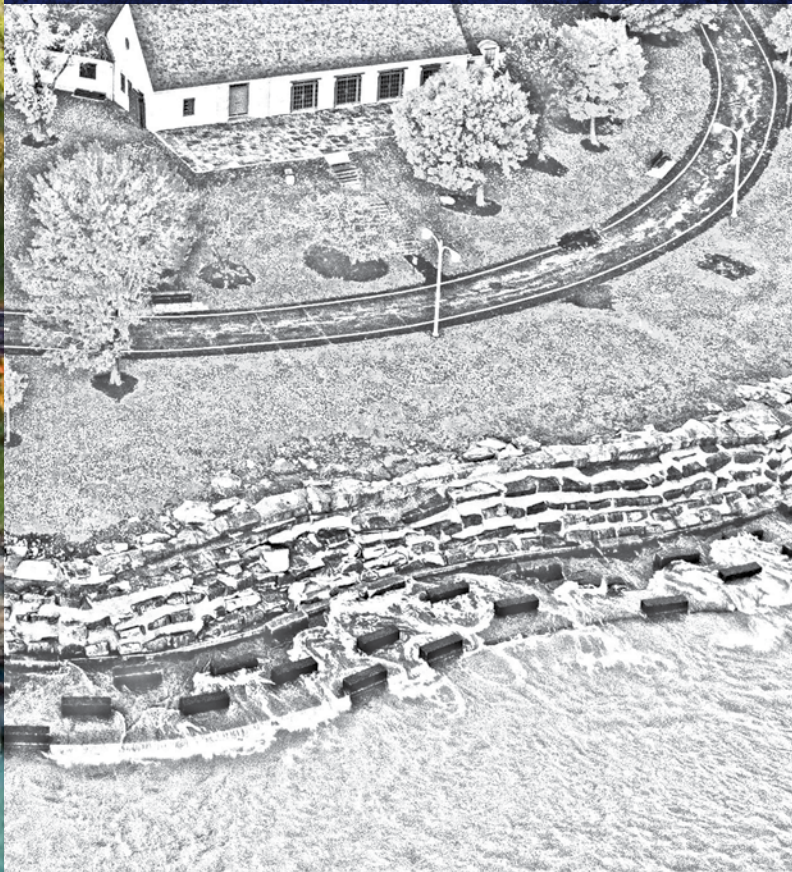


HEALTH VIEWS



The Missing Layer

Exploring the community
drivers of mental health



UNIVERSITY OF
ILLINOIS CHICAGO

School of Public Health

Message from the Dean



Wayne H. Giles

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health of people in the U.S. has received renewed focus. Of course, the challenges of social disconnection, stress and fracturing community spaces in the U.S. began long before any of us had ever heard of COVID-19.

Earlier this year, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD highlighted these key public health challenges with a pair of reports, "The Surgeon General's Advisory on Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" and "Social Media and Youth Mental Health." Murthy challenged public

health professionals to "...prioritize building social connection the same way we have prioritized other critical public health issues such as tobacco, obesity and substance use disorders."

Our Fall 2023 edition of Healthviews Magazine gives you an inside look at how we're grappling with the intersection of public health and mental health in communities near and far. Our cover features an image of Promontory Point, a part of Chicago's Burnham Park on the south side of the city. With its swimming beach, campfire rings and walking paths, the Point is a place for people from across Chicago to come together for recreation and socialization.

Yet as public health researchers and practitioners, we know that the built environment on its own is not enough to bridge gaps of isolation, health and wellness. Our stories in this magazine describe the challenges and possible solutions our communities need to heal and restore mental health.

Researchers and alumni of SPH are collaborating with Chicago Public Schools to build its capacity to address mental and physical health at the school level, including the unique needs of LGBTQ+ students. Our division of community health sciences is producing outstanding scholarship on the connections between mid-life stressors and cognitive decline among Black populations and how loneliness is a true health disparity for Black communities.

You will also read about the how stigma and social influence are limiting cervical cancer screening and vaccination rates, as well as an overview of the crisis of health misinformation in the U.S. And a story on a new effort from SPH's Collaboratory for Health Justice shows how community course alignment can begin bridging disconnectedness in our communities, linking academia and community-based organizations.

Here at the UIC School of Public Health, we are committed to working with you and our community partners to highlight and mitigate how mental health is impacting the public's health. We know that our research, practice and community-engaged efforts to address chronic diseases, mitigate environmental exposures, protect workers, influence policies and strengthen communities will be more effective with an approach that integrates mental and social well-being.

In good health,

Wayne H. Giles, MD, MS
Dean

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Nancy Valentin

SPH Health Justice Speakers Bureau
MPH student, Community Health Sciences



Being on the frontlines in the early days of the pandemic showed me that the structural elements that we have (or don't have) are key to seeing our way out of crisis. As we try to navigate life three years later, it's imperative that we continue to bring in a new workforce that understands that

solutions can't be left solely to individuals. We need to create the infrastructure to support residents in their quest to optimal wellness. Mental health is a crisis that we have evaded for too long. We have an opportunity to use our rapid response skills, data-informed lens and ability to be truly multi-sector to better improve people's mental health.

Kevin Borrap

Executive Director, Injury Prevention Center,
Connecticut Children's Health System
DrPH '18



We are experiencing a wave of discriminatory laws and policies impacting care for children who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. Overall, 45 percent of LGBTQ+ youth report having seriously considered suicide in the past year. We know that youth who live in accepting

communities have a significantly lower rate of suicide attempts. To me, public health leadership means advocating for what we know works to improve mental health wellness while opposing malicious efforts designed to impair the mental health wellness of the most marginalized in our communities.

Liz Akinboboye

Health Promotion Specialist, Northwestern University
BA in Public Health '20, MPH '22 in Community
Health Sciences



In my line of work, the intersection between mental health and public health is understating that a student's mental health can impact the reasons why they choose to use alcohol and other drugs. To me, it also means harm reduction. I work with students in substance misuse prevention work,

identifying why they may be using alcohol or other drugs. Harm reduction is a non judgmental idea to help reduce harms one can experience if choosing to use alcohol and other drugs. I hope to help students address any mental health issues they share with me in hopes that we can reduce any harms in the student's use of substances moving forward. This could look like referring them to a counselor or a therapist.

Mahbat Bahromov, MD

CEO, Aga Khan Health Services, Tajikistan
SPH Global Health Research Partner



Addressing mental health is integral to achieving public health goals. From our experience of working with vulnerable populations, we know that mental health has a huge impact on how people relate to others, make decisions and handle stress. And we know the importance of dealing with stigma attached

to some public health issues, which discourages individuals from seeking help. This makes protecting and restoring mental health an integral part of public health and is of immediate concern to public health professionals advocating for prevention and developing effective interventions to promote healthy lifestyles.



Whole Child Wellness

With American schools addressing a litany of socioeconomic disparities, SPH researchers are modeling how schools can strengthen mental, physical and emotional health.

In December 2021, U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy, MD, issued a public health advisory identifying a crisis facing the country: the mental health of the nation's youths.

While young people battling depression, anxiety and hopelessness was not a new phenomenon, Murthy noted "alarming increases in the prevalence of certain mental health challenges" and called for "an all-of-society effort," including earnest action from researchers and schools.

At the UIC School of Public Health, faculty members have a lengthy history of research, programming and partnerships addressing youth mental health, particularly in K-12 schools. Three current efforts underscore SPH's commitment to championing young students' mental health alongside their physical well-being.

A specialist to support 'whole child' health

In September 2019, Jamie Chriqui, PhD, MHS, senior associate dean and professor of health policy and administration, and colleagues at SPH's Policy, Practice and Prevention Research Center (P3RC) began working with Chicago Public Schools' (CPS) Office of Student Health and Wellness (OSHW) on a CDC-funded pilot program to support the district's existing Healthy CPS initiative.

An expansive effort to eliminate health-related barriers, the multi-layered Healthy CPS initiative encompasses dozens of local, state and federal policies related to student health and wellness, ranging from nutrition and physical activity to mental health and social-emotional well-being. To confront the potentially dizzying array of policies and drive "whole child" health, Chriqui and her team worked with CPS officials to conceptualize, develop and then test a Healthy CPS network specialist role in one of the district's 18 geographic networks.

"It is vital that schools have support to navigate and implement an initiative as broad as Healthy CPS,"

said Chriqui, a renowned expert in school wellness policy work.

The team selected an elementary school network on Chicago's west side – one covering 28 schools and more than 4,000 students – and the P3RC planned an efficacy study to evaluate the effectiveness of the specialist's role.

In spring 2020, the appointed specialist began providing Healthy CPS-aligned information and advanced support, such as resource referrals, technical assistance and strategy, in the west side network's schools.

"We envisioned the specialist as someone who could help school leaders make sense of the Healthy CPS framework and identify the necessary resources to support student health," said Tarrah DeClemente, MPH '12 with a concentration in health policy and administration and the executive director of OSHW.

In its 2019 Healthy CPS survey, the year prior to the specialist's arrival, schools in the pilot network met 72 percent of Healthy CPS criteria. In the 2023 survey, the average score for the pilot network increased to 80 percent. By contrast, the average Healthy CPS score for all other networks in the district basically did not change (73 percent in 2019 versus 74 percent in 2023).

"We call this the 'Specialist Effect,'" Chriqui said. "With a gatekeeper and navigator helping schools focus on Healthy CPS, the schools in our pilot network didn't miss a beat even while going against severe headwinds from the pandemic."

Chriqui said those results offer compelling reason for deploying the specialist role across CPS. The work also serves as a model for other districts eager to boost students' physical and mental health.

"We have proof of concept here that the specialist role can support schools and all aspects of students' well-being," Chriqui said.

DeClemente called Chriqui's team "extremely collaborative and

solutions oriented" in pursuit of school communities supporting the whole child.

"This partnership is making a difference in our work as an office and a district," DeClemente said.

Evaluating strategies to support LGBTQ+ students

In CPS, the nation's fourth largest school district with more than 300,000 enrolled students, Booker Marshall, MPH '17 with a concentration in community health sciences, manages the OSHW LGBTQ+ and Sexual Health team. It's an expansive role in which Marshall and their team oversee varied efforts to promote and strengthen students' physical and mental health, including programs supporting LGBTQ+ students.

"This work is important because it prioritizes students with marginalized identities," Marshall said. "The goal is for schools to be safe and supportive environments for all of our students."

Marshall's work is funded by a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention-issued cooperative agreement through the agency's Division of Adolescent and School Health. With that cooperative agreement, CPS is required to work with an evaluator to assess progress and effectiveness. Enter Elizabeth Jarpe-Ratner, PhD '18 with a concentration in community health sciences, a DrPH core faculty member in the division of health policy and administration and a P3RC investigator. Each year, Jarpe-Ratner meets with Marshall's team to identify its goals and to structure an evaluation around its objectives.

This academic year, for example, Marshall's group aimed to increase the number of Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) in schools, which have shown improved outcomes for the district's LGBTQ+ students, and to also install a mentorship program for new GSA sponsors providing individuals more support and guidance in starting GSAs.

"My role is to support the work of the CPS team, which includes helping them execute upon their strategies, decisions and objectives. Then, we want to assess

implementation and experiences of staff and students regarding the policies being implemented, so schools are building capacity, putting the proper policies in place and ensuring the appropriate deployment of resources,” said Jarpe-Ratner, a collaborator with CPS since 2013.

In past years, the CPS team sought to advance staff training on gender and sexuality issues, promote visible signs and symbols of support for LGBTQ+ students, implement LGBTQ+ inclusive curricula and enforce non-discrimination, Title IX and transgender inclusion policies. Jarpe-Ratner, Marshall and five colleagues detailed their extensive and promising efforts to support CPS’s LGBTQ+ students in the July 2022 edition of *Health Promotion Practice*.

“CPS is ahead of the curve here, and its work can be a blueprint and source of guidance for other districts,” Jarpe-Ratner said.

In fact, Jarpe-Ratner called it “huge” to have a prominent school district making this investment given “significant and disturbing data” around higher rates of suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and substance abuse among LGBTQ+ youths. In addition, LGBTQ+ youths report more school days missed because they feel unsafe, lonely or depressed.

“This is literally lifesaving,” Jarpe-Ratner said of CPS’s efforts. “There’s strong evidence to show that the presence of bullying and harassment policies, GSAs and other policies that support LGBTQ+ youth in schools lessens the risk of those feelings or behaviors.”



Booker Marshall (left) and Elizabeth Jarpe-Ratner at Peter Cooper Dual Language Academy in Pilsen.



Tarrah DeClemente (left) and Jamie Chriqui at Richard T. Crane Medical Prep High School in the Near West Side neighborhood.



Betsy Porter is investigating the scale of lunch debt policies nationally.

Lunch debt, stigma and social-emotional health

Nearly two decades ago, a team of SPH researchers began collecting information on state laws related to school nutrition and physical activity as part of the National Cancer Institute's Classification of Laws Associated with School Students (CLASS). In doing so, the SPH researchers stumbled upon an unexpected student health issue that had nothing to do with the foods available in the cafeteria line yet held potentially significant implications for students' social-emotional wellness and mental health.

To address the hunger problem in the U.S., certain students qualify for free or reduced lunch. In many cases, students must apply for free or reduced lunch, a process challenged by community messaging or language barriers that can – and often do – result in eligible students paying full price and racking up lunch debt. In other cases, students without the ability to pay might receive an alternative meal that creates stigma as they navigate the lunchroom. And neither outcome, UIC researchers reasoned, seemed in the students' best interest.

Investigating state laws regarding lunch debt, the SPH team uncovered widely varying policies. Nine states served a meal with no questions asked; six states required that students be served a meal but failed to limit overt identification or alternative meals; seven states acknowledged the potential stigma around lunch debt yet provided no actionable strategies to schools; and eight states served a meal for only a predetermined number of days.

"While we were hoping to find laws always protecting students from hunger and stigma, we only found nine states doing this," said Betsy Porter, JD, clinical assistant professor of health policy and administration. "If kids are not eating or being shamed or stigmatized, there's an impact to their social-emotional learning, growth and overall health."

Over recent years, Porter, a licensed attorney, has led UIC's surveillance effort around lunch debt, spotlighting state policies and implementation strategies to drive awareness and education around the issue. For example, the SPH-based group has reviewed state efforts to provide meals to all students and tracked interventions such as meal eligibility outreach.

"Anyone can use our data to figure out what's working and not and then explore implementation in their own worlds," Porter said. "Step one, though, is knowing what the policy says and figuring out how to make it better. The hope is policymakers and district leaders think about ways these policies impact kids throughout the school day."

Lunch debt has become an increasingly important issue over the last year. In summer 2022, pandemic-era waiver provisions to federal programs assuring every child could receive free breakfast and lunch at school expired.

"Knowing students have a consistent source of at least lunch would certainly go a long way to reduce stress, improve mental health and, hopefully, foster the overall well-being for kids in this situation," Porter said. ●

Public health researchers often cite cost as a barrier to healthcare access for people across the U.S. When SPH's Caryn Peterson, PhD, began examining human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination rates at federally qualified health centers, a different picture emerged.



HPV is the most common sexually transmitted infection (STI) in the U.S., and some types of HPV cause cervical cancer, the fourth-most common type of cancer for women worldwide. For people receiving care at FQHCs, HPV vaccines and cervical cancer screenings are available at no cost thanks to federal programs and legislation, but people who utilize FQHCs have lower rates of HPV vaccines and screenings than non-Medicaid insurance patient populations.

Peterson's research is zeroing in on key non-access barriers: public stigma, shaming and blaming.

"If you are stigmatized by behavior or a health condition, this can reduce your likelihood of seeking care," Peterson said.

Peterson is a research assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics and co-director of the UIC Cancer Health Equity and Career Development Program. Her research identifies discordance between adults' knowledge and practice.

In a scoping review in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, Peterson and co-authors used a health stigma and discrimination framework to explore causes of vaccine and screening hesitancy. They noted positive social norms might provide motivation to receive vaccination and screening, while negative facilitators like stigma drive fear

of social judgment, rejection and shame. At its core, shaming and blaming beliefs persist that acquiring HPV and cervical cancer is a result of "incautious behavior," either multiple sexual partners or failure to access screening. This belies the fact that people in monogamous relationships are also at risk of acquiring HPV.

Stereotyping also plays a role, introducing the concept that certain actions on the part of the individual are the true cause of their disease. Peterson says this stigma plays a potent role in marginalizing individuals.

"There are already populations that have some degree of medical mistrust, and being a member of a stigmatized group makes that relationship with healthcare providers more uncomfortable," Peterson said.

The research also identified a gender imbalance in public stigma. Though HPV is an STI, the role of men in a woman's acquisition of HPV is generally treated with indifference. This imbalance persists even though most men, women and non-binary individuals will develop an HPV infection at some point in their lives.

Peterson and Andrew Dykens, MD, MPH '08, associate professor of family medicine at the University of Illinois College of Medicine, identified similar trends of social influences toward HPV and cervical cancer among people in Senegal. A study published in the journal *Plos One* indicated women

are more likely than men to stigmatize cancer and experience self-blame for developing cancer. The study also found women rely more heavily than men on social networks for health guidance, as opposed to turning to healthcare professionals for advice.

In Chicago, with high rates of cervical cancer and pre-cancer, misinformation is rife on prevention and the role of screening, with emphasis on perceived negative behaviors rather than wellness behaviors. Peterson sees a role for numerous protecting factors, beginning with education on the high prevalence of HPV infection and the importance of engaging males in supporting screening for female partners as well as HPV vaccination.

Peterson says HPV screenings and vaccinations need to be normalized as healthy steps to engage in self-care. Especially for children, providers should stress the vaccine is a tool for cancer prevention, rather than protection against STIs.

Stigma creates barriers in a range of healthcare issues beyond cervical cancer. For example, Peterson and Sage Kim, PhD, professor of health policy and administration, recently published new research examining the intersection of HIV, stigma and the lives of formerly incarcerated older adults.

"Stigmatizing health conditions is another means of social stratification," Peterson said. "The elements of stigma are potent risk factors for health-seeking behavior that need to be considered in health education as well as in interventions." ●

Stressed Out

SPH researchers are exploring stress exposure and higher rates of dementia among Black people and how social connectiveness can mitigate risks and loneliness.



In the U.S., Black and Latinx populations ages 65 and older have two to three times higher rates of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias as compared with white populations. Most research on cognitive health problems focuses on older populations, but SPH's Uchechi Mitchell, PhD, associate professor of community health sciences, believes the causes of these disparities may be occurring much earlier in the life course.

Mitchell is currently leading a National Institutes of Health grant entitled, "The Role of Mid-life Psychosocial Stressors, Social Resources and Physiological Dysregulation in Understanding Race Differences in Cognitive Decline." Her research focuses on Black and white Americans in mid-life, specifically ages 50-64, who may be exposed to what she calls a "constellation of stressors," – work-related

stressors, family responsibilities on both ends of the aging spectrum and everyday chronic stressors like discrimination and financial strain – that contribute to cognitive decline.

"By age 65, that's a point where a lot of the damage has already been done," Mitchell said. "Experiences over the life course are what lead to these late life health outcomes, and shifting to an earlier timeframe is beneficial for getting a sense of what these early exposures are doing."

Mitchell is using national data from the Health and Retirement Study, which has data dating back as far as 1992. The data includes measures of social, economic and behavioral health factors along with measures of cognitive functioning and multiple stressors.



She is focused on comparing the experience of mid-life Black and white people because of their disproportionate exposure to certain stressors: caring for adult children while simultaneously caring for parents, financial strain, experiences of discrimination and the demands of work life. Mitchell theorizes that this period of life may be a time of high exposure to these stressors.

While stressors alone are not a cause of Alzheimer's disease and related dementias, Mitchell says stressors impact cognitive performance across all stages of the life course. The result is that a person exposed to a high volume of stressors earlier in life would start at a lower threshold of cognitive functioning in old age and may experience an earlier onset of dementia or more severe dementia symptoms.

The initial data analysis from the project finds Black people are experiencing cognitive decline earlier than other populations and are starting that decline with lower levels of cognitive functioning because of these mid-life stressful exposures. Over time, the rates of decline are faster for middle-age white populations, likely because they are beginning the decline stage with higher levels of cognitive functioning and are essentially "catching up" in the decline process.

"Our memories slowly decline, which occurs naturally to some extent, but to reach the point of dementia and experience it early in life is what we're trying to understand," Mitchell said. "This change in cognition is hard to notice because they seem like 'normal' age-related changes in memory, and changes characteristic of dementia or mild cognitive impairment are difficult to detect without a clinical examination."

Mitchell's study is also examining areas for intervention and the role of social resources in mitigating the effects of stressors. She says social engagement may be key to maintaining a "cognitive reserve" despite stressful exposures. For example, if a middle-aged adult is experiencing financial strain, relying on a person in their social network for instrumental and emotional support can potentially mitigate the effect of these stressors.

Mitchell cautions that protective pathways are often thought of as ways an individual or their networks can engage in self-care. She says institutions should be designing ways to support people both socially and cognitively to protect from stress exposures. Beyond financial support, organizations should intentionally implement mitigation practices such as protecting against experiences of discrimination through zero tolerance policies and providing supportive resources during major life events like bereavement.

Once interventions are in place, they can be specifically tailored to meet the needs of Black or other minoritized populations that may face more exposure to and more severe versions of stressful experiences.

Mitchell says future research should delve earlier into the life course, recognizing that mid-life in one's 30's and 40's, and the stressors and protective resources characteristic of these ages, are quite different than in ages 50-64.

Understanding health impacts of social isolation

There is a major barrier to building the cognitive protective factors needed for mid-life Black adults: America's ongoing epidemic of loneliness.

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, half of U.S. adults reported experiencing measurable experiences of loneliness. The health effects of this sense of social isolation are stark: lacking connection can increase the risk for premature death to levels comparable to smoking daily, according to a study cited by the U.S. Surgeon General.

Dissertation research conducted by Melissa Gutierrez-Kapheim, PhD '22 with a concentration in community health sciences, found surveyed non-Latinx Black Chicagoans are experiencing perceived loneliness at rates 60 percent greater than non-Latinx white respondents, while Latinx participants tallied 30 percent higher than white respondents.

Her dissertation research revealed that differences in neighborhood social cohesion and social infrastructure may explain these racial gaps. Currently serving as the director of health equity and assessment research at Sinai Chicago: Sinai Urban Health Institute, she is aiming to publish her findings and, in collaboration with the community, develop strategies to increase social connectedness in disinvested Black and Brown communities as a method to decrease and prevent loneliness.

"[As a society] we are spending a lot of time thinking about the concept of loneliness, but our methods to reduce loneliness have largely failed," Gutierrez-Kapheim said. "We generally think about loneliness as an individualistic problem, but it may have to do with the communities in which we live and how we engage with our neighbors. The discrepancy in access to neighborhood social infrastructure is a byproduct of historical structural racism."

Gutierrez-Kapheim describes loneliness as a disconnect between quantity and quality of a person's relationships. She notes some people are content with a life partner, while others may have a life partner, children and an extended family network yet still experience deep loneliness. Her work builds on Eric Klinenberg's concept of social infrastructure and Ray Oldenburg's concept of third places, which underscore the importance of having place in which community members can gather and connect with one another and thus increase the strength of relationships among neighbors.

Her dissertation utilized data from the Sinai Community Health Survey 2.0 across ten Chicago neighborhoods, which explored residents' views on neighborhood social cohesion, the degree to which one finds their neighborhood to be a trusting place with shared values, and self-reported feelings of loneliness. Gutierrez-Kapheim then used city license data to note every restaurant, library, park, community center, senior center,



Uchechi Mitchell (left) served as Melissa Gutierrez-Kapheim's doctoral advisor in the division of community health sciences.

sites for musical events, art centers and other places of amusement in each census tract from the community health survey to create a measure of social infrastructure.

One of her key findings is that as social cohesion increases, loneliness decreases among Black and Latinx adults in her sample. Additionally, she found that her measure of social infrastructure was associated with a decrease in loneliness for Black participants, while for Latinx participants, neighborhood social cohesion explained the relationship between social infrastructure and loneliness. There was no statistically significant connection for white participants. Due to the study's cross-sectional data, causation can not be determined.

Gutierrez-Kapheim's research aligns with a May 2023 report from the U.S. Surgeon General, *Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation*, highlighting the importance of social connectedness as a means of decreasing loneliness and improving health.

"Loneliness doesn't happen in a bubble, it is influenced by societal structures," Gutierrez-Kapheim said. "The more potentially segregated and disinvested communities are, the less opportunities they have for this positive social engagement in community spaces." ●

MISINFORMATION IS WARPING

WE 3-2 LEAD, PUSH BREWER

At first, Katrine Wallace, PhD '13 with a concentration in epidemiology, could only shake her head.

Amid the photos of family members' dogs and friends' newly adopted pandemic-era routines, Wallace also discovered rampant misinformation about COVID-19 littering her own social media feeds as the pandemic disrupted American life in early 2020.

She recalls a post linking the virus to 5G towers and one especially startling declaration: that COVID-19, which would contribute to an estimated 14.9 million excess deaths throughout 2020 and 2021 per World Health Organization data, wasn't a disease at all but rather a fabrication designed to rattle the 2020 U.S. election.

"As a public health person, a trained epidemiologist, I felt a sense of duty to offer explanations and information," said Wallace, who was regularly fielding questions and concerns about COVID-19 from family and friends as well.

Wallace has since posted hundreds of videos to her TikTok feed (@epidemiologistkat), enthusiastically and earnestly dishing out evidence-based public health information to counter rampant misinformation about COVID-19 and other oft-misunderstood public health issues. Her TikTok has soared to 275,000 followers and 5.5 million likes, elevating Wallace, an adjunct assistant professor of epidemiology and biostatistics at the UIC School of Public Health, into a high-profile public health figure featured in media outlets like the *Washington Post* and at events like the Nobel Prize Summit.

For Wallace, TikTok – quite ironically a significant vector of health-related misinformation over recent years – has become her own antidote to battle misguided thoughts, conspiracy theories and the like.

"As public health people, we all have the responsibility to set the record straight as much as we can," Wallace said.

A prevalent, pesky problem

The misinformation vortex is far reaching and varied, applying to physical health conditions such as COVID-19 as well as mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In a recent study published in the *Journal of Canadian Psychiatry*, for instance, researchers investigated the content quality of the 100 most popular TikTok videos about ADHD, one of the social media platform's most discussed health topics. Using proven assessment tools, the researchers classified 52 percent of the videos as misleading and only 21 percent "useful."

The volume and velocity of health misinformation cluttering cyberspace cannot be ignored, especially as people increasingly turn online for health information. A 2021 study from the American Health Information Management Association Foundation reported three in five individuals consult the Internet for health information. And once there, 86 percent deem the content they find credible.

Now to be certain, the Internet does host valid health information from a range of reputable providers. SPH's Collaboratory for Health Justice, for example, developed evidence-based decision trees in 17 different languages to help people determine if they should pursue COVID-19 testing. Universities, government agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, professional organizations such as the American Medical Association and established healthcare enterprises like the Mayo Clinic also provide reliable guidance on a diverse assortment of health matters.

However, a rather sizable – and swelling – collection of online content is produced by non-healthcare providers and, even more troubling, influencer types with a vested interest in peddling specific information, such as a supplement or paid service. While some of this content can be valid, misinformation can stir unnecessary anxiety and impact individuals' decision-making about

IG OUR SENSE OF REALITY

clinical care. As one example, a widely spread fallacy about the presence of microchips in COVID-19 vaccines prompted some people to reject the shot.

Confronting misinformation

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy, MD, has labeled health misinformation “a serious threat to public health” and urged prudent action.

“It can cause confusion, sow mistrust, harm people's health and undermine public health efforts,” Murthy wrote in a 2021 advisory. “Limiting the spread of health misinformation is a moral and civic imperative that will require a whole-of-society effort.”

For so long, Wallace said, public health's prevailing philosophy when confronting misinformation was to ignore it, largely to avoid shining any light on erroneous claims. More and more, however, public health practitioners are playing offense and actively relaying evidence-based information from credible sources.

“As public health experts, we know where the good info is, and we're the ones trained to read and interpret data,” Wallace said. “Now, our responsibility is to verify before we amplify because what we say has ripple effects.”

While pursuing her MPH at George Washington University, Meredith Hernlund, BA in Public Health '19, became one of the earliest project managers on the Health Communication Volunteer Corps (HCVC). The group crafted and then ran health-related social media posts through layers of fact checking and approvals before publication. Initially addressing COVID-19, HCVC later tackled other health topics, such as addiction and environmental health.

“It takes layers and steps to get out a product that's truthful and accounts for a broad audience, but that's what we did,” said Hernlund, now an occupational

safety and health research communications specialist with MDB, a Washington, D.C.-based public relations and communications firm.

Everyone can contribute

Such public communication efforts are a notable start, but much more will be needed to counter misinformation.

Public health practitioners, for instance, can proactively engage with patients and correct misinformation in understandable, personalized ways. Practitioners might also partner with community groups to develop appropriate and accessible evidence-based messaging and, as Wallace does with TikTok, use technology as a megaphone for well-founded content.

Researchers, meanwhile, might highlight the scope of the problem and propose thoughtful interventions to policymakers and private enterprises. This can include efforts to quantify the harm of misinformation as well as evaluating the effectiveness of strategies to combat health misinformation.

Finally, health communications, a relatively nascent field, needs to prosper – and quick. Hernlund hopes to see students and professionals alike gain communication and marketing skills by enrolling in applicable courses and certificate programs as well as engaging with professional organizations like the National Public Health Information Coalition and the Public Health Communications Collaborative. She would also like to see public health communicators brought to the table quicker amid an emergency, so they can proactively address public concerns with evidence-based information.

“Ultimately, we all want the same result, which is making sure people understand complex health topics and have appropriate information in hand,” Hernlund said. “With all the health misinformation out there, that's not something we can do today by standing still.” ●

for worker safety

One concern of rapidly developing applications of artificial intelligence (AI) is the potential for job losses. A new initiative at the UIC School of Public Health and College of Engineering is casting the potential of AI in a new light, as a tool to protect workers' health, safety and well-being.

A team of UIC faculty and graduate students are leading the first attempts nationally to train occupational safety and health (OSH) professionals in the use of AI. Through a new course and lab at the School of Public Health building, OSH professionals are gaining new tools to broaden human capabilities in protecting workers.

The project is led by Houshang Darabi, PhD, professor of mechanical and industrial engineering and a leader in AI and its applications in healthcare, education and occupational safety; and Preethi Pratap, PhD, research assistant professor of environmental and occupational health sciences. Darabi and Pratap are part of the leadership of SPH's Great Lakes Center for Occupational Health and Safety, a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health-funded Education and Research Center committed to training the next generation of OSH professionals to recognize and address emerging hazards impacting workers and the workforce.

"Using AI is not something OSH professionals can do by themselves; we need to work with data scientists and industry experts," Pratap said. "We want to provide targeted research training, prepare junior faculty and train students so that we're building networks and collaborations with professionals."

Pratap and Darabi envision a role for AI with more powerful and persistent observational skills than humans could reasonably apply. For example, an AI algorithm applied to a video feed could detect when a worker removes a hard hat in a hazardous area, triggering an alert to a supervisor to mitigate the safety risk. A human could monitor the same video feed constantly, but the rote and mundane aspects of that task would likely hinder a human's monitoring efficiency.

AI can also monitor subtle changes in a worker's activity that could represent a major safety risk. If a worker needs to climb an electrical pole to heights more than 100 feet off the ground, the way a worker positions their body is critical to prevent a fall. AI monitoring through drone video footage can alert a human operator to notify the worker to make slight alterations to their positioning.

AI applications for OSH have a few common characteristics: while a wearable device with sensors might be used, such as for truck drivers at risk of fatigue and falling asleep, the sensor itself is not an AI tool. AI's role is the evaluation of data from a sensor, video or other data source, processed through an algorithm to produce a recommendation. While AI can excel at monitoring and processing data, ultimately humans play an important role in implementing these safety recommendations. To put it simply, the reasons why a worker may choose to not wear a hard hat in a hazard area could be infinitely complex. Human supervisors will be better equipped to work through these situations with better monitoring tools.

"AI comes in when we have data, but we don't have a direct means of drawing a conclusion from that data," Darabi said. "You can build a sensor to detect radioactivity, but there are situations where no sensors are possible, and you need to gather multiple pieces of information and analyze and interpret that information to draw a conclusion."

AI efforts at SPH began with a continuing education course built for OSH professionals with no knowledge or skills working with AI. The course equipped students with a detailed understanding of AI, its applications in OSH and practical experience designing a project with AI applications. Darabi is currently mentoring a faculty member from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign Agricultural Safety program to design a graduate AI course focused on OSH in agricultural contexts. The course will enroll UIC and UIUC students in spring 2024.

A lab with AI technology has been constructed at the School of Public Health building on UIC's west campus. While the lab is still growing, it features sensors, devices and equipment that occupational safety professionals may already be using in the workplace. The lab provides the linkage to AI algorithms to design new and improved uses for these technologies. Coding skills are not a prerequisite for working with AI, but students using the lab are often learning how to code to write and modify safety algorithms.

Pratap acknowledges that AI applications in the field of occupational safety and health may result in some job losses, but she argues that a host of new jobs are likely to be created. She views the introduction of AI as a period of adaptation for OSH professionals.

"AI is the new math, and while we all won't be experts in AI, it is necessary for us to build collaborations and partnerships to promote human-centered approaches to building AI tools and how we address inequities in occupational health, safety and well-being," Pratap said.

The Great Lakes Center for Occupational Health and Safety will continue to play a key role in supporting the development of AI education, given that current funding is quite limited.

"We're trying to give tools to people, the knowledge and expertise to go out and develop their own AI solutions," Darabi said.

"We're hoping people take these experiences back to their work and use them with actual practical consequences." ●



Caleb Smith, BS in Mechanical Engineering student, demonstrates how a wearable sensor can provide AI with data on ergonomic risks for waitstaff in restaurants.



Community Course Alignment



With MacArthur Foundation funding, SPH classes are redesigning curriculum to incorporate the technical needs of Chicago community-based organizations

As a program case manager at Lawrence Hall, a Chicago community-based service agency committed to healing the effects of childhood trauma, Aaron Brown believes teens and young adults in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood need a chance to turn off their "survival brain."

When young people face heightened exposure to violent crime and property crime, Brown says they develop tendencies to live in the moment rather than focusing on long-term goals and development.

"When you are in survival mode, you can't live in that mode, you can't have fun in that mode," Brown said.

"When you get out of this space you normally are in, going hiking or canoeing or ziplining, you finally feel like you can be free and actually learn."

In 2019, Brown created the Journeys Across Communities Recidivism Reduction Program (JAC Program) to equip youth ages 14-24 in Chicago's South Shore neighborhood with support, resources and cultural immersion experiences after involvement with the justice system, as a strategy to prevent the recurrence of high-risk behaviors and violence.

The program grew out of his own experiences as a young person in the community and centers on the concept that even a few hours of intentionally designed programming toward love and healing can foster teens and young adults to envision personal goals and a new life path forward. But how does a program measure the impact of adult

mentors or the creation of personal goals? Do these objectives lead to changes in the lives of participants? If so, why? What role does love play in participant success? Ultimately, what does success look like?

A new form of academic-community partnership piloted at the UIC School of Public Health aims to bolster community-based organizations' capacity to tackle key technical challenges like program evaluation. Known as community course alignment, SPH professors are tailoring courses to address specific real-world tasks facing Chicago community-based organizations (CBOs).

"When it comes to understanding needs and challenges our communities face, our community partners are the experts," said Brenikki Floyd, PhD, associate dean for community engagement. "We have a responsibility to create space for our community partners and foster the co-creation of mutually beneficial innovations through transformative partnerships."

The genesis for course alignment grew from an SPH-initiated needs assessment with the CBOs involved with the City of Chicago's COVID-19 response. In 2021, to fund community engaged teaching efforts, Jeni Hebert-Beirne, PhD '08, MPH '95, associate professor of community health sciences and founder of SPH's Collaboratory for Health Justice, and Maggie Acosta, former assistant director with the Collaboratory, earned a \$500,000 grant from the MacArthur Foundation called "Strengthening Public Health Infrastructure in Chicago Communities."

“What we are asked to evaluate from funders is not always the stuff that matters,” Hebert-Beirne said. “It’s the hard-to-articulate stuff that really matters – how do you measure love, what keeps young people involved in a program, how young people feel like they matter – all these things we don’t have a great way of defining.”

A South Shore partnership in action

Alisa Velonis, PhD, associate professor of community health sciences and faculty with the UIC Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health, worked with Lawrence Hall staff to co-design one of these courses, Community-Engaged Program Evaluation. The partnership had two goals: to provide specific technical assistance to Lawrence Hall and to embed community partner expertise in the experience of students learning community-engaged program evaluation.

Each week during the spring 2023 semester, Lawrence Hall’s Sean McGinnis, chief program officer; Breanna Hollie, vice president of youth and community development; Brown and other Lawrence Hall staff attended class sessions, partly as students and partly as co-instructors. The community alignment final product was a draft evaluation plan for Lawrence Hall to implement, co-developed by students, faculty and program staff.

“It’s one thing to say, ‘I know the program works, I know what we need to do to help youth,’” Brown said. “It’s entirely different to have a group of professionals study the ins and outs of the program and make clear whether it’s beneficial.”

Over 13 weeks, JAC Program participants engage in group and individual therapy, mentoring, employment services, educational support and cultural activities. In collaboration with Brown, McGinnis and Hollie, the class dug deep into the program, hypothesizing how programmatic elements work together to succeed. The class reviewed literature that illustrated how providing youth with mental and physical support that fosters opportunities to grow and change can reduce violence recidivism rates.

The JAC Program was ripe for evaluation because of its recent formation, a need to attract sustained funding and a goal of launching the program in other communities.

“A lot of our programs are based on someone like Aaron and his lived experiences and his natural connection to kids,” McGinnis said. “We can’t put that in a job description and say, ‘You have to be Aaron if you want to work here.’ If we’re going to replicate this, we need to be able to define [what it is that works].”

Class discussions about program theory and student-led literature reviews highlighted possible key drivers of program success, including the need for passionate staff with genuine love for youth participants. Peer-to-peer engagement and teaching may create outsized benefits, which led Brown, McGinnis and Hollie to think about how to better incorporate participant and alumni leadership in the program. Finally, class conversations about family engagement led Lawrence Hall to apply for grant funding to include family members in cultural immersion activities.

“I think our students saw what could be accomplished when there is constant communication and sharing of power, validation and decision-making between ‘traditional public health’ and community partners,” Velonis said. “As teachers, we have the potential to have this ripple effect of learning.”

Building stronger academic-community ties

Velonis’ class was one of 14 initial MacArthur-funded community-aligned courses, with another seven under way this fall totaling 44 current community collaborators. Beyond these courses, the community-engaged teaching team also facilitates guest lecturers from SPH’s Health Justice Speakers Bureau to bring further community perspectives to classroom. Programmatic support for the grant has been led by Hebert-Beirne and Acosta; Marjorie Kersten, PhD student with a concentration in community

health sciences; Kiela Moreno, MPH student with a concentration in maternal and child health; and Cynthia Medina, MPH student with a concentration in community health sciences.

Through the MacArthur funding, faculty and community collaborators receive compensation for their time and access to community-engaged teaching support. Generally, faculty are not compensated for course design, which is problematic given the time-intensive nature of a true partner-designed, community-aligned course.

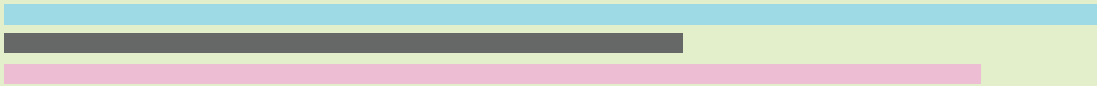
“We need to position this as continued relationship building with our community partners,” Hebert-Beirne said. “We met these extraordinary people with whom we built a robust learning environment. The lessons learned are how powerful this can be, but also how hard it is to go that extra mile without the support and compensation provided by the MacArthur grant.”

As Lawrence Hall initiates an evaluation of the JAC Program, Brown envisions a future in which the program is operating in major cities across the country impacted by gang violence. A robust program evaluation designed in collaboration with academia could allow for that replication. For now, the focus is on growing the South Shore presence to impact as many youths as possible with programming, employment pathways and alternative ways of thinking.

“Whether it’s in public health or social work or criminal justice, we may all have different paths to get through a problem or a challenge,” Hollie said. “But we’re all here to make a difference and impact the system.” ●



Lawrence Hall leaders including (from left) Narestus Coley, Breanna Hollie and Aaron Brown attended classes at SPH and provided community perspectives to shape students' evaluation skills.



SPH's Alisa Velonis (left) and Jeni Hebert-Beirne earned MacArthur Foundation funding and created the community-engaged course incorporating Lawrence Hall's evaluation needs.

Strengthening Health and Wellness for Populations Around the World

1

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

Linda Forst, MD, professor of environmental and occupational health sciences, was honored with a new NIOSH/CDC grant to establish the Great Lakes Center for Farmworker Health and Well-Being. This center focuses on addressing the needs of 55,000 migrant and seasonal farmworkers employed in Illinois annually, mainly from Mexico and Central America. The center aims to collaborate with public health experts, researchers, policymakers, trade organizations and advocates to make meaningful improvements in the health and well-being of these crucial workers.



2

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

SPH's Global Health Program hosted the third annual Frugal Innovations in Global Health Conference, co-sponsored by Loyola University College of Arts and Sciences and Parkinson School of Health Sciences and Public Health, India Development Service and Rush University College of Health Sciences. This conference introduces current and future healthcare practitioners to innovations in healthcare delivery that address pervasive gaps in healthcare access.



3

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



SPH's Global Health Program hosts a monthly Global Health Speaker Series, bringing speakers in-person and

virtually to present on global health topics. Recent speakers included Dr. Sonia Riaz, technical deputy director, Federal Ministry of National Health, Pakistan, speaking on universal healthcare in Pakistan and Dr. John Kahler, co-founder, MedGlobal, on the migrant crisis from Venezuela to Mexico.

4

MEXICO CITY, MEXICO

Alondra Puente and Milli Boker (photo), MPH students in community health sciences, traveled to Mexico City as part of SPH's 100,000 Strong in the Americas Mexico Exchange Program with Instituto Nacional de Salud Pública (INSP). Alondra and Milli worked with a faculty member from INSP analyzing health services for mobile and migrant populations in Mexico in the context of COVID-19 and how the healthcare system in Mexico can better support immigrants from Central America.



5

HAVANA, CUBA

The SPH Global Health Program offered a summer enrichment program, Public Health in Cuba, with partners Medical Education Cooperation with Cuba and the Cuban National School of Public Health. SPH faculty, staff and students engaged in a variety of educational activities related to Cuba's health system, public health infrastructure and model of care.



6

KISUMU, KENYA

Shaye Arwood and Sophie Young, MPH students in epidemiology, and Eglé Malinauskaitė, MPH student in community health sciences, collaborated with SPH Kenya Program partners Nyanza Reproductive Health Society and the Safe Water and AIDS Project to conduct their applied practice experiences focused on HIV interventions (Shaye), risk factors for bacterial vaginosis (Sophie) and disease assessments connected with water purification systems (Eglé).



7

KISUMU, KENYA

Samuel Dorevitch, MD, professor of environmental and occupational health sciences, and partner Alex Mwaki, country director of the Safe Water and AIDS Project (SWAP), were honored with the Energy Globe and Suqia Global Water Awards for their work with the Sola Maji project, establishing scalable solar-powered water purification kiosks in Ahero and Chuthber towns in Kisumu.



8

YUNLIN COUNTY, TAIWAN

Tiffany Ku, MPH student in epidemiology, partnered with Chang Gung University of Science and Technology and Yunlin County's health departments and hospitals to engage in health checks, surveys and health promotion activities for the elderly, notably the use of interactive board games to enhance health literacy and promote healthier lifestyles.



An app for global HIV care

After piloting an avatar-based app in the U.S. to promote HIV medication adherence and clinical visits, SPH's Dr. Mark Dworkin, student researchers and global partners are testing the efficacy of the app in Hyderabad, India



SPH's Mark Dworkin, MD, professor of epidemiology and biostatistics and an infectious disease physician, saw a unique opportunity to merge his research interests and uplift a vulnerable population – and he didn't let it pass.

In 2015, Dworkin spearheaded the development of My Personal Health Guide, an avatar-based talking mobile phone app designed to boost medication adherence and retention in care among young Black men in the U.S. who have sex with men living with HIV (MSM). More recently, Dworkin wondered if he might translate the app to people living with HIV in India, a population he had been working with throughout the last decade.

"India has a lot of people living with HIV and many with low health literacy, so this avatar-based app seemed an approach with real potential," Dworkin said.

Two years ago, Dworkin brought the idea to SHARE India, a healthcare-oriented nonprofit based in the southern India city of Hyderabad. Dworkin's longtime partners were immediately interested in collaborating on a promising intervention that could promote health literacy and help combat HIV stigma in a country whose Supreme Court had only decriminalized homosexuality in 2018.

But this was no plug-and-play project.

"In a global context, you can't just create a replica and think it's going to work," said Casey Morgan Luc, PhD student with a concentration in epidemiology and a My Personal Health Guide project team member since 2020. "You want to make sure you deliver an app that is respectful and tailored to the needs of local communities."

To that end, Dworkin and his team have spent the better part of the last two years adapting My Personal Health Guide for their population in India, a significant, time-consuming effort featuring countless Zoom calls, a crash course in cultural

differences, a trip to India and an earnest commitment to creating a relevant, impact-driving solution.

Dworkin and his team truncated the app, preserving some functions while deleting others, and edited the script alongside SHARE India representatives to ensure it relayed HIV-related information, motivation and behavioral skills in clear, simple language. Often, the group bumped into process or patient care differences prompting changes. Sierra Upton, PhD student with a concentration in epidemiology, said the project team encountered differences in local systems, including how India's HIV healthcare system operates and how societal structures influence health.

There were the inevitable cultural differences, too. For instance, the app's U.S. version illustrated the importance of medication adherence by showing an individual steering a car with two hands to ensure safety. While that visual resonated with U.S. audiences, it lacked relevancy in India, as many people in the app's target group would not own a car. The UIC team responded by shifting to the more relatable image of a motorbike in the India version.

"As much as we wanted to move quickly, we had to identify cultural differences and design with those in mind," Dworkin said.

Thereafter, the collective translated the app into the local language (Telugu), an effort demanding careful attention as one poorly translated word or phrase could alter the meaning of content. Finally, SHARE India partner Gandhamalla P. Sabitha Rani recruited a local media professional to record the script.

The script read is a particularly instrumental piece of the project, Dworkin said, as a human-like avatar speaking with animation and emotion helps individuals better relate to the information, which heightens their individual engagement with medication adherence and care.

"It's a lot like acting," Dworkin said. "You don't want a robotic voice, but rather a voice encouraging healthy behaviors, acknowledging stigma and speaking with empathy."

Dworkin calls the app, which also includes valuable functions like private medication reminders and tracking of viral load, a powerful supplement to clinical care for those either recently diagnosed with HIV or struggling with adherence.

"We're providing information in an accessible, entertaining way while offering the benefit of privacy, encouragement, education and motivation to set people up for improved care," Dworkin said.

In February 2023, the Dworkin-led team learned that the local regulatory authority approved the project. With that approval in hand, Gandham will soon begin demonstrating the app to prospective users and funneling data to the UIC researchers, who will examine the acceptability and feasibility of the app and determine next steps.

"It takes an enormous amount of time, patience and perseverance to launch a research study in a global setting, and we're just getting started," Upton said.

And though Dworkin insists he is not thinking beyond Hyderabad at this point, he acknowledges My Personal Health Guide's long-term potential in other global settings.

"What we can accomplish here sets the stage for what we might be able to do next," Dworkin said.

The app development research was supported by the National Institutes of Health under Award Numbers R21NR016420 and R01MH116721. ●

Expanding horizons

A new gift from the Passaro family will strengthen SPH's national profile as a global health leader

For more than 15 years, SPH students have been traversing the globe addressing some of the world's most pressing public health challenges, thanks to the support of Chicagoans Lanny and Terry Passaro.

The Passaros have long been among the most generous donors to the School of Public Health. In 2005, they created the Douglas Passaro Global Horizons Scholarship to honor the memory of their son, a School of Public Health professor with a passion for global health who passed away at the age of 43.

Now, the Passaros are reaffirming their commitment to SPH with a new gift to the Global Health Program, funding an endowed professorship and increased scholarship support.

"I have thought about the Global Health Program for more than 20 years," Terry Passaro said. "It's a good product, it's an honest product. It's sending students, some who know next to nothing about travel, and giving them a mission to make a difference around the world."

Since the first scholarship was awarded in 2006-07, 50 SPH students working across five continents have benefited from the Passaro scholarship, which supports graduate students conducting health-related, hands-on international field experiences. The scholarship has funded numerous students taking part in global experiences in Jordan, Guatemala, Nepal, Philippines, Bolivia, Malawi and Kenya, among other locations.

"The generous donation from the Passaro family will enhance student educational opportunities and experiences and strengthen our ability to attract an esteemed researcher in global public health," said Alyson Lofthouse, assistant dean of global health.

"The endowed professor will expand our research portfolio and take a lead role in growing our vision for global health research, education and practice, fostering population-level health solutions worldwide. We are beyond grateful for the support of the Passaro family."



"One of the really impressive outcomes of this scholarship has been high quality focused research projects in so many places around the world," said Mark Dworkin, MD, professor of epidemiology and faculty on the Passaro scholarship selection committee. "We've had many passionate smart students apply for and get awarded the Passaro scholarship and use it to do remarkable work."

"Because of the Passaro Fund, many UIC students lived with Kenyan host families, were immersed in a new culture, provided community service, cultivated their leadership potential and attained significant knowledge and personal growth," said Bob Bailey, PhD, professor emeritus of epidemiology and biostatistics. "These experiences have been foundational to many of them going on to successful careers in global health and now making significant contributions to health promotion and disease prevention here at home and around the globe."

Ada Moadsiri, DrPH '13, MPH '06, earned Passaro Scholar funding in 2009-10, when she worked with the Tongan Ministry of Health to reduce the burden of nutritionally-related chronic disease. Today, Moadsiri serves as a technical officer with the World Health Organization's Tobacco Free Initiative.

"The scholarship afforded me my first opportunity to blend humanitarianism and global public health, which encouraged me to dedicate my career to international civil service," Moadsiri said. "Because of those lasting personal and professional lessons, when I am supporting countries and areas to advocate for and implement upstream policy measures, I try never to lose sight of the communities, families and individuals we aim to impact."

Samuel Dorevitch, MD, professor of environmental and occupational health sciences, has worked closely with Safe Water and AIDS Project in

Kenya to establish solar-powered water purification stations across the western part of the nation. He has collaborated with Passaro-funded students and says the endowed professorship will be a "giant step forward" for the Global Health Program.

"Many SPH faculty are already doing innovative and impactful global health work, and the professorship will provide us with high-level leadership," Dorevitch said. "It will also advance SPH's global health activities within UIC, and it will raise the profile of UIC nationally."

For Terry Passaro, the gift is a continuation of her family's dedication to the Global Health Program.

"It gives our whole family a way to participate through very effective global health education initially in memory of Douglas Passaro and in the memory of Lanny Passaro, a proud supporter of scholarship through education and travel," she said. ●

2023 Douglas Passaro Global Horizons Scholarship Awardees

This award honors the memory of Dr. Douglas James Passaro, SPH associate professor of epidemiology and attending physician in infectious diseases at UI Health from 2001 to 2005. The award is intended to provide support to graduate students for health-related, hands-on international field experiences to carry on Dr. Passaro's legacy of promoting global health.



Elise Dressel

Location: Chicago

Project: Elise partnered with UIC College of Medicine faculty on research in an NIH-funded trial comparing two tuberculosis

screening strategies for people living with HIV and newly entering HIV care in Kampala, Uganda.



Tigist Mersha

Location: Addis Ababa, Ethiopia

Project: Tigist worked with Ethiopia's Ministry of Health and Maternal and Child Health Department to survey

the extent of preconception care education and develop a family planning toolkit in the native Amharic language.



Thea Santiago

Location: Alcantara, Cebu, Philippines

Project: Thea worked with Child Family Health International, collecting data on epidemiological surveillance capacity

and facilitating discussions on factors and barriers affecting capacity.



Elijah Marder

Location: Antioquia, Colombia

Project: Elijah worked with faculty from La Universidad de Antioquia assisting in psychosocial and youth development

activities with at-risk adolescents who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation and other rights abuses.



Sandra Morales-Mirque

Location: Guatemala

Project: Sandra collaborated with Guatemala Village Health to develop an intervention to address

domestic violence in indigenous communities.



Samantha Smith

Location: Lalitpur, Nepal

Project: Samantha partnered with the Research Institute for Bioscience and Biotechnology Laboratory on a study

to improve understanding of water quality issues in low- and middle-income countries, identify sources of fecal pollution and improve laboratory methods for analyzing water quality.

Congrats to the Class of 2023

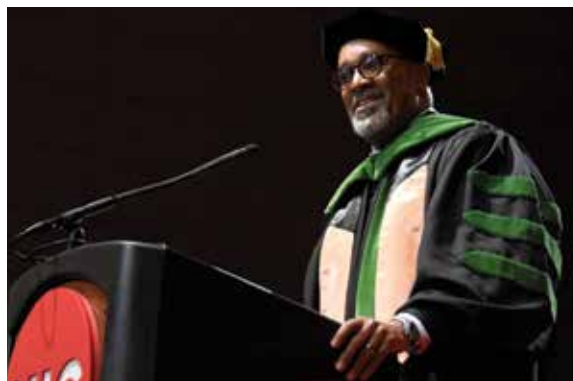
On May 4, the School of Public Health celebrated its Spring Commencement ceremony at the Isadore and Sadie Dorin Forum, awarding degrees to more than 280 undergraduate, masters and doctoral students. Highlighting the event was a keynote address by Admiral Rachel L. Levine, MD, assistant secretary for health with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and head of the United States Public Health Service Commissioned Corps.

"In your time at UIC, you have learned the needs for compassion, sensitivity and empathy, the importance of patience and curiosity, the need to be calm and confident and the need to innovate," Levine told the graduating class. "Only you can know the possibilities of your future."

SPH Dean Wayne H. Giles, MD, MS and university leaders reminded graduates that their time at UIC was indelibly shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Over the past three years of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is clear we need a strong and well-educated public health workforce, and it is a privilege to be charged with the development of the next generation of public health workers," Giles said.

Abigail Suleman, who earned her MPH degree with a concentration in maternal and child health epidemiology, was recognized as the Alan W. Donaldson award winner from the Class of 2023.





Preparing the next health justice leaders

Linda Rae Murray's career locally and nationally has been dedicated to naming, addressing and mitigating health disparities. Now, a new scholarship at SPH named in her honor will cultivate the next generation of public health leaders from underserved communities committed to upending health disparities.

"She has served and advocated for the poor, workers and those suffering racial and ethnic discrimination," said Peter Orris, PhD, professor of environmental and occupational health sciences. "This is the essence of her career, following Frederick Douglass' call for struggle, as 'Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will.'"

Murray, MD, MPH '80, began her career as a resident at Cook County Hospital, where she served two terms as president of its House Staff Union. She later practiced medicine as a general internist at Woodlawn Health Center in Chicago and as an attending physician in the division of occupational and environmental medicine at Cook County Hospital. She served as medical director at Winfield Moody, a federally qualified health center (FQHC) serving the Cabrini Green Public Housing Project in Chicago; as advisor to the International Chemical Workers Union; as residency director for occupational medicine at Meharry Medical College; and as bureau chief for the Chicago Department of Health under Mayor Harold Washington.

She retired as the chief medical officer of the Cook County Department of Public Health.

Nationally, Murray held leadership roles with the National Association of County and City Health Officers, served as president of the American Public Health Association and was appointed to the Board of Scientific Counselors, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health of the Centers for Disease Control by President Clinton.

"Unions are key to ending the socioeconomic divide that has produced such suffering in communities of color," said Dian Palmer, president of SEIU Local 73. "Dr. Murray has been a powerful advocate for public health and health justice in underserved communities, and I expect the recipients of a scholarship in her name will continue to advance these efforts."

"The experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have illustrated the urgent need for practice and research modeled on Murray's efforts," said David Ansell, MD, MPH '91, senior vice president for community health equity for Rush University Medical Center.

The scholarship's star-studded national initiating committee includes Ansell; Susan Avila, MPH '91; Mary Bassett; Georges Benjamin; Fernando DeMaio; Camara Jones; John Kahler; Michelle Morse; Orris; Susan Rogers and Myrtis Sullivan, MPH '83.

Please join the committee in this effort to attract and train UIC students who are committed to social and health justice and advance Dr. Murray's vision of creating a more equitable and egalitarian world. ●

Give to the scholarship: go.uic.edu/LindaRaeMurray



Honoring Dr. Samuel Epstein's mission

A new family-supported scholarship fund supports SPH students investigating environmental exposures and cancer links

In Chicago, community members are increasingly involved in public health decision-making on industrial environmental exposures in and near city neighborhoods. The efforts of these citizen scientists are a natural outgrowth of the storied career of Samuel Epstein, PhD, professor of environmental and occupational health sciences from 1976 to 1999 at the School of Public Health.

Epstein was one of the first in the U.S. to issue a clarion call about carcinogenic risks of environmental and occupational exposures. From collaborations with Ralph Nader to his leadership of the Rachel Carson Trust for the Living Environment, Epstein's claims were often met with ridicule by industry and even some fellow scientists, but his dogged scholarly approach ultimately bore witness to an emerging awareness of environmental health risks across the country.

"He was rigorous with the data and was one of the first, if not the first, to understand that we were introducing massive amounts of synthetic chemicals into the environment without any data proving their safety and significant data suggesting their dangers," said Julian Epstein, one of Samuel's sons. "All of this was reaching our bloodstreams and organs on a massive scale unprecedented in human history. He was the proverbial canary in the coal mine."

Julian and brother Mark Epstein are aiming to support SPH students who will highlight and address the next generation of environmental health challenges. Their gift of \$60,000 will support six students in the division of environmental and occupational health sciences interested in environmental exposures and cancer prevention.

"Science and medicine have helped create important health and safety protections, but there are still environmental risks that need to be solved in our lifetime," Mark Epstein said. "Corporate and economic influence, conflicts of interest and the rapid pace of innovation require more than ever that we're supporting those stewards who are dedicated to finding solutions to address these harms."

Kristen Malecki, PhD, director of the division of environmental and occupational health sciences, said the gift will support students engaging with new advances in public health science.

"New technologies are now providing tools to support much-needed research and awareness of the complex interactions between genetics, social and cumulative environmental factors that shape cancer," Malecki said. "The generous gift from the Epstein Foundation will advance training of the next generation of scholars in cancer and environmental health sciences."

Samuel Epstein's research and accompanying warnings followed the post-World War II boom in the U.S., a period of significant technological and economic growth. Yet behind these leaps were a raft of newly created inorganic compounds with little testing before entering the marketplace. While Rachel Carson was decrying the use of DDT as a pesticide, Epstein began focusing on petroleum-based consumer products. Slowly but surely, he built a corpus of evidence that pointed to significant carcinogenic risks in the products that had redefined American life.

His 1978 book, "The Politics of Cancer," ignited a firestorm of controversy, according to author Robert N. Proctor, describing



Photo Credit: © Benff via Creative Commons, 2021.



Samuel Epstein (left) congratulates SPH's An Li, PhD, after she was named the Dr. Samuel and Mrs. Catherine Epstein Term Professor in Cancer Prevention.

an “indictment of industry malfeasance, research impotence and regulatory incompetence.” Epstein advocated on a wide range of issues, from Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange to toxic waste dumps near U.S. communities to the risks of seemingly innocuous products like baby powder and toothpaste.

Julian and Mark Epstein both cite the infiltration of plastics in air, water supplies, oceans and in human bodies as one of challenges they envision environmental health leaders will be tackling in the near future. With the global scope of this challenge, Mark Epstein cites his father's commitment to working with stakeholders from government agencies to clinicians and industry as keys to engaging in the political and economic decision-making that accompany environmental health research.

“He was a maverick in the sense that he understood that scientists had to be broader than their publications in scientific journals; they had to also participate in the public square as the solutions were ultimately and necessarily political,” Julian Epstein said. “We’re hoping this gift will inspire those who want to marry the rigors of scientific research with well-reasoned public policy. Ultimately, his message was a stitch in time saves nine – prevention in public health is a lot less expensive than getting sick with these deadly diseases. It’s as true today as it was when he first started.” ●

Post-Roe America comes to UIC

UIC's Reproductive Justice Coalition, with significant SPH support, is caring for people nationwide seeking reproductive health services

In June 2022, the Supreme Court ruling *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision. Following the *Dobbs* ruling, faculty, students and staff at UIC and UI Health quickly came together to form the Reproductive Justice Coalition, including representatives from the School of Public Health and numerous other academic programs and centers across the university. The Reproductive Justice Coalition aims to coordinate efforts to support abortion access and education at UI Health and UIC.

After meeting for several months and leading activities across campus, the Coalition launched a fundraiser in the winter of 2022-23 in support of those seeking abortion services in Illinois. Led by SPH maternal and child health faculty, the Coalition aimed to raise \$35,000 to enable abortion providers in the Illinois Medical District to provide supportive resources to individuals and families traveling to receive reproductive health services. By mid-December, the Coalition's fundraiser goal was quickly met and exceeded.

This success was highlighted by a generous grant from the Irving Harris Foundation, which supports the health and well-being of pregnant and birthing people, very young children, families and communities, and centers intersectional racial equity. The Foundation is a longtime supporter of SPH's Center of Excellence in Maternal and Child Health. Additionally, members of the Reproductive Justice Coalition matched initial donations. With excess funds available, the Coalition created care kits with items recommended by UI Health abortion providers for patients traveling from out-of-state for abortion services.

One maternal and child health student at SPH contributed to the Coalition's efforts by assembling donation bags (photo, right) for those seeking abortion services in Illinois. These care kits were thoughtfully designed to provide comfort and essential items to those seeking abortion services. For those traveling to Illinois with children, a children's care kit was also available which included a sticker pack, a coloring book with crayons and a stuffed animal.

"I'm proud to have contributed to the creation of something that will serve as a source of comfort and support to those in need of abortion services," the student said. "The Coalition's fundraising efforts have undoubtedly made a positive impact on the lives of many individuals, and I am grateful to have been a part of it."

Since *Dobbs*, reproductive health physicians at UI Health have cared for patients from around the nation. These doctors characterize their work as rewarding but taxing.

"The biggest change I have experienced as an abortion provider is the moral distress I feel on a daily basis," one physician said. "By the time patients are able to arrange for care in Illinois, they are often much farther along and have worsening health conditions, and we are only seeing the tip of the iceberg."

The Coalition's support has put patients at ease and removes some of the fear, shame and stigma that comes with abortion care.

"This gift has given peace of mind and security for some of the sickest



and most vulnerable patients, all of whom have been forced to travel alone to an unfamiliar city with little or no support," the physician said. "Patients say they have never felt so well cared for during a medical procedure."

The Reproductive Justice Coalition is demonstrating its value to the UIC community and to people seeking abortion care in the Illinois Medical District from across the country. Moving forward, the Coalition will continue working in a variety of ways, through advocacy, education and training to be a driving force of change with respect to reproductive justice within UIC and beyond. ●

Peer support team builds community

Natalie Burda, BA '22, is giving back to SPH's undergraduate programs



When Natalie Burda (top photo, right) began her MPH degree at SPH in fall 2022, a few months after graduating from SPH with a BA in Public Health, she was looking for a way to give back and stay involved with the undergraduate program.

With encouragement from SPH's Cecilia Macias, director of diversity, equity and inclusion, Burda applied for and was accepted to the School's Peer Support Team, a group of masters and doctoral students dedicated to helping their peers succeed academically in quantitative methods and writing-related courses. Burda has been working with undergraduate students ever since.

"I think I learned the right tools early on, and it's important to share those tools with others," Burda said. "I was the first person in my family to go to school and was fortunate to have people supporting me, and I wanted to support those who didn't have people there for them."

Burda provides students in the BA and BS in Public Health programs with support across all courses, with both one-on-one meetings and bi-monthly workshops. Her work with students ranges from reading academically to citation support to creating posters for public health conferences. Burda and the Peer Support Team aim to work in concert with faculty, and her workshops are often crafted around upcoming assignments for students.

"There's so much collaboration behind the scenes, a group effort to help out students who are struggling and to get them excited and passionate," Burda said. "Especially with COVID, burnout is very real, and we're trying to focus on helping students through that."

As an MPH student, Burda is currently pursuing a generalist concentration in environmental and occupational health sciences while looking to build experience in industrial hygiene. She aims to pursue a career in occupational health, working to protect vulnerable populations in the workplace.

She says her years in the BA in Public Health program helped build a public health lens to view the world, to identify disparities between communities, identify larger systems at play and begin applying solutions to these challenges.

"I think UIC, and especially SPH, are trying to dismantle the structures of institution and exist differently within these spaces and practice what they preach," Burda said. "My programs have really reiterated having a person-first lens, beyond just a focus on disparities, making sure we put the needs of individuals first." ●

Celebrating the achievements of students, alumni, faculty and staff

Adam Andersen, DPT, director of SPH's MHA program, was SPH's 2022-23 Bernard H. Baum Golden Apple Award winner, recognizing outstanding graduate level teaching and service.



Trevia Brooks, DrPH student, was awarded the André Gilmore Stanley scholarship, named in honor of the former DrPH student and FDA policy analyst. Trevia's research focuses on qualitative approaches to address gun violence.



Dorothy Foulkes, MS in Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences '22, is serving as a molecular surveillance manager of quality assurance and laboratory liaison with the Chicago Department of Public Health Disease Control Bureau, where she oversees laboratory-based surveillance programs.



Kendall Anderson, MS in Environmental and Occupational Health '19, has been serving as the clinical diagnostic testing team lead at the Chicago Department of Public Health, using laboratory-based surveillance to respond to major public health threats.



Anu Cheemarla, Master of Healthcare Administration '23, was named an administrative fellow at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, a one-year project-based experience at the nation's top-ranked pediatric academic medical center.



Shanta Ghosh, PhD in Biostatistics student, was the recipient of the 2023 American Statistical Association Biopharmaceutical Section student scholarship award.



Sanjib Basu, PhD, was named a UIC Distinguished Professor of Epidemiology and Biostatistics by the university.



Stacey Cunningham, DrPH student, was awarded the André Gilmore Stanley scholarship, named in honor of the former DrPH student and FDA policy analyst. Stacey's research explores systemic and structural racism and bias in hospitals and maternal morbidity inequities.



Arizay Guzman, BA '22, was accepted to the CDC's Public Health Associate Program and is currently working with the Johnson County Public Health Department in Iowa focusing on community health assessments and improvement plans.



Laurel Berman, PhD '05, MS '02, adjunct assistant professor, earned the SPH 2022-23 Silver Circle Award for excellence in teaching in the School's undergraduate programs.



Onyinye Enyia Daniel, PhD in Public Health Informatics '15, was named one of Chief Data Officer Magazine's Global Data Power Women for her role as vice president of data and analytics strategy at Highmark Health.



Tynetta Hill-Muhammad, MPH in CHS student, is serving as the Chicago chapter organizer for Black Youth Project 100, a member-based organization of Black youth activists creating justice and freedom for all Black people.



Hannah Bonecutter, MPH in Health Policy and Administration '21, earned a Presidential Management Fellowship with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Enterprise Integration.



Jillian Doss-Walker, DrPH '22, was part of a team who received a CDC global health honor award for their response to the public health emergency of Wild Poliovirus Type 1 in southern Africa.



Marjorie Kersten, MPH '22, PhD in Community Health Sciences student, is an evaluation consultant for Chicago Grows Food and a board member for Esperanza Health Center, which provides accessible health services across Chicago's south and west sides.



Frank Borgers, PhD, clinical assistant professor of health policy and administration, was honored by UIC's Teaching Recognition Program for a demonstrated long-term commitment to teaching excellence.



Jeni Hebert-Beirne, PhD '08, MPH '95, associate professor of community health sciences, was recognized by UIC with its Community Engagement Award.



Kara Herrera and Casey Luc, PhD in Epidemiology students, along with Jeffrey Lyang, MPH in Epidemiology '23, Colin Korban, MPH in Epidemiology '20 and Irina Tabidze, MPH in Maternal and Child Health Epidemiology '02, published new research in The Lancet on co-occurring sexually transmitted infections among monkeypox cases in Chicago to guide prevention efforts.



Melissa Korniejczuk, MPH in Health Policy and Administration '23, was named a 2023 Presidential Management Fellowship finalist, for a two-year training and leadership development program at a United States government agency.



Hannah Matzke, PhD '23 and MS '16 in Occupational and Environmental Epidemiology, accepted a new position at the Chicago Department of Public Health's Community Health Bureau as the lead epidemiologist for the Healthy Chicago Survey.



Sandra Morales-Mirque, MPH in Community Health Sciences student, is a board member for the Co-op Ed Center and participated in Mayor Lightfoot's task force for wealth building in Chicago.



Stuart Robinson, assistant director of academic services in the division of community health sciences, earned UIC's Award of Merit, a university-wide honor presented to staff members who exhibit service, commitment and dedication.



Mark Rosenblatt, MD, EMHA '20, was named the interim chief executive officer of UI Health.



Temiloluwa Sodipe, BS '23, earned the 2023 Public Health Promise Award, given to an outstanding graduating undergraduate student deemed by faculty and peers to show the greatest potential for future contributions to public health.



Michele Rodriguez Taylor, assistant director of internship programs and employer outreach, earned UIC's Rising Star Award, for early career dedication and quality of performance.



Arshia Wajid, MPH in Health Policy and Administration '01, was honored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as one of the top 15 women faith leaders in health.



Tayler Whittler, DrPH student, is a volunteer with Mother Lab, a Boston-based maternal health and health equity research lab, where she has investigated how maternal stress and depression impact breastfeeding.



Kristine Zimmerman, PhD '19, MPH '03, visiting clinical assistant professor of community health sciences, published new research on implementing cardiovascular disease risk-reduction interventions in rural churches.



Tooka Zokaie, DrPH student, was featured on Crooked Media's podcast "America Dissected," discussing fluoridation and addressing misinformation with public health programs.



Tell us what you're up to!

Email your news to
SPHAdvancement@uic.edu.

Meet our new faculty

Adam Andersen, DPT, MBA

Clinical Assistant Professor
Health Policy and Administration



Adam Andersen, DPT, MBA is the MHA program director. He has served in quality and safety leadership roles in an academic medical center and in industry. He taught as an adjunct faculty member in the UIC physical therapy program and with the residential and executive tracks in the UIC MHA program. Adam

graduated from UIC with a BS in Physical Therapy before completing a Doctor of Physical Therapy from Governors State University and MBA from UIC. He currently teaches Quality Management in Health Services and is the course director for MHA preceptorships and capstones.

Julia Bauer, PhD, MS '15

Assistant Professor
Epidemiology and Biostatistics



Julia Bauer's research centers on addressing fundamental gaps in the understanding of how environmental exposures impact the nervous system across the life course in susceptible populations, including mothers and their infants, adolescents and workers in global and local

settings. She aims to identify susceptibility factors that modify the association between chemical exposures and health, including race and ethnicity, exposure timing, co-exposure conditions and sex differences. Her work includes using novel biomarkers of exposure, such as deciduous "baby" teeth to estimate retrospective elemental exposures.

Larelle Bookhart, PhD

Assistant Professor
Community Health Sciences



Larelle Bookhart's research interests include nutrition during the first 1,000 days of life, healthcare system practices and policies that influence early nutrition and methods to reduce and eliminate early nutrition related health inequities, with

a focus on breast/chest feeding. Bookhart's prior research examined factors associated with in-hospital exclusive breastfeeding among healthy term newborns. Her current research aims to create a continuum of support from the clinical setting to community setting in collaboration with community-based maternal care workers to improve breast/chest feeding outcomes. Other research and teaching interests include structure and function of the maternal and infant health delivery system.

Abhery Das, PhD

Bridge to Faculty Scholar
Health Policy and Administration



Abhery Das' research examines mental health and psychiatric service utilization among minoritized communities resulting from policy implementation, exogenous shocks and inequitable social systems. Her work on institutional racism in the criminal justice system

demonstrates how police stops, police killings of unarmed Black Americans and incarceration result in greater psychiatric help-seeking in the broader Black population. Her future projects include evaluation of policies that reduce racial disparities in policing and incarceration, as well as the mental health consequences of police presence and zero tolerance policies in urban schools.

Raphael Florestal-Kevelier, PhD

Clinical Assistant Professor
Community Health Sciences



Raphael Florestal-Kevelier has advanced training and more than 15 years of experience engaging in scholarship, practice and teaching focused on the well-being of university students, with an emphasis on its intersections with students' academic, professional and personal success. Within

higher education, his research and practice pay attention to advancing health equity in university contexts, cultivating health promoting campus environments and the academic and social experiences of Black queer and transgender students. He also serves as UIC's assistant vice chancellor for student health and president-elect of the American College Health Association.

Tiffany N. Ford, PhD, MPH '16

Assistant Professor
Community Health Sciences



Tiffany N. Ford conducts subjective well-being, or self-reported quality of life, research that examines racism in the health, economic and social lives of Black people in the U.S. and considers policy and practice interventions to support well-being. Her research is qualitative, quantitative, mixed

methods, spatial and informed by her power-building and sharing relationships with community-based organizations, community-led coalitions and individuals most impacted by structural oppression. She is the faculty advisor for Radical Public Health at SPH, on the board of Chicago United for Equity and serves as the president-elect of the Society of the Analysis of African American Public Health Issues.

Gabriela Gracia, PhD '18

Research Assistant Professor
Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences



Gabriela Gracia serves as deputy director of the Great Lakes Center for Farmworker Health and Wellbeing. She is a medical anthropologist by training, and her research uses qualitative methods to understand environmental and occupational health hazards in underserved populations

including farmworkers, informal workers and artisans. She is interested in developing, implementing and evaluating interventions using community-based participatory methods.

Kelechi Ibe-Lamberts, PhD

Clinical Associate Professor
Community Health Sciences



Kelechi Ibe-Lamberts teaches and researches health behaviors, health disparities and health outcomes among culturally diverse populations. His research work specifically involves matters related to refugee/immigrant health

and the development of transnational ties among Black immigrants. He identifies as a 1.5 generation Transnational Nigerian American. Born in Lagos, Nigeria, he immigrated to the United States at the age of 8, where he grew up in Chicago. He serves as the chair for the APHA Caucus on Refugee and Immigrant Health and also hosts a podcast titled "My Black is Transnational."

Honghyok Kim, PhD

Assistant Professor
Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences



As an environmental epidemiologist, Honghyok Kim investigates why the health effects of environmental exposures and climate-related factors manifest differently across individuals, communities and countries using quantitative data analyses and interdisciplinary thinking.

His work includes the health impacts of environmental risk factors such as air pollution, temperature, heat waves, cold spells, floods and greenness, and associated health disparities by individual-level and community-level characteristics. He also works on theoretical, conceptual and methodological work to better estimate environmental health disparities than current approaches. His work includes multiple countries and locations.

Michele McCay, DrPH '11, MPH '00

Clinical Assistant Professor
DrPH Program



Michele McCay has worked with public health initiatives that focus on the leadership needs of maternal and child health programs and global health initiatives. She leads global health work on the African continent to improve services and systems benefiting women and babies. She is a member

of the Illinois Department of Public Health's Maternal Mortality Review Committee on Violent Deaths and has held several leadership roles in the American Public Health Association - Health Administration Section. Teaching and research areas of interest include public health leadership and administration, maternal and child health programs and systems and global health.

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Linda Rae Murray, MD, MPH '80

Interim Program Director
Undergraduate Programs



Linda Rae Murray has been a faculty member with SPH since 2009, teaching in both the undergraduate and graduate programs. She is a world-renowned public health champion and advocate both locally and nationally. Her past leadership roles include director of environmental and

occupational health for the Chicago Department of Health, chief medical officer for the Cook County Department of Public Health, member of the Health Equity and Social Justice Team at the National Association of City and County Health Officials and president of the American Public Health Association. Most recently, Murray co-chaired Mayor Brandon Johnson's transition team subcommittee on health and human services.

Mehdi Amouei Torkmahalleh, PhD

Assistant Professor
Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences



Mehdi Amouei Torkmahalleh's primary research interest is assessing community exposure to ultrafine particles from indoor, workplace and anthropogenic sources and examining the associations between these exposures and neurodegenerative diseases. He is one of the leading global

scientists in the field of exposure to cooking emissions. In 2021, he led a study coauthored by more than 50 scientists that addressed the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on global air quality. He is also interested in novel topics such as sustainability, green buildings, smart buildings, climate change, global health, environmental equity and citizen science.

Meida Wang, PhD

Clinical Assistant Professor
Epidemiology and Biostatistics



Meida Wang has a background in statistical genetics, with specific training and expertise in genome-wide association studies, joint analysis of multiple phenotypes in genome, association detection between ordinal trait and rare variants. Wang's research focuses on

developing novel statistical methods and computational tools for identifying and characterizing genetic variants that influence susceptibility to human complex diseases or traits, such as identification of risk factors for COPD and the musculoskeletal system and connective tissue phenotypes.

Fanta Waterman, PhD

Clinical Assistant Professor
DrPH Program



Fanta Waterman is a health services researcher and community health educator, investigating economic, clinical and humanistic outcomes related to healthcare access, policy and behavior. Her specialization focuses on how health systems and services research relates to community

health outcomes of globally underserved and under-investigated populations. Before her academic career, she spent more than 15 years in the biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries. She serves as on the executive board as treasurer of Mocha Moms of Connecticut and is the president of the Long Ridge Library in Danbury, CT.

Rita Zejnullahi, PhD

Clinical Assistant Professor
Epidemiology and Biostatistics



Rita Zejnullahi's research interests center on the use and development of statistical methods for policymaking. This includes the quantification of uncertainty of point estimates from predictive models, the formulation of effect sizes and effect size estimators in randomized and quasi-

experiments when adjusting for covariates and extensions of meta-analysis methods to small sample situations.

Honoring Our Retirees



When Frank Cervone, PhD, came to the School of Public Health as the director of information technology in 2014, he quickly

identified key technology gaps in SPH's research portfolio. Nearly a decade later, retiring from SPH as the executive director for information services, Cervone can look back on significant technology growth and interconnectivity with the rest of the university.

"The most motivating factor for me was the mission of SPH and helping to promote public health and improving the health of the population in general," Cervone said.

During Cervone's tenure at SPH, he worked at the university level to build UIC's IT governance and research data security, in collaboration with partners from other colleges. He played a key role in UIC's first iteration of Advanced Cyberinfrastructure for Education and Research, which provides researchers and collaborators around the globe with computational resources and data-related services.

Currently, Cervone has taken on a new role with San Jose State University leading its BS in Information Science and Data Analytics program. His role is fully remote, allowing him to enjoy one of his chief retirement passions of traveling the globe. He says he enjoys the slower pace of life that (semi) retirement offers.

"It is interesting to see from a tech perspective how the School has progressed and is more active in its relationship to how it uses technology," Cervone said. "The people aspects of public health are extremely important, but you can't really do that today without having a strong technology foundation."

In Memoriam



When Bill Baldyga, DrPH '82, received a liver transplant in 2005, doctors advised he take six months off from his role as associate director of the School of Public Health's Institute for Health Research and Policy (IHRP).

Instead, he took six weeks off and installed a cot in his office for the ever-rare nap.

This is not an ode to hustle culture but rather the reflection of a researcher, mentor, husband and friend to many who never quit and who never gave up hope.

Bill Baldyga passed away in 2023 at the age of 72. He is survived by his wife, Gina Piane, MPH '84, DrPH '89, son Andrew, daughter Allison, stepdaughters Danielle and Natalie, daughter-in-law Regina, granddaughter Helen and numerous family and friends. Piane and Baldyga first met at SPH.

Baldyga was a community-focused researcher with interests in community health in Pilsen and Greater Lawn. His community-engaged evidence-based and participatory research often focused on chronic disease prevention, tobacco cessation and related policy changes. His greatest professional joy was found in mentoring students, a task he even continued in retirement. He excelled at improving students' writing and helping them hone their career aims.

"Our time at SPH was when we both found our calling, we found a home and figured out where we belonged," Piane said. "For Bill, community-based research was his passion, his mission."



Sharon Feldman, MPH '94, was a long-time researcher and administrator with SPH's Institute for Health Research and Policy (IHRP). She brought passion, an extraordinary sense of caring for others and dedication to helping promote public health science and social justice. Sharon was a key member of the staff of the early years of the CDC-funded Prevention Research Center and was a coordinator for the first CDC

PRC-funded network, the Tobacco Control network, which served as a model for subsequent CDC-funded networks. Sharon then served as the coordinator for the Health Policy Center and helped facilitate the research of many of IHRP's prominent researchers over the past three decades.



Celia Toles, MPH '10 with a concentration in public health informatics, first joined the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in 2014 as a health communications specialist in the Division of State and Local Readiness (DSLRL), Office of Readiness and Response. She rose to become associate director of policy and communications for the division and helped to establish the DSLRL Justice and Equity Team, which

she continued to co-lead. She contributed her talents to many CDC responses and deployments and was a member of CDC's global response team. On January 28, 2020, one week after CDC activated its COVID-19 response, Celia was one of the first CDC staff to deploy to the Los Angeles International Airport quarantine station. At that time, there were only 15 cases reported in the U.S.

"Her courage in being the first out the door is exemplary and demonstrates Celia's passion to help others," said DSLR co-worker Noelle Anderson.

More recently, Celia served as the task force communications lead supporting the Sudan Virus Disease response. This past summer, she served a detail as acting deputy director of the Office of Communications in the CDC Office of Readiness and Response.

Celia touched the lives of countless people and had a vast network of friends and supporters. She will be missed by her CDC colleagues and friends, who describe her as an exceptional mentor and advocate who helped them jump start their careers.



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