New program nourishes body and soul

The time-honored tradition of cooking and sharing a meal with others is at the center of a new program called Nourished that seeks to create community between student volunteers and people who have experienced homelessness in Los Angeles.

The concept is simple enough. USC students gather with residents at a permanent supportive housing facility on the edge of Koreatown once a week to cook healthy recipes and eat together. They share stories and chat about current events.

But interviews and focus groups with residents and volunteers hint at the development of a deeper connection and the cultivation of a sense of belonging.

“The neatest thing is how it brings people out of the housing here and gets them together,” said Fred Banks, a resident who has attended many of the Nourished events. “We might have karaoke or a dance, but when you have a meal with somebody, it’s totally different. It builds relationships and makes people come together more closely.”

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USC students and formerly homeless individuals living in supportive housing are building a bond by breaking bread.
Laptop program narrows digital divide for foster youth

In today’s tech age, growing up without access to a computer and the internet is a major disadvantage.

For most adolescents, it’s not an issue; 90 percent of teens in the United States have their own laptop. However, it’s a different story for youth in foster care.

“We live in an increasingly digital world and the divide between those with internet access and those without is getting smaller,” said Jeremy Goldbach, an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work. “But kids in the foster care system are still being left out.”

Less than 20 percent of foster youth own a computer, with even lower rates in rural counties throughout California. That disparity might play a role in higher dropout rates, less success on the high school exit exam and lower rates of college graduation among foster youth.

That’s where iFoster enters the picture. The California-based nonprofit launched an innovative program in 2012 after its founder, Serita Cox, kept hearing from teens and caregivers that not having access to a computer is a common challenge.

“If you look in the literature, there is nothing about the digital divide or access to technology for foster youth,” she said. “But when we asked this community what was needed, this was the top request across the country.”

With funding from various child welfare agencies, philanthropic foundations and individual donors, the program began providing laptops to college-bound teens in the foster care system. Thousands of computers have been distributed throughout the United States, including more than 2,000 in Los Angeles County thanks to funding from nonprofit Foster Care Counts and support from the county’s Department of Children and Family Services. But Cox wanted to do more. She envisioned broadening the program’s reach and prompting legislative changes that would ensure all foster youth had access to a computer.

“It’s not just about giving them a laptop,” she said. “It’s about evaluating the program and developing a model that can be replicated nationwide.”

Foster Care Counts asked Goldbach to evaluate the effect of iFoster’s laptop efforts on academic performance by surveying participants before they received a computer and following up with them a year later. He also added measures focused on general life satisfaction, including social and emotional factors.

The results floored Cox. “Grades went up, missed school days went down, they applied to college more and they applied to jobs more,” she said. “At the same time, self-esteem went up, depression went down and thoughts of suicide went down.”

Because the study didn’t include a control group, Goldbach is more cautious about drawing direct connections between receiving a laptop and seeing improvements in those various domains. However, he said the results are promising and indicate the need for more research on technology access in the foster care system.

He also noted that findings from interviews with participants in the laptop program backed up his statistical analyses.

“They said things like it’s been really important for them to be able to do their homework on their own time, to not have to use a shared computer in their foster home, to not have to go to the library or do their work at school,” Goldbach said. “They also said it makes them feel

“...and support in unfamiliar surroundings. I hope you enjoy reading about the exciting and uplifting work of these students and others featured in this issue!”

**Eric Lindberg**
Editor, Hamovitch PI

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Front page: As part of a new program, Nourished, student volunteers from USC share a healthy meal with residents at a local housing facility for individuals who have experienced homelessness.

Front Page Photo/Eric Lindberg
Although she has since upgraded to a new laptop, Lucero Noyola said the computer she received through a program for foster youth proved invaluable as she pursued a double major in psychology and sociology at USC.

more like their friends and that they feel like they fit in more.”

For some, having a laptop simply made life easier. That certainly was the case for Lucero Noyola, who came across the iFoster program while searching for resources to support her as she pursued a college degree.

A native of South Gate, she had grown up relatively unsupervised because both of her parents worked full time to support the family. By middle school, Noyola had landed in the juvenile probation system for fighting and using drugs. After three years of cycling through various rehabilitation options, including house arrest and juvenile hall, she was sent to a group home.

Although Noyola initially tried to run away from the Orange County facility where she was placed, the openness and willingness of the staff to welcome her back in gave her hope and a renewed focus.

“It was really a way to become someone completely new,” she said. “They treated me more like an actual person and not like a criminal. I had a voice.”

Six months later, after she had become a model resident, the juvenile court allowed her to move back in with her parents. Noyola focused on education, enrolling in adult school to make up missing credits and ultimately graduating from high school on time.

“Education has been my lifeline,” she said. “I've found community and work and a way to make a living.”

Around the time she began taking classes at East Los Angeles College, Noyola came across the iFoster laptop program. It proved serendipitous, particularly when she transferred to USC and had to commute from a transitional living facility in Whittier. She would often get home from campus late in the evening, when the local library had closed and there were few options for free wireless internet.

The transitional housing complex had WiFi in its community room, but it was closed at night and her apartment wasn't close enough to pick up the signal.

“Sometimes I would be up at 4 in the morning doing homework, and I wasn't about to go sit outside just to get close to the community room,” Noyola said.

At that time, iFoster provided a free WiFi card with its laptops, so she could remain in her apartment and look after her young daughter, Aurora. That access became particularly valuable as she pursued a double major in sociology and psychology with a heavy emphasis on research.

She has since upgraded her laptop and moved into an affordable housing unit a few miles north of USC that offers wireless internet, but Noyola remains grateful for the support she received from iFoster.

“It was also a way for me to research what kinds of resources were out there,” she said. “I didn't have a social worker, so the only way I found out about these things was by researching them online.”

Noyola is now earning her master's degree in social work at USC and plans to pursue a doctorate and ultimately an academic research career. She is interested in issues involving probation, teenage mothers, foster youth and low-income families.
School safety model gains traction in South America

An innovative approach to promoting safety and preventing violence in schools is being embraced in Valparaíso, Chile.

Education officials in the South American country are joining a growing list of regions around the world that have embraced a school mapping and monitoring system developed by researchers at the USC School of Social Work and Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

Essentially a scientific approach to understanding the specific challenges faced by individual classes, schools and districts, the model involves collecting detailed data to aid in reform efforts.

“This is not a top-down, prepackaged solution for reducing school violence and improving school climate,” said Verónica López, associate professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso. “Instead it proposes a building-capacity perspective that seeks for school staff to become actively engaged in responding to school violence through locally designed solutions.”

An educational psychologist, López is part of a research team that has introduced the monitoring system in public elementary schools throughout Valparaíso. Although adapted for the local context, the model is based on the school safety work of Ron Astor, the Lenore Stein-Wood and William S. Wood Professor of School Behavioral Health at the USC School of Social Work, and his longtime research partner, Rami Benbenishty, a professor at Bar-Ilan University.

For nearly three decades, Astor, Benbenishty and their colleagues have developed the data and mapping system with a particular emphasis on creating a flexible and hyperfocused approach to educational accountability.

“Every school is so different, even in the same communities,” Astor said. “One school might have name-calling issues, another might have weapon use, a third might have sexual harassment and abuse and a fourth might have fights and bullying. We came to the conclusion that you need reliable data at the local level.”

Although López was familiar with Astor and Benbenishty’s work on school safety and violence, a chance encounter at an international conference led to an exchange of ideas. With funding from the Chilean government, López and her team, including researchers Mariana Bilbao and Paula Ascorra, visited the United States to learn more about the monitoring approach.

She also invited Astor, Benbenishty and other researchers to Chile to serve as consultants as they began developing a similar monitoring system in Valparaíso. Using survey data collected from students, school administrators and teachers, the system generates detailed reports that
highlight specific issues in each school, even down to the classroom level.

“This is really a practice-based research project, where the aim is to help schools improve themselves rather than just gather information,” López said.

Although schools in the colorful seaside city struggle with many of the same issues as those in the United States and elsewhere, such as bullying and harassment, they also face unique challenges.

Chile’s education system features three tiers of schools — public, private subsidized (similar to charter schools) and private. Most wealthy and middle-class families send their children to private schools, relegating kids with low socioeconomic status to municipal schools.

Public schools in Valparaíso also have a tense relationship with their communities, López said, often viewing their lower-income surroundings as a menace and constructing physical and figurative walls to shield students from the neighborhood.

“That makes building community networks very difficult,” she said. “From a global perspective on how to improve school climate, that’s a very important issue that we still need to address.”

Ensuring that connections are made with community stakeholders is essential to improving school safety and reducing violence, said Diana Pineda, who worked with Astor to implement the school monitoring approach in San Diego County and currently serves as program director of Welcoming Practices that Address Transition Needs of Military Students in Public Schools, a collaborative effort to improve school climate for children from military-connected families.

Pineda spent a week and a half in Valparaíso in 2013, meeting with López and others to offer advice on collecting data, measuring school climate and collaborating with community groups, education officials, nongovernmental agencies and other partners.

“It’s very reassuring to have the opportunity to learn from them and their experience. It’s been very inspiring, and I believe they have also been inspired by us.”

Verónica López

“How do we engage schools within the community context, which is a critical component?” she said. “If you don’t engage the schools, the community and the parents, then it’s going to be really tough to sell.”

Another challenging aspect of the education system in Chile has been its disciplinary approach to accountability. Schools that are struggling can be forced to pay fines, lose resources from the government and have their principals replaced.

High-stakes testing raises the pressure on schools, López said, and those that don’t improve in terms of grade point averages and student performance on national language and math tests can be shuttered.

“We get a sense that the approach of educational authorities is more punitive toward schools than we see in other places, especially if we compare it to Israel,” said Benbenishty, who has worked with Astor to refine the school monitoring model in the Israeli education system for the past 25 years. “One of our goals is to develop ways of using accountability and monitoring to support schools, rather than punish them.”

The tide is slowly shifting toward that approach in Valparaíso, especially as school officials and community members become more familiar with the model.

“They really started acknowledging and recognizing the value of gathering data,” López said. “They talk about gathering valid data that they can trust and using it to make decisions.”

With their work in Valparaíso showing promise, López and her research team are now turning to a broader challenge — to revamp a long-standing life skills program delivered in nearly a third of all schools in Chile. Initially funded by the government to work with 12 school districts, the project swelled to 59 districts by the end of 2015.

As that process unfolds, the Chilean research team is continuing to rely on the expertise of Astor and Benbenishty. A recent grant from Chile’s government will allow both scholars to visit Chile, and Benbenishty is on sabbatical at USC this year to advance the collaboration among Bar-Ilan University, Chile and USC.

“It’s very reassuring to have the opportunity to learn from them and their experience,” López said. “It’s been very inspiring, and I believe they have also been inspired by us.”

Astor concurred and expressed hope that the project will eventually lead to the development of a nationwide school monitoring system in Chile that could serve as a model for other countries in the region.

“Many South American countries are following Chile’s leadership in this area,” he said. “We are continuing our meetings, connections and efforts to expand these monitoring methods in South America.”

Diana Pineda (right), project director with the USC School of Social Work, and Verónica López (left), associate professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica de Valparaíso, flank a group of individuals involved in a school climate and violence monitoring project in Chile.
It’s a dangerous and traumatic journey for many unaccompanied children and adolescents heading north from Central America toward countries like Mexico and the United States. But it’s a risk they are willing to take to escape one of the world’s deadliest regions.

“We need to share these stories of girls who have been raped by gangs or boys who are being threatened and beaten up, the poverty they have lived in and the trauma they have been through,” said Erica Nellessen, a master’s student at the USC School of Social Work.

Nellessen and fellow MSW student Jessica Booker explored the recent surge in migration of unaccompanied children from Central America as part of a course on global social work. They recently presented their findings during the 8th International Conference on Social Work in Health and Mental Health, held in Singapore.

In recent years, the number of refugees fleeing from a particular area of Central America known as the Northern Triangle — specifically El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras — has skyrocketed. These three countries are among the most dangerous in the world in terms of homicide rates.

“Gangs have gained control of a lot of territory in those countries,” Booker said. “A lot of risks these children face are related to violence and chaos involving these gangs.”

Approximately 55,000 gang members operate in the Northern Triangle, according to a 2014 report by the Congressional Research Service, which also noted that deportations of individuals back to that region and heavy-handed enforcement efforts may be worsening the gang problem.

Other issues include a general lack of educational and employment opportunities, domestic violence, child abuse and poverty.

“These children simply can’t live in peace where they are,” Nellessen said. “Of course they risk everything because they don’t really have much to lose.”

In a 2015 report, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees indicated that the number of asylum seekers from the Northern Triangle arriving in the United States since 2008 has quintupled. The same report noted a 13-fold increase in the number of requests for asylum in other Central American countries and Mexico.

For unaccompanied children and adolescents, the journey north is particularly treacherous. They often have little food or water. Many are caught and deported to their country of origin. Others are robbed, raped or attacked, sometimes by the smugglers hired to shepherd them across the border.

“They are five times more likely than their accompanied peers to experience posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and
These professionals also need to go beyond the trek often struggle with ongoing issues in the United States, including difficulty with the language barrier, problems securing documentation and pursuing asylum and general challenges related to the acculturation process.

Many of these adolescents find themselves relegated to low-income neighborhoods, lagging behind in a markedly different school system and struggling to make friends with peers who don’t share a common language.

In addition to outlining the extent of the problem, Booker and Nellessen offered recommendations regarding how the social work profession can respond to this crisis in terms of both practice and research.

“As social workers, our role as advocates to impact policy is a key piece in this puzzle,” Booker said.

The duo focused on three main areas in need of improvement: trauma-informed care, a holistic approach to services and increased collaboration.

They called on social workers and other helping professionals working with unaccompanied minors to seek training in understanding the effects of trauma, building trust with clients, focusing on stress reduction and helping create a community that offers healthy relationships to these children. These professionals also need to go beyond providing clinical treatment to embrace a case management approach that addresses issues involving education, housing, health care and legal services.

“One recommendation is to pass laws to make legal representation more accessible,” Nellessen said.

These children often attend immigration court in their quest for asylum, but they are not entitled to an attorney. Finding a qualified and inexpensive immigration attorney is difficult, and many unaccompanied minors face judges on their own. Nellessen said the odds of remaining in the country increase from 10 percent to nearly 50 percent with a competent legal representative.

Booker is particularly intrigued by the legal aspects of this crisis. In collaboration with the USC Gould School of Law, she is working in an immigration clinic, where she offers case management services to unaccompanied children, and plans to intern at a law firm this fall.

That type of cross-disciplinary interaction is an example of the collaborative approach to addressing this crisis recommended by Booker and Nellessen. Advocacy at all levels of government is also critical.

Despite evidence that 60 percent of unaccompanied children should be granted refugee status given the violence and chaos in their home countries, Booker said the U.S. government is often reluctant to grant that status.

“Part of our work and research is to bring a loudspeaker to this issue and really hold our government and country accountable,” she said.

“A lot of politicians throw out statistics, some of which aren’t even true,” Nellessen added. “These kids don’t really understand much about U.S. politics. They just want to go to school, learn English and become a productive member of society.”

She speaks from personal experience, having spent three years as a social worker at a shelter in Chicago that receives unaccompanied children from Central America. She also traveled to Latin America during high school and spent time in Peru during college.

“These experiences only confirmed my desire to continue working with Latino immigrant children, youth and families in the United States,” she said.

Although both students plan to pursue careers as social work practitioners after graduating next year, they expressed gratitude to Murali Nair, a clinical professor at the USC School of Social Work, for encouraging them to submit their work to the international conference and giving them their first taste of the academic research world. They haven’t ruled out a return to the classroom at some point to earn a doctorate.

Promoting research involvement is a goal Nair pursues in the classroom and during outside meetings with students, such as planned lunches to discuss study ideas.

“We underestimate the potential of our graduate students,” he said. “They can be innovative, critical thinkers. We need to enrich their five senses by helping them do research, not just reading and listening.”

Haluk Soydan, the school’s associate dean for faculty affairs and senior fellow for global research impact, attended the Singapore conference and came away impressed by Booker and Nellessen’s work.

“They had a very well-structured and conceptualized presentation,” he said. “They are really great ambassadors of our MSW program.”

School leaders have increasingly emphasized the integration of the MSW program and the school’s research enterprise. Soydan is hopeful the school will continue those efforts, moving beyond ad hoc initiatives such as a recent student research symposium to a broader policy that offers support like funding to attend conferences, an approach supported by Booker and Nellessen.

“I know that kind of reluctant feeling a lot of my social work colleagues have about doing research, but I have been converted,” Booker said. “I hope there will be more research opportunities for students in our social work program, because this has been such an invaluable experience.”
School launches virtual parent education program

An innovative new program launched by the USC School of Social Work is helping young parents access supportive services without leaving their home.

Home visitation is an increasingly popular approach to supporting new parents. The model brings a professionally trained parent educator into the home to deliver a curriculum focused on child development, parent–child interaction, positive parenting and school readiness.

However, these services can be difficult to provide. Barriers include scarcity of professionals with expertise to deliver home-based support, transportation costs and reluctance on the part of some families to welcome a stranger into their home.

“You often hear that in rural environments it is next to impossible to get home visitors out to people’s homes,” said Dorian Traube, an associate professor with the USC School of Social Work. “We thought what if we could deliver home visitation entirely through videoconferencing technology?”

That is the model being tested in a project led by Traube in collaboration with USC Telehealth, the university’s virtual therapy and counseling clinic. Instead of visiting new families throughout Los Angeles County, social work interns trained in an evidence-based parent education model known as Parents as Teachers are offering their services online.

Funded by the Overdeck Foundation and Consortium for Research on Engagement and Well-Being, the research initiative involves collecting data on topics such as parental stress, maternal depression, child development milestones, health milestones, socioemotional development and life skills. Interviews with participants and social work interns will help the researchers identify elements of the program that are critical to engaging families in virtual home visitation.

Participants receive support services for 6 to 17 months, with 50-minute sessions occurring at least twice a month but preferably weekly.

Since the project launched in January, Traube said the initial cohort of families recruited through the LA Best Babies Network in conjunction with First 5 LA has embraced the new technological approach.

“We fully anticipated this being a hard sell, but that has actually not been an issue,” she said.
“People are super comfortable with this and they love the instant access that videoconferencing can give them.”

By using interns and avoiding extended travel times due to congested traffic, the program is cutting the standard cost of home visitation services in half. Employing a full-time professional workforce to deliver virtual services would still save between 25 and 35 percent, Traube said.

There are some drawbacks, she acknowledged. Keeping appointments can be tricky; it’s much easier to forget to turn on the computer than to ignore a knock at the door. Funding is also a challenge and federal officials want evidence of the efficacy of virtual home visitation before freeing up Affordable Care Act funds earmarked for such services.

Nonetheless, Traube believes the benefits far outweigh those concerns. The main issue she expected clinicians to encounter — difficulty engaging with parents and building a relationship without being in the same room — has not materialized.

“They very quickly build rapport,” she said. “We spend a lot of time training our interns in best practices around telehealth service delivery."

The project is also a boon for students at the USC School of Social Work’s Virtual Academic Center who are completing their field placement by delivering virtual home visitation services.

“By training our social work interns in this evidence-based practice, we are creating a whole new cadre of professionals who can be home visitors,” she said. “They are leaving as a certified parent educator in a model that is nationally recognized.”

This isn’t the first time that service providers have tinkered with the use of technology to deliver support to parents, but previous efforts have generally involved asynchronous material that parents have to review on their own.

This project represents the first attempt to provide live, interactive services in real time, largely thanks to the infrastructure provided by USC Telehealth, which has enabled clinicians and interns to provide therapeutic support to clients for more than three years.

The Clinton Global Initiative has highlighted the approach as a Commitment to Action, defined as a new, specific and measurable strategy to address a significant global problem.

It has also drawn the attention of other regions and service providers seeking to replicate the home visitation virtual program.

“For the moment this project was announced,” Traube said, “we started getting calls from other states that want a similar model.”

Dorian Traube

Once the process is codified, she envisions adding additional support options — like training and jobs programs focused on science, technology, engineering and math — that would help foster teens develop skills that can lead to high-paying jobs and successful careers.

“Their success story is encouraging for other regions that want a similar model,” she said. “Certainly for teenagers, connectedness is a big part of today’s culture. If you don’t have a laptop, you just aren’t part of that culture.”

Cox recently presented the program’s initial research findings to federal officials and Silicon Valley leaders during a White House tech event and received favorable feedback. With more evidence, preferably from a randomized controlled trial, that the program has benefits in terms of self-esteem, academic performance and mental health, she is confident that the federal government will add technology access to foster care requirements.

That type of success story is encouraging to people like Winnie Wechsler, a board member with Foster Care Counts, an all-volunteer nonprofit focused on improving the lives of youth in foster care in the Los Angeles region.

“The cost of this is so little — to think you only have to spend $250 to have this kind of impact,” she said.

The immediate payoff of the program paired with the initial findings from Goldbach’s survey has inspired a statewide initiative among nonprofits and philanthropists to fund similar efforts in their communities, Wechsler said, and there is increasing attention being paid to the issue by legislators and other public officials.

In particular, there is growing recognition that having a laptop and access to technology in general is no longer considered a luxury.

“Social media and the communication elements of using laptops are central to our lives,” Wechsler said. “Certainly for teenagers, connectedness is a big part of today’s culture. If you don’t have a laptop, you just aren’t part of that culture.”

Lucero Noyola, who is entering the MSW program at USC this fall, and her daughter, Aurora, now have access to the internet at home, a luxury Noyola had to go without until she received a laptop through an innovative program for foster youth.

“The immediate payoff of the program has benefits in terms of self-esteem, academic performance and mental health, she is confident that the federal government will add technology access to foster care requirements.”

Lucero Noyola

“From the moment this project was announced, we started getting calls from other states that want a similar model.”

Dorian Traube

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| That type of success story is encouraging to people like Winnie Wechsler, a board member with Foster Care Counts, an all-volunteer nonprofit focused on improving the lives of youth in foster care in the Los Angeles region. “The cost of this is so little — to think you only have to spend $250 to have this kind of impact,” she said. The immediate payoff of the program paired with the initial findings from Goldbach’s survey has inspired a statewide initiative among nonprofits and philanthropists to fund similar efforts in their communities, Wechsler said, and there is increasing attention being paid to the issue by legislators and other public officials. In particular, there is growing recognition that having a laptop and access to technology in general is no longer considered a luxury. “Social media and the communication elements of using laptops are central to our lives,” Wechsler said. “Certainly for teenagers, connectedness is a big part of today’s culture. If you don’t have a laptop, you just aren’t part of that culture.” Cox recently presented the program’s initial research findings to federal officials and Silicon Valley leaders during a White House tech event and received favorable feedback. With more evidence, preferably from a randomized controlled trial, that the program has benefits in terms of self-esteem, academic performance and mental health, she is confident that the federal government will add technology access to foster care requirements. “People very quickly build rapport,” she said. “We spend a lot of time training our interns in best practices around telehealth service delivery.” The project is also a boon for students at the USC School of Social Work’s Virtual Academic Center who are completing their field placement by delivering virtual home visitation services. “By training our social work interns in this evidence-based practice, we are creating a whole new cadre of professionals who can be home visitors,” she said. “They are leaving as a certified parent educator in a model that is nationally recognized.” This isn’t the first time that service providers have tinkered with the use of technology to deliver support to parents, but previous efforts have generally involved asynchronous material that parents have to review on their own. This project represents the first attempt to provide live, interactive services in real time, largely thanks to the infrastructure provided by USC Telehealth, which has enabled clinicians and interns to provide therapeutic support to clients for more than three years. The Clinton Global Initiative has highlighted the approach as a Commitment to Action, defined as a new, specific and measurable strategy to address a significant global problem. It has also drawn the attention of other regions and service providers seeking to replicate the home visitation virtual program. “From the moment this project was announced,” Traube said, “we started getting calls from other states that want a similar model.” |
Launched as a pilot project earlier this year by researchers at the USC School of Social Work and leaders at the USC Caruso Catholic Center, the program has focused on going beyond a simple meal program for people who have experienced homelessness.

“Nourished is unique in that it changes people’s lives in a more substantive way than just giving them a meal or trying to meet their immediate needs. It can change their perspective on their community,” said Jack Lahey, cofounder and program manager of Nourished and a recent graduate of the school’s MSW program. “It can change their perspective on their community and their lives.”

The initiative originated from conversations among Lahey, Benjamin Henwood, an assistant professor at the USC School of Social Work whose research involves homelessness, and officials at the Caruso Catholic Center who sought advice on developing a program that would get USC students involved in issues related to homelessness.

Although they emphasized that charitable programs that provide food and clothing to individuals experiencing homelessness are critical and should continue, Nourished organizers envisioned a program with more of a focused approach to building connections.

“I wanted to move our students toward looking at systemic issues and social justice and to move beyond charity,” said Rosie Shawver, the center’s director of campus ministry. She added later, “Misconceptions are broken when you encounter somebody and build a relationship with them. If you are on Skid Row and handing out sandwiches, that encounter can happen but it might be shorter and isn’t intentional.”

The initiative is certainly timely. The university recently convened city officials, service providers and other stakeholders to launch a collaborative effort to address homelessness in the region. The program also fits well with the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare’s Grand Challenge to End Homelessness, a national effort headed by Henwood and other homelessness scholars.

Nearly 50,000 people experienced homelessness in Los Angeles last year, prompting city officials to declare a state of emergency and earmark $100 million to tackle the issue. The city is slowly shifting from what experts describe as outdated and ineffective shelters to placing individuals in permanent supportive housing, where they receive wraparound services such as ongoing medical and mental health care, case management and referrals to other providers.

Although that approach, known as Housing First, fulfills the needs of many people transitioning from the streets into housing, Lahey said critical gaps remain. Some individuals living in supportive housing struggle to access healthy food and often grapple with loneliness.

“A big barrier for them has always been social isolation and a real lack of community integration,” he said. “By having these meals in
To encourage better eating habits, Nourished volunteers create menus in consultation with residents that feature healthy, diabetic-friendly, low-sodium dishes. Recent examples include vegetarian and turkey chili, healthy coleslaw and made-from-scratch veggie burgers.

After the event ends, participants also receive a single portion of ingredients already prepped and ready to assemble as a separate meal.

“Almost everybody said it has had an impact on their diet, food habits, cooking meals in their unit, knowing how to shop and what to purchase and consuming more fruits and vegetables,” Lahey said.

Although Banks said he has always tried to stay away from greasy foods apart from the occasional steak or hamburger, he has enjoyed the program’s focus on healthy eating.

“They are introducing how good turkey meat tastes, how ground-turkey tacos taste, stuff that is a little better for you, a little less grease,” he said. “You can make tofu taste good. It’s awesome and it fills you up.”

Another aspect of Nourished that organizers hope to expand as the program continues is an oral history component in which residents talk about their past experiences.

Many people living at the supportive housing facility suffered through the draconian policies toward homelessness of the 80s and 90s, Lahey said, and having the opportunity to describe their life will add to the historical narrative and help them feel like they are being heard and acknowledged.

So far, only a few residents have participated in the oral history initiative, but there is confidence that as Nourished becomes more established, others will want to add their story to the record.

“There is something about preparing a meal together and sitting together at a table that makes people want to share their stories,” said Jaclyn Nguyen, a student volunteer.

The Los Angeles native has attended every meal since the program started and is hopeful that other students at USC will get involved in Nourished.

“You get to connect with a group of people you otherwise wouldn’t be able to connect with,” Nguyen said.

Volunteers receive training on the causes of homelessness and promising interventions, in addition to a copy of a book coauthored by Henwood titled *Housing First: Ending Homelessness, Transforming Systems, and Changing Lives.*

A few dozen students have already expressed interest in participating this fall, Lahey said, and discussions are underway to expand Nourished to other housing facilities in Los Angeles. Morreale, who is now attending law school at Golden Gate University in San Francisco, is working with organizations to start a Bay Area branch of the program and envisions creating a network of universities with Nourished initiatives.

“We can go beyond the gates of USC. We can go beyond what we’ve learned and previous notions we’ve had about these folks,” she said. “Our big goal is to get everybody involved. We need everybody, our whole community, to join us in this effort.”

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“Almost everybody said it has had an impact on their diet, food habits, cooking meals in their unit, knowing how to shop and what to purchase and consuming more fruits and vegetables,” Lahey said.

All the food prepared at Nourished is low-sodium dishes. Recent examples include vegetarian and turkey chili, healthy coleslaw and made-from-scratch veggie burgers.

After the event ends, participants also receive a single portion of ingredients already prepped and ready to assemble as a separate meal.

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PhD student secures fellowship

A highly selective fellowship program has selected Judith Perrigo, a PhD student at the USC School of Social Work, to join its newest cohort.

Perrigo is one of 12 new fellows in the Minority Fellowship Program, an initiative funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and overseen by the Council on Social Work Education. The program supports doctoral students interested in providing behavioral health services to underrepresented racial and ethnic minority populations.

Perrigo will receive specialized training, a stipend of approximately $25,000 and opportunities for professional development and networking, including a special gathering for participants at the council’s annual meeting.

“One of the greatest benefits is the collaboration that takes place with the rest of the cohort,” she said. “I’ll be able to work with other doctoral students with similar research interests across the nation.”

She has already envisioned some uses for the stipend, including funding for a pilot study and statistical software to advance her research. She credited her mentors, particularly Associate Professor Michael Hurlburt, for helping her review and revise her application to the program.

“It was a hefty proposal and not something I did on my own,” she said. “I’m pretty sure without him it wouldn’t have happened.”

Perrigo joins fellow USC doctoral student Krystal Hays, who is entering her second year in the fellowship program.

Vern Bengtson, emeritus professor and faculty research associate at the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, is one of two editors of the newly published third edition of the Handbook of Theories of Aging. Bengtson also served as an editor of the first and the second editions of the work, which is one of the most frequently cited books in the field of gerontology. The latest update features many new contributors and content from the most highly respected researchers in the field.

Eugenia Weiss, clinical associate professor and director of the Orange County Academic Center, has been appointed to a three-year term with the Council on Social Work Education’s Council on the Role and Status of Women in Social Work Education. The council develops educational resources relevant to women’s issues in social work education. It aims to eliminate policies in academia that hinder the full participation of women, makes recommendations to the board of directors on policy matters, and initiates and coordinates programs and activities related to women in social work education.

The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine has invited Suzanne Wenzel, the Richard M. and Ann L. Thor Professor in Urban Social Development, to serve as an expert on a newly formed committee to evaluate interventions and policy options for addressing urban homelessness in the United States. The committee’s focus during the next 16 months will include health outcomes and health care costs associated with permanent supportive housing. The report produced from the committee’s work will inform national policy to address urban homelessness.

Michálle Mor Barak, the Dean’s Endowed Professor of Social Work and Business, delivered a keynote speech at the 9th International Conference on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion in Nicosia, Cyprus. Held at the University of Cyprus, the conference focused on the theme of equality, diversity, inclusion and human rights in times of austerity. Mor Barak spoke about the importance of diversity in the workplace, noting how diverse work teams may increase potential productivity while decreasing negative relationships.

Clinical Professor and Associate Director of Faculty Development Doni Whitsett recently completed a Fulbright Specialist Scholarship to Sun Yat-Sen University in Guangzhou, China. She conducted lectures and workshops on gender and sexuality with the professional mental health community, including social workers, sex educators, students and faculty members.

Whitsett also conducted focus groups and interviews with young Chinese adults aged 20 to 35 for a research project exploring the changing gender and sexual attitudes and values in modern China.

Ann Nguyen, a postdoctoral scholar at the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, has received the Award for Early Career Excellence in Research from the Program for Research on Black Americans at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research. The award recognizes Nguyen’s significant contributions to scholarship on the mental health of African Americans and Caribbean blacks in the United States. Her research focuses on social support, mental health and well-being in racially and ethnically diverse groups.