Policy and Administration.

“Initially, I just wanted to work with Dr. John Brekke, but then I was wowed by the program at USC,” said Barr, who worked as a social work intern at psychiatric clinics while attaining his master’s degree at UCLA and for two years after graduation. Barr’s research focuses on evidence-based practices for individuals with serious mental illness. He is interested in mindfulness-based interventions and melds aspects of his religious studies background in Buddhism into his approach.

A desire to promote social work as an interdisciplinary profession at the organizational level is what drives Lengnick-Hall, who holds a dual master’s degree in social work and public affairs. She cited the progressive manner in which Michælle Mor Barak, the Lenore Stein-Wood and William S. Wood Professor in Social Work and Business in a Global Society, approaches social work as a science as what drew her to USC.

Gordon Capp was also attracted to the school’s progressive linkage of science and social work as a profession. His research interests involve community and mental health, with a particular focus on working with schools. Capp taught in the public school system for five years before earning his master’s degree. He spent the last seven years at the Community Family Guidance Center in Cerritos, California, working on child welfare and mental health issues.

“In community health practice, it feels like such a narrow sphere of social work,” Capp said. “But the opportunity to try to make social work better with the goal of ending people’s suffering is great, and USC has an impressive leadership in research.”

Capp said being at USC offers exciting opportunities for collaboration and support with his fellow classmates, despite the diversity of their interests. Mor Barak, the director of the doctoral program, agreed this is a unique group of students.

“This new cohort of incoming doctoral students is extremely talented,” she said. “They bring a wide spectrum of research interests and diverse backgrounds that will further enrich our program.”

New PhD students possess diverse backgrounds, experiences

By Charli Engelhorn

The new doctoral cohort includes (left to right) Chung Hyeon Jeong, Katherine Sullivan, Gordon Capp, Andrea Lane, Nicholas Barr, Melissa Bird, and Rebecca Lengnick-Hall.
For instance, Chung Hyeon Jeong is experiencing life for the first time in the United States. A native of South Korea, he graduated from Seoul National University and became interested in social work after witnessing growing health disparities among minority immigrants, namely North Korean refugees.

“They suffered from mental and physical health issues at a much higher rate, and I felt that it was caused by social reasons,” Jeong said. “I came to USC because Los Angeles is the best place to research immigrants because of the diverse population, and the school is very interested in the problem of health disparities.”

The stars aligned for Jeong in that his faculty mentor, Lawrence Palinkas, the Albert G. and Frances Lomas Feldman Professor of Social Policy and Health, was already working with a student conducting research on North Korean immigrants.

The school’s research clusters are also an invaluable resource for the new students. Andrea lane has found the perfect home in the Child Development and Children’s Services cluster, working alongside Jacquelyn McCroskey, the John Milner Professor of Child Welfare, on issues involving foster youth. Lane previously worked with the California State Senate, where she heralded legislation focused on child welfare.

“Part of the reason I left the senate was because I was frustrated with not being involved in the creation of ideas,” Lane said. “I was trying to clean up issues involving families with sexual trauma, but I want to prevent them from happening in the first place.”

Likewise, Katherine Sullivan is transitioning from six years as a community mental health clinician into a research career involving the impact of trauma for military families.

“The military cluster is really addressing this issue more than other schools,” Sullivan said. “I was afraid that entering academia would remove me from being connected to social work, but I see how this program allows me to be productive in the academic community and still relate to clinicians.”

Finally, the Behavior, Health and Society cluster is a great fit for Jaih Craddock, who said the interests of her mentors in the cluster align perfectly with her own.

“My current research interests are on HIV risk in black communities and how black family dynamics influence adolescent and young adult sexual health decision making,” she said. “I am currently working on a skill-based HIV intervention for homeless women, and I’m excited about this opportunity. USC has proven to not only have a strong family-style network, but also strong pride in their contributions to the world.”

Although all the students reported that the program at USC is difficult, they agreed it is worth the effort.

“The curriculum is very good … and hard,” said Jeong. “The core classes are tough, but we are learning a lot about macro and micro methods and statistics, and they will all come together in the end.”

Bird said she is also experiencing changes in her life for the better, crediting the depth of instruction at USC.

“The level of education to inform the field of practice is amazing,” she said. “I have never absorbed this much information ever. It’s changing the entire structure of how I think.”

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**“Social workers need to have a leadership role in developing research. My clinical background strongly informs my research, and people at USC really value that. You don’t find that in other programs.”**

*Nicholas Barr*

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BREKKE | from page 6

and physical pain among participants.

“We found improvements in the use of medication related to physical health conditions, and really importantly, we found a dramatic shift away from the emergency room, away from urgent care, and toward outpatient primary care,” Brekke said.

The Bridge intervention is based on a behavioral model of health services use for vulnerable populations that Brekke and his research team adapted for people with serious mental illness. It features a three-pronged approach focused on integrating different systems of care, educating patients about health and self-care, and building cognitive and behavioral skills.

The two-year, PCORI-funded study will randomly assign approximately 150 participants with serious mental illness to one of two groups. One group will receive treatment as usual and the other will participate in the Bridge peer navigator program.

Brekke’s team will track health outcomes across three time points—at the onset of the study, six months, and one year—to determine the intervention’s effectiveness in terms of health care services use, health knowledge, satisfaction with care, health status, quality of life, and self-efficacy. In addition to surveying study participants, Brekke will rely on medical records and insurance claims information to objectively examine health status.

He said peer navigators have proven effective at building a strong connection with clients and empowering them to take charge of their health.

“The clients really appreciate and engage with learning these skills and the peer providers take tremendous reinforcement from being the ones providing the training,” Brekke said, noting that there was some concern that it may be challenging for peer navigators to administer the Bridge program.

“They were very capable and enjoyed delivering the intervention,” he said. “It improved aspects of their self-esteem, their confidence. It actually made them much more aware of their own health care needs.”

The study will take place at a treatment facility overseen by Pacific Clinics, a large behavioral and mental health care organization that Brekke has partnered with for more than two decades on previous research projects. In addition to Pacific Clinics, Brekke lauded the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health and the USC Clinical and Translational Science Institute for ongoing support of the Bridge intervention.

Due to the promising results of the pilot study, approximately 80 peers and case managers have been trained to provide peer navigation services in the Southern California region, and Brekke said he is hopeful that the larger study will lead to further expansion of the program.

“There’s a large movement nationally toward using peer navigators in a variety of service and population contexts,” he said. “If our intervention effects hold up and it looks as strong as it has up to now, we would hope to begin wider implementation and dissemination.”
The beauty of this project is that by thoughtfully compiling this information, we can very cost-effectively start to tease out what is working, what’s not, who is being served, who is not, and what changes are taking place in this population,” said Emily Putnam-Hornstein, an assistant professor who is working in tandem with Jacquelyn McCroskey, the John Milner Professor of Child Welfare, to develop the Children’s Data Network (CDN).

First 5 LA, which launched the CDN in 2010 as a strategy to increase access to timely and accurate data about children from infancy to 5 years old, recently called for strong leaders to push the project forward.

As an accomplished researcher with decades of involvement with child development agencies in Los Angeles, McCroskey has built solid relationships with key county leaders and community groups that will be necessary to bridge information gaps among various institutions.

Putnam-Hornstein’s affiliation with the California Child Welfare Indicators Project at UC Berkeley and her past research, which has involved the linkage of child welfare data with birth and death records, made her an ideal partner to oversee the CDN.

“We have different strengths but we’re finding enormous similarity in terms of our understanding of what the issues are and how we go about engaging people and using the data they already have,” McCroskey said.

By encouraging partnerships and expanded use of existing administrative data, she is hopeful that public officials and community leaders will be able to develop a better understanding of what leads to issues such as poor developmental outcomes or child abuse and neglect, allowing them to focus on preventive efforts rather than simply reacting to maltreatment or negative behaviors.

“I hope we can demonstrate to people that this whole idea of data mining in the human services has only begun to be explored and that there is a great deal of value in terms of guiding policy and service delivery.”

Jacquelyn McCroskey

For example, during the past few years, the county’s Education Coordinating Council demonstrated how matching data from foster care, probation, and 81 school districts could help improve outcomes such as academic achievement, expulsions, and attendance. Results from that project allowed policy makers to pinpoint certain geographic areas where resources could be invested to support particular students in need, a place-based approach that has been emphasized by First 5 LA.

“It was certainly light years ahead of where we had been,” McCroskey said, “but we still had to do it separately each time and for each school district.”

“We have these great exemplars of stand-alone data linkage projects, but there hasn’t been a platform for the ongoing integration of data,” Putnam-Hornstein added. “What a shame that we do these one-off data linkages and yet we can’t use that integrated data to answer other questions.”

As envisioned, the CDN will serve as that platform, ultimately generating integrated statewide and local information and research on services related to child health, safety, and well-being. Affiliated researchers will be able to partner with public agencies to use linked data to explore specific issues such as child obesity, the receipt of early intervention services, or the effects of budget cutbacks on child care availability in local communities.

All research proposals will be reviewed by a scientific advisory board and involved agencies and will be subject to standard government and university approval processes to ensure that the identities of children and their families are protected, in addition to maintaining a high standard of academic rigor.

“We want to ensure we are not only focused on data security but also the scientific integrity of how the data are used,”
Putnam–Hornstein said. Ensuring political neutrality is also important, she said. Rather than adopting policy positions on any issues, the CDN will focus on generating and disseminating research to inform other stakeholders, public officials, agency leaders, and child advocates.

Although similar data linkage projects have been pursued elsewhere, including Western Australia and New Zealand, McCroskey and Putnam–Hornstein hope the CDN will serve as a model—for not only other regions but also other areas of research beyond child health, safety, and well-being—as more policy makers recognize the value of integrated data. “We’re just beginning to figure out ways we can use existing data,” Putnam–Hornstein said. “As we get better at that, we’ll have a much more rigorous base from which to evaluate where there are service gaps and where we have really great programs that are working.”

During the coming months, they will develop the infrastructure and security protocols necessary to house the data repository at USC, which is highlighting analysis of “big data,” or large-scale data sets, as a groundbreaking strategy to advance scientific research. The duo also plans to pursue several internal research projects to showcase the potential benefits of linked data.

“This is the kind of thing that immediately appeals to geeky people, so we just want to make sure we are going beyond the people who get it right away,” McCroskey said. “We are both very enthusiastic about this. We love the idea and we think it’s going to be a revelation for a lot of the key institutions that work with children.”

Players use steady, smooth motions to collect buckets of enchanted water, row their vessel, gain altitude, and fly toward the sun or moon. Additional game features can ensure they are sitting upright, and the team developed modules to detect and promote proper muscle stretching prior to exercise.

Although the game is still a prototype, it has received positive feedback from both wheelchair users and experts in immersive technology. During the 2013 ACM SIGGRAPH conference, the top showcase for advances in computer graphics and interactive media, Skyfarer was selected as one of four emerging technologies. The next steps for the research team include developing a full prototype to test with wheelchair users over time. Jordan–Marsh and Gotsis also plan to redesign the rig for commercial uses, such as in rehabilitation clinics. As currently configured, the metal frame is somewhat bulky.

“Down the road, we’d like to make it available for people to use in their home,” Jordan–Marsh said. “We’re exploring creative ways this could work at home without this big structure.”

Skyfarer may also appeal to people who aren’t in wheelchairs, she added, such as older adults who are seeking a general exercise program to prevent shoulder injuries and maintain their strength.

“It has amazing physical and psychological mood-lifting and social possibilities,” she said.

Jordan–Marsh, who teaches a master’s-level class on health technology and a doctoral course with Gotsis on interactive media, said although social work is not always viewed as a natural component of projects involving video games or emerging technology, the profession is gaining more attention as researchers begin to acknowledge the psychosocial aspects of technological advances and their applications to health and well-being.

For instance, the USC School of Social Work is continuing to develop a groundbreaking virtual avatar in its military social work program that depicts a soldier with mental health issues to help students prepare for clinical practice. The school is also making a foray into telehealth and is encouraging projects that empower individuals to become engaged in their own health care.

Skyfarer’s development was funded by the U.S. Department of Education’s National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research through a grant to Rancho and USC.
William Vega, provost professor and executive director of the Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, has received two honors in recognition of his expertise on health disparities affecting aging ethnic minority populations. He has been appointed as a member of the Gerontological Society of America Behavioral and Social Sciences Section Program Committee, which organizes and oversees the scientific and professional program of the society’s annual scientific meeting, the premier gathering of gerontologists from the United States and around the world. Vega was also selected as the conference honoree for the 19th annual gathering of the Latino Behavioral Health Institute, considered the premier Latino behavioral health conference in the nation.

Lawrence Palinkas, the Albert G. and Frances Lomas Feldman Professor of Social Policy and Health, has been appointed to the Committee on Ethics Principles and Guidelines for Health Standard for Long Duration and Exploration Spaceflights by the Institute of Medicine. The committee is responsible for exploring policy and ethics issues related to crew health during long-duration space missions, including the potential development of new standards for hazardous and uncertain working conditions.

Hortensia Amaro, dean’s professor of social work and preventive medicine and associate vice provost of community research initiatives, has received the Ernest R. Hilgard Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Psychological Association’s Society for General Psychology. She has also been appointed to the Committee on the Assessment of Resiliency and Prevention Programs for Mental and Behavioral Health in Service Members and Their Families by the Institute of Medicine. Finally, a new lecture series at Northeastern University’s Institute on Urban Health Research and Practice has been named in her honor.

Assistant professor Alice Cepeda has been elected to the American Sociological Association Council, representing the Alcohol, Drugs and Tobacco Section. She will be responsible for encouraging research, teaching, and exploration of professional issues and concerns related to research on alcohol and drugs.

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors has appointed Dean Marilyn Flynn to a newly created Blue Ribbon Commission on Child Protection. The independent commission was formed following the deaths several children and amid revelations that county agencies failed to intervene in cases of maltreatment despite abuse allegations made by family members and teachers. Flynn and her fellow commission members will be responsible for reviewing issues and challenges faced by the county’s Department of Children and Family Services and offering policy suggestions and reforms to support children and families at risk of maltreatment and abuse.

Associate professor Ann Marie Yamada has coedited a new edition of the Handbook of Multicultural Mental Health, which provides information to clinicians and mental health professionals regarding treatment of patients from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Yamada also coauthored three chapters in the book, including a chapter on military culture with clinical associate professor Eugenia Weiss and research assistant professor Hazel Atuel.

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information regarding their child’s academic and extracurricular background and receive reminders for pertinent dates and appointments related to district enrollment.

In turn, the district will be able to use student information to link children with appropriate schools, classes, and activities, as well as supportive community organizations such as tutoring agencies.

“Allowing districts and schools to know about the kids’ special considerations before they get there is critical,” said Tamika Gilreath, an assistant professor and coprincipal investigator. “Similarly, if kids and their families can have advance access to school resources and scheduling, for instance, it can make a big difference in smoothing the transition process and allaying fears.”

In addition, the application is geared toward providing more than mere logistical linkages for parents and children. The technology is also designed to connect parents and students with “buddies” already in the district to help welcome them into the community and school. Researchers hope this will foster a sense of belonging and trust among transitioning families.

“We already know the consequences of belonging to a numerical minority group, the feelings of isolation and a lack of commonalities or shared experiences with your peers,” said Hazel Atuel, a research assistant professor and member of the project team. “This lack of socioemotional support within the schools hinders school readiness. What the app will do is facilitate communications and promote connections.”

Astor believes the needs of these students and districts will be similar to those of students who experience multiple relocations or districts with frequent student transfers. “These are issues pertinent to military families, but the implications of what we learn here could translate to other populations and hopefully be usable for schools across the country with high transition, such as inner-city schools or cities with interschool movement,” Astor said.

Focusing on making the application responsive to what schools and families need the most will ensure its sustainability after the project ends, Gilreath said. Yet, she believes the biggest issue the technology will address is awareness.

“This partnership highlights the fact that it is not only service persons and their spouses who have been impacted by this war,” she said, “but their children have also shared in their sacrifices.”