# A NEW LOOK AT MENTAL HEALTH AND AGING: Research & Programs that Support Positive Aging





College of Behavioral & Community Sciences





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## From the Dean



Julie Serovich, PhD, Dean, College of Behavioral & Community Sciences

When I blew out the candles on my birthday cake this year, I thought, "Gosh, I'm getting old." Many of you reading this may have had the same thought cross your mind as well as you celebrated another year. While many of us tend to fixate on the less-glamorous parts of aging, like the new wrinkles by our eyes or pain in our knees, it is imperative to see aging in a positive light with caring for our mental health in a central role.

Fortunately, as the size of the aging population skyrockets, mental health as a concern for older adults has gained focus in recent years, and we continue to understand

more about the mental and behavioral health of older adults. Faculty in the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences (CBCS) at the University of South Florida (USF) have been visionary in their work to restore a positive quality of life to older adults and their caretakers. In fact, the college is home to the School of Aging Studies, one of the nation's oldest and largest degree-awarding programs in gerontology.

In the pages that follow, you will read about several faculty members who have dedicated their careers to addressing critical issues in this area of research. They share a mission of improving the lives of older adults, yet their expertise spans many parts of the field. From investigating how music can provide comfort to older adults living with dementia, to developing recommendations on disaster preparedness for long-term care facilities, to creating communities that allow aging people to thrive, and designing peer coaching programs to combat loneliness and depression, our faculty continue to improve the lives of seniors. Of course, this is just some of the wonderful work that has gone on in the college.

This report also highlights several of our students and how they are serving as pioneers for future generations, our on-campus programs and centers, and organizations within our community related to aging. I am appreciative of our collaborative efforts and the support these groups provide to those in our area.

For nearly five decades, leaders affiliated with the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute have worked tirelessly to advance the mission of strengthening mental health services in Florida through research, training, and education. Dr. Kathleen Moore, FMHI executive director, continues to guide the institute's mission. Thank you, Kathy, for your leadership.

People today are likely to live longer and enjoy more independence than those in past generations. I am proud of our researchers, students, and staff who are working to make these years healthy for our aging population. As you read this report and learn more about the work CBCS and FMHI are conducting, I hope you are inspired and see that, thanks to the work of many, a future filled with age-friendly communities, educated caregivers, and accessible mental health support is in sight.



## Message from the Executive Director

The Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute (FMHI) has been a driving force in improving behavioral health services for over 47 years. FMHI and our partners have dedicated this time to tackling difficult issues involving mental health, substance use, co-occurring disorders, criminal justice, aging, and child welfare across the lifespan. Since joining forces with the College of Behavioral and Community Sciences (CBCS) in 2008, the interdisciplinary collaboration between researchers, policymakers, and community-based agencies has been continuously strengthened by working together. In the 2021-2022 FMHI Annual Report, we focus on issues related to mental health and aging, by highlighting the wide array of research, training, and policy projects conducted by our esteemed faculty along with our community partners. Also identifying key stakeholders who have served as leaders in these areas within our community.

Our population is aging, and approximately 75 million Americans will be over age 65 by 2030. Additionally, a 2012 study from the Institute on Medicine found that, approximately one in five older adults in the U.S. experience a mental illness, substance use disorder, or both. That ratio, should it still exist in 2030, equates to approximately 15 million people. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as "a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." Because mental health is essential to overall health and well-being, it must be recognized and treated in everyone, including older adults, with the same urgency as physical health. As the U.S. population of older adults continues to boom in the coming decades, there will be an increasing demand for knowledge that can be leveraged to promote quality of life and prevent disability.

Many CBCS faculty members are highly committed to evaluation and research aimed at enhancing cognitive and mental health. Within the School of Aging Studies, we have spotlighted four faculty members from both the Tampa and Sarasota-Manatee campuses. Dr. William Haley is a Distinguished University Professor awardee and has pioneered and shaped the field of family caregiving research over the past 30 years. His work is noted for being methodologically rigorous and paradigm-shifting in addressing the issues, positive effects, and coping strategies of caregivers of family members with chronic illness and disability. Dr. Victor Molinari is a professor whose major research interests include mental health outcomes in long-term care sites, serious mental illness in nursing homes, professional issues in geropsychology, and personality disorder in older adults. Dr. Lindsay Peterson is a research assistant professor as well as the director of the Long-term Care Administration and Aging Sciences Internship Program and interim director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging. Her primary research interest is long-term care policy and practice and communication concerning decision-making, disaster planning, and advance care planning for older adults. Dr. Kathy Black is a professor whose expertise encompasses the area of healthy aging, public health and aging, environmental gerontology, advance care planning, and geriatric mental health. She examines how communities can benefit by working



Kathleen Moore, PhD,
Executive Director,
Louis de la Parte
Florida Mental Health Institute

together to help their age-friendly programs grow and become more successful. Within the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy, we have spotlighted two faculty members Dr. Amber Gum, professor, and Dr. Kyaien Conner, associate professor and special assistant to the dean on diversity and inclusion. These two have worked together for the past several years and were awarded federal funding aimed at improving the mental health of seniors. Currently, they are examining the impact of a community-based intervention to reduce disparities in hospital readmissions among older African Americans and Latino/Hispanics living with chronic disease. A second project evaluates the ability of volunteer members of senior center communities to be trained to effectively deliver a brief behavioral activation intervention to improve depression.

We are also showcasing several centers and programs within USF: the Byrd Alzheimer's Center, Palliative Care Education in Assisted Living (PCEAL) Lab, STEALTH Laboratory, and the Positive Aging Lab. We will also be highlighting several connections within our community: Senior Connections Center of Hillsborough, Pinellas Area Agency on Aging, Seniors in Service, Senior Friendship Center in Sarasota, Hillsborough County Aging Services, and Florida WINGS – Stetson University Center for Aging.

Each year, CBCS and FMHI hold an annual colloquium which provides a space for community leaders, providers, local citizens, and university faculty and students to convene and hold a dialogue on pressing state and national issues. This year's colloquium, to be held in the fall of 2022, will focus on "The Challenges Facing Older Adults Mental Health, Financial Capacity, and Exploitation." Three presenters who are experts in this area will be followed by a question and answer led by Dr. William Haley:

- Dr. Peter Lichtenberg: Assessing the Domains of Financial Capacity: A Person-Centered Approach
- Rebecca Morgan, Esq.: When Bad Things Happen: Elder Abuse and Undue Influence Targeting Elders
- Dr. Victor Molinari: A Person-Centered Approach to Reducing Aggressive Behaviors in Persons with Dementia

We are also including a section in this report on educating tomorrow's leaders in aging and mental health issues. As many as one in five older adults experience mental health concerns that are not a standard part of aging — the most common of which are anxiety or mood disorders, including depression. In most cases, mental health issues respond well to treatment, but often older adults do not seek or receive the help they need. Undiagnosed and untreated mental health illnesses have serious implications for older adults and their loved ones, so it is very important to continue to focus on innovative practices and research at the local, state, and national level.

We hope you enjoy this annual report and its examples of leadership within and across our college and community. FMHI partners continue to work alongside our community partners to identify the most pressing age-related challenges and to provide training, coordination, and innovative strategies for addressing these challenges. It has been an honor and privilege to be the executive director of FMHI over the last four years. We are very excited about all the new initiatives that are on the horizon, and we hope you too are inspired by the collaborative efforts of our community!

## **Spotlight**

### **FACULTY SPOTLIGHT**

## Dr. Kathy Black

Dr. Kathy Black first felt her calling to help aging adults in 1977 while working as a young nurse in a nursing home. She also spent time caring for her grandmother and supporting her in aging with dignity. After earning master's degrees in both social work and gerontology from the University of Southern California, Dr. Black recognized both the necessity of planning for needs throughout the end of life as well as the importance of living life to the fullest.

"The older adults didn't want to focus on the negative aspects of getting older, but rather the positives," says Dr. Black.

Over the years and through her qualitative research, two concepts continually arose in relation to this: accessibility and engagement. The idea of accessibility, according to Dr. Black, must address the diverse range of abilities experienced in aging. For some people, this may be mobility considerations, such as being able to walk on surfaces with a walker, and for others, this may require adaptations for vision and hearing. She says accessible living environments, both in the home and throughout the community, best enable people to continue to grow and contribute to social, civic, and economic life.

The second concept she came across frequently was engagement. Staying engaged in matters of importance to people can be achieved in multiple ways. This includes opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities that support physical, cognitive, and social well-being. Available, affordable, and inclusive interactions can foster engagement at all ages and abilities.

Building upon her research and conversations with older adults, Dr. Black spearheaded the state's first age-friendly community in Sarasota County. Dr. Black now helps lead Florida's Age-Friendly Community Network and advises several state agencies on how to better promote healthy aging.

When asked how she would describe an age-friendly community, she says, "in simplest terms, it means creating community features that allow aging populations to thrive in community life." This includes policies, services, settings, and structures that work together in partnership to support and enable us all to age well.

Dr. Black explains that everyone is a stakeholder in an age-friendly community. This includes government, non-profit organizations, and businesses, as well as people who live in the community. She cites, for example, that the majority of people desire to age in place. Age-friendly communities can respond by providing affordable and accessible homes and services to remain at home, which can be advanced by zoning considerations, builders, home-based supports, and neighbors.

In the years since she began working on age-friendly communities and researching and advocating for ways to improve the lives of older adults, she has received several distinguished honors. Dr. Black was chosen as a Next Avenue Top 50 National Influencer in Aging, a Hartford Geriatric Faculty Scholar, and

a Fellow in the Gerontological Society of America. In addition to her role as a professor at the University of South Florida, Dr. Black serves as an advisor on aging to four state departments including the Florida Department of Elder Affairs, Department of Health, Department of Transportation, and the Florida Consensus Center. In 2020, Dr. Black was selected by the World Health Organization to launch their United Nations Decade of Healthy Ageing Leaders program.

From her early career days as a young, passionate nurse to her advocacy and service as a social worker, to becoming a professor who speaks on a national level, Dr. Black has dedicated her life's work to listening to aging adults and paving the way for them to continue to thrive.



Kathy Black, PhD
Professor, USF
School of Aging Studies

## Building Communities for ALL Ages



## **Spotlight**



**Lindsay Peterson, PhD**Research Assistant Professor,
USF School of Aging Studies

### **FACULTY SPOTLIGHT**

## **Dr. Lindsay Peterson**

As a journalist for the *Tampa Tribune*, Dr. Lindsay Peterson began conducting research on aging adults when she was assigned a column for the paper. Her assignment required her to research and write about topics that impacted the lives of older adults in the Tampa Bay area. Her column included everything from local events to information related to Alzheimer's disease, to concerns about long-term care facilities. The individuals she interviewed shared that they were living in unprecedented times, and the issues they were facing were ones that they had never imagined. Dr. Peterson explained this was because, for the first time, people were living to an age their parents and the generations prior had never achieved.

In 2012, Dr. Peterson came to the School of Aging Studies as a PhD student. She worked closely with her mentor, Dr. Kathy Hyer. Her focus shifted slightly to include not only issues affecting older adults, but also the policies surrounding long-term care and the practice of decision-making for vulnerable seniors. One area of policy that molded her primary research interest was advance care planning and preparedness of long-term care facilities to meet the needs of their patients when faced with natural disasters.

Following the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and then Hurricane Irma in 2017, researchers began looking at the policies and practices of evacuating seniors from long-term care facilities in high-disaster states. They found that older adults in residential long-term care facilities were at a high level of risk for injury or death during a natural disaster and in the immediate weeks to follow. This finding resonated with Dr. Peterson and complemented the research she was conducting on policies for long-term care facilities. In 2018, after receiving her PhD and joining the School of Aging Studies faculty, Dr. Peterson began working as a project manager on a three-year National Institute on Aging (NIA) grant under her long-time friend and mentor, Dr. Kathy Hyer. The aim of the grant was to examine the effects of hurricanes in Texas and Florida on the health and safety of residents in nursing homes and assisted living communities.

The findings of the NIA grant illuminated that when faced with a disaster, nursing homes and assisted living facilities were simply not prepared to meet the needs of their residents. Additionally,



the standard practice of evacuating all residents was challenged as not always being the least disruptive or the safest choice for all seniors. What was clear was the need for additional policy and protocols for licensed facilities to ensure the safety of senior residents.

Dr. Peterson's work on the NIA grant continued through the COVID-19 pandemic, and she has been granted an extension through 2023. While the



pandemic was not a natural disaster, it certainly caused a massive disruption to the health and safety of residents living in nursing homes and assisted living communities. Dr. Peterson quickly went to work examining the slew of new issues now facing vulnerable seniors and the policies being implemented to support and protect them. In November 2020, she was awarded a qualitative research grant titled, "Disaster Preparedness for Caregivers of Individuals with Dementia." The study examines the preparedness of caregivers during a disaster or emergency. The goal of this project is to use qualitative data to develop new, more usable informational materials and influence policy for this population.

When asked what her take away was from the past decade of research on disaster preparedness for seniors, she stated that she had two. Dr. Peterson observed that the population of people living in assisted care of some form is growing rapidly, and while assisted living centers and communities are more appealing because they offer a more "homelife environment," they are not strenuously regulated. Therefore, there may be gaps in the preparedness to meet the needs of their residents in an emergency or disaster. Secondly, she feels there is more work to be done in examining the quality of long-term care facilities overall.

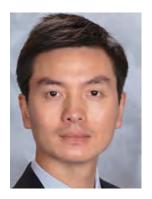
Dr. Peterson also serves as the current interim director of the Florida Policy Exchange Center on Aging. She explained that her goal as director is to demonstrate how the data collected through research on a person's own experiences can translate into actual practice and policy. She believes that we do not necessarily need new or more policies for aging adults, but we need to modify existing ones by examining current data.

"The Policy Exchange Center on Aging is working to modify existing policy, supported by research," says Dr. Peterson "Then we need to explain to the public the results of the research and how it impacts policy. We need to communicate why our research matters."

When asked about the future and what research or work she hopes to continue, she explained that she would like to continue to focus on advance care planning for aging adults, specifically those with dementia. In addition to her role as a research professor, Dr. Peterson serves as the director of the Longterm Care Administration program and the Aging Sciences Internship program at USF. Both positions have helped her create strong ties to community-based agencies of care in the Tampa Bay area. While she is years past her role as an investigative journalist, the same passion for conveying to the community what matters and what best supports the lives of seniors still motivates her and continues drive her work.

## Implementing music as an intervention





Hongdao Meng, MD, MPH, PhD Associate Professor, USF School of Aging Studies

## FACULTY SPOTLIGHT

## Dr. Hongdao Meng

r. Hongdao Meng represents the unique composition of both medicine and music, and he has capitalized on this interdisciplinary training to help others achieve positive health in mind, body, and spirit. Last year, Dr. Meng applied for two grants that were funded by the Florida Department of Health. The first grant, for which he served as principal investigator, was titled, "Visually Assisted Mindful Music Listening Intervention for Persons Living with Dementia and their Caregivers: A Pilot Study." The aim of this project was to develop and pilot test a brief mindfulness-based music listening intervention to reduce behavioral expressions among persons living with dementia improve sleep and reduce stress among family caregivers. When asked why he chose to implement music as an intervention, he stated, "music is a universal language."

As a music enthusiast himself, Dr. Meng has always been fascinated by the positive behavioral response that people have when listening to music. He explained that there was not a specific genre of music utilized in the intervention, but rather a diverse group of genres. One of the key findings from

this study was the significant reduction in agitation and angst reported by caregivers of patients with diagnosed dementia. As many studies have noted, individuals with dementia who are living in long-term care or memory care facilities can frequently experience higher levels of anxiety and confusion, which can lead to agitation. This study demonstrated that the use of music as means to mitigate the patient's agitation appeared to soothe them and provide comfort in ways unseen by other interventions. Follow-up research is planned to confirm these findings in more facilities.



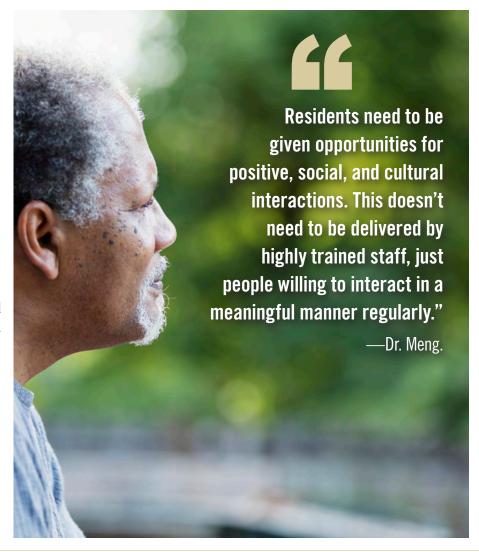
Dr. Meng served as a co-principal investigator (PI: Dobbs) on a second grant that focused on examining support given to caregivers of individuals with dementia. The goal of this project was to conduct a cluster randomized controlled trial (cRCT) of a palliative care education intervention among 225 persons with dementia. This was conducted in 12 assisted living facilities to increase appropriate hospice referral, improve pain assessment, and enhance documentation of advance care planning. Dr. Meng explained that both grants hinged on access to residents in either long-term care or assisted living facilities – both of which mandated heavy access restrictions following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, thanks to his dedicated study team, he was able to find acceptable alternative solutions and carried out both studies to completion.

In addition to his numerous grant-funded research projects, Dr. Meng serves as the director of the Positive Aging Laboratory at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa campus. This research laboratory combines behavioral science and integrative health to offer solutions and guidance on living a long and healthy life. The laboratory focuses on the testing of integrative health and social engagement interventions for middle-aged and older adults. The goal of the lab is to promote health and well-being among the populations they serve. To achieve this goal, the laboratory works to develop, translate, and integrate evidence-based non-pharmacological approaches. In recent years, the lab has become a powerhouse for producing publications and continues to be a "think tank" for graduate students.

When he first arrived at the School of Aging Studies in 2010, Dr. Meng noticed that many of the existing policies for aging adults focused on the negative aspects of aging. He wanted to make a shift toward research and policy that focused on the positive aspects of aging. He strongly believes in the benefits of positive social interactions for aging adults, especially those living in residential facilities. He feels there is an unbalanced priority placed on the physical and medical needs of residents while failing to recognize that the emotional and mental health needs of residents is equally as important.

"Residents need to be given opportunities for positive, social, and cultural interactions. This doesn't need to be delivered by highly trained staff, just people willing to interact in a meaningful manner regularly," says Dr. Meng.

One might say that Dr. Meng's approach to aging brings a novel light of optimism and that his continued focus on the positive aspects of life at a time when so many are focused on the end is a refreshing and reassuring perspective.



## **Spotlight**



William E. Haley, PhD
Professor,
USF School of Aging Studies

Dr. Bill Haley has been recognized by the American Association for the Advancement of Science as the world's leading researcher in the impact of caregiving for the families of patients with Alzheimer's disease and other chronic conditions.

### **FACULTY SPOTLIGHT**

## **Dr. William Haley**

or many people who conduct research in academia it is common to deviate from their original research interests at the start of their careers, and Dr. William "Bill" Haley is no exception. After graduating from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst with a doctoral degree in clinical psychology, he was eager to begin his career and applied to universities across the country while on internship at the University of Washington-Seattle. When his initial round of application submissions was not received with enthusiasm, he switched gears and decided to apply for postdoctoral programs. At the time, the University of Washington had two postdoctoral positions available: one in pediatrics and one in geriatrics. Unbeknownst to him, his decision to pursue gerontology would steer his life's work and over 40 years in academia.

Dr. Haley worked at a memory disorder clinic during his first job as a postdoctoral fellow. He was charged with evaluating patients to determine if they exhibited signs of cognitive decline. At this point in his career, he had little to no experience in working with older adults. Dr. Haley recalls that he rarely even saw individuals over the age of 50 during his training or education.

While his postdoctoral fellowship afforded him the opportunity to research dementia and Alzheimer's disease, which at the time was underrepresented, Dr. Haley became most fascinated with the caregivers of those individuals he was evaluating. He was captivated by their stories as he listened to their experiences, and he tried to explain the physical changes that were happening in their loved one's brain. At that time, there were no medications for Alzheimer's, and no public discussions or support groups. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) even referred to Alzheimer's as "Organic Brain Syndrome" before 1980. In addition to the minimal amount of literature on Alzheimer's, the subject of caregiving was also almost absent.

With his postdoctoral fellowship behind him and his peaked interest surrounding caregiving and its impacts on individuals very much still with him, he accepted a position at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Quickly after arriving in Birmingham, he was awarded a grant to examine the physical and mental health impacts on caregivers. Simultaneous to his grant work, he was working

one day per week in the local Veterans Affairs clinic where he witnessed the cultural differences felt by caregivers, specifically African American caregivers. Through this experience, he learned that there was far less burden or stress reported by African Americans in regard to caring for a loved one. He explained that there was a sense of understood duty, as if they always assumed they would be the one to provide care to their elders. The concept of examining caregiving through the perspective of it being a





rewarding and positive experience, rather than a burden, was a mindset that resonated with Dr. Haley, and he began to focus his research on the positive aspects of caregiving.

"Most people find care giving stressful, but manageable; they even report growing from it," says Dr. Haley.

Dr. Haley shared a personal and memorable story about a woman who was a caregiver to her husband with terminal cancer. She stated that her husband wanted desperately to attend his high school reunion but was unable to ride in the car without pain for long periods of time. With the help of her husband's nurse, as part of a randomized trial of coping skills for hospice caregivers, his wife devised a plan in which she would drive for short periods of time over the course of several days and eventually arrive at his reunion. Dr. Haley explained that this experience not only allowed her husband to continue to remain active and enjoy life, while seeing that his wishes could still be carried out, but it also gave his wife a sense of gratitude and empowerment for being able to provide this opportunity. It helped his wife as a caregiver feel purposeful, and it demonstrated that with helpful problem-solving and strategizing, people can continue to create meaningful memories far beyond where we once saw them.

Caregivers often need not only emotional support, but also practical help in solving very challenging problems. Research from Dr. Haley and others has shown that caregivers can benefit tremendously from evidence-based interventions, which he says need to be made more widely available.

Early in his career, Dr. Haley's work focused on the impacts felt by caregivers providing care to individuals with dementia and Alzheimer's, but he later applied the same critical thinking and interventions to those providing care for other illnesses, such as cancer and stroke, and others at the end-of-life. He was focused on understanding the root of caregivers' stress and what coping or adaption skills they relied upon. Much of what he has extracted from working with these varying sectors is that while most find caregiving overwhelming at times, they also find it valuable to their own well-being. Most are thankful for the time they have shared with loved ones; they report having a stronger appreciation for life and feel purposeful in a time when they could have felt powerless.

When asked about future developments within this area of research, Dr. Haley stated he would like to see a change in mindset and policy such that caregivers are recognized as a part of the healthcare system. He believes that, as a country, we should recognize and support caregivers more and provide them with the skills to help themselves and their loved ones enjoy each stage of life.

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## **Spotlight**



Kyaien Conner, PhD
Assistant Professor,
Special assistant to the dean
on diversity and inclusion
USF Mental Health, Law & Policy

Seniors coaching their peers to improve mental health and quality of life for all involved.

### **FACULTY SPOTLIGHT**

## Dr. Kyaien Conner and Dr. Amber Gum

When it comes to collaboration in research, few partnerships are more impressive than that of Dr. Kyaien Conner and Dr. Amber Gum. As a team, they have managed to secure not one, but two federal research grants. The first grant titled, "Do More, Feel Better," is a National Institutes of Health (NIH) collaborative R01 aimed at improving the mental health of seniors. The grant is a multi-state research project in which Dr. Gum is the principal investigator and Dr. Conner is the co-investigator. The collaborative project includes the University of South Florida, the University of Washington, and Weill Cornell Medicine.

The goal of the project is to assess whether seniors can be effective as coaches to improve the mental health and quality of life of their peers. These coaches are considered influencers to other seniors and are the main focus of the project. The project is recruiting seniors in the Hillsborough County area who are 60 and older to be both participants and to act as coaches. The coaches are tasked with helping their assigned peers plan appropriate physical, social, and recreational activities; aid their fellow seniors in identifying their individual needs; and then steer them towards participating in activities to meet their personal interests, such as socializing with friends, exercise, walking, gardening, and engaging in previous hobbies and additional aging services.

On the heels of a global pandemic, when seniors were reporting feeling depressed, lonely, and isolated at alarmingly high rates, this project was timed perfectly. When asked why she choose to implement a project aimed at combating loneliness and depression, Dr. Gum explained that, while depression is common for older adults, it has several negative effects in addition to mental health issues. Research has demonstrated that older adults who are depressed are more likely to experience a myriad of complications including cognitive decline, dementia, physical and functional decline, suicide, and shortened life expectancy – making a project geared toward mitigating the effects of depression highly beneficial.

Dr. Gum's previous research has shown that many older adults want to stay involved and help others, and there is an extensive body of literature documenting the benefits of volunteerism. Thus, the idea of using peers as coaches seemed like a win for both participants and volunteers and a natural



choice for delivering support. To help implement this project, Dr. Conner was an ideal fit as a co-investigator. Her recent research in training older adults to help their peers make positive behavior changes demonstrated that peer volunteers can have a significant impact.

Additionally, Dr. Gum feels that Dr. Conner is the most fitting collaborator for this project because of her expertise in training older adults to help other older adults, specifically those who are suffering with depression. Dr. Conner has served as an active collaborator with community partners on research, and her community relationships and experience are crucial for the success of the project. Dr. Conner's training and background as a licensed mental health clinician have also been very helpful in supervising the project's mental health clinicians and coaches and

in helping problem-solve challenges as they arise, such as recruitment. On a more personal level, Dr. Gum stated that she has enjoyed working with Dr. Conner because she feels that she can learn a lot from her, especially in regard to trainings. She added that she was excited to work with Dr. Conner because "she is just a fun person to work with."

In addition to the "Do More Feel Better" project, this powerful collaborative duo is also working on a Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) grant. Titled "Examination of The Evidence Based Care Transitions Intervention Enhanced with Peer Support to Reduce Racial Disparities in Hospital Readmissions and Negative Outcomes Post Hospitalization," this grant is a three-armed randomized controlled trial that aims to fill gaps in research around Critical Transitions Interventions (CTI) and their impacts on high-risk and under-studied populations, all while trialing an innovative strategy of utilizing peers to deliver support, resources, and motivation to fellow study participants.

After studying prior research and relying on her previous success with training and utilizing older adults to aid their fellow peers, Dr. Conner felt strongly about incorporating this strategy in the study. The peer educators in this program are more than just another person there to provide support. The peer educators receive training in motivational interviewing techniques which allow them to provide culturally sensitive social support and education to patients who need it after being discharged from the hospital. The training also includes teaching educators how to use their experiences to model empowerment and health promotion behaviors. Dr. Conner has been passionate about the use of peer support and believes in the power of a supportive, and in this case, trained peer.

"Having peer support, not from a doctor or nurse, but someone from the same age demographic, racial background, that 'speaks their language' both literally and figuratively, can be incredibly helpful, and builds on the strengths that already exist in marginalized communities," says Dr. Conner.

To effectively recruit volunteers for this study, Dr. Conner worked with the Senior Connection Center, which is the Area Agency on Aging for a five-county region including Hillsborough County. This organization has a long history of improving the lives of older adults. As a member of their board, Dr. Gum assisted in the arrangement for their involvement in this study. To add to their already strong mutual collegial respect for each other, when asked about collaborating on another grant, Dr. Conner

remarked that she would have no hesitation to partner with Dr. Gum in the future as they have multiple times in the past. Aside from the two grants they are working on currently, they both share similar research interests, community connections, and even mentors.

"I was really excited to have the opportunity to work with her. Dr. Gum was one of the reasons I came to USF,"says Dr. Conner

With their strong working relationship, shared passion for helping vulnerable populations within their community, and similar research interests, it is no wonder they have collaborated successfully on many occasions. There is no doubt among their colleagues that these two will have a long and impactful future, and while individually they are each remarkable, together they appear unstoppable.



Amber Gum, PhD
Professor,
USF Mental Health, Law & Policy

Peer support from someone who 'speaks their language' can be incredibly helpful.



## **Community Connections**



## **Senior Connection Center**

enior Connection Center is an Organization that serves individuals 60 and older who live in the Suncoast region by finding the answers to questions on aging. Many seniors feel that finding information on local resources can be a daunting task. There is so much information available in so many places that, for many, it becomes hard to make sense of it all. This is where the Senior Connection Center can help. The center currently assists aging adults in a fivecounty area in Florida, encompassing Hillsborough, Polk, Manatee, Highlands, and Hardee counties, by explaining the options and guiding those in need through the maze of programs and services available to them. The center's services allow seniors and caregivers to plan and make informed decisions. This non-for-profit corporation has been dedicated to helping people age at home with dignity for over 30 years. Currently, the Senior Connection Center offers an elder helpline, Medicare help, elder abuse support and prevention services, health and wellness programs, and caregiver support. The organization has a longstanding history of partnership with the School of Aging Studies and has served as a community-based partnership on several grants. Several USF faculty members sit on the Board of Directors.

### **More Information**



https://seniorconnectioncenter.org/



1-800-96-ELDER



info@sccmail.org.



## Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas, Inc.

The Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas is a private non-profit organization that has supported the senior community, individuals with disabilities, and caregivers since 1974. It serves as the Aging and Disability Resource Center and provides an initial entry point for all social services related to aging and disability. The agency has a coordinating network of local partners and providers to supply connecting resources for seniors. The mission and vision of the Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas are to provide seniors, adults with disabilities, and caregivers with the resources and services needed to maintain independence, promote healthy aging, and live an optimal quality of life. The agency is considered a trusted resource to advocate, educate, and empower this community. Services provided by the Area Agency on Aging of Pasco-Pinellas include Medicare and health insurance, food and nutrition, health and wellness, staying safe at home, caregiving, transportation, community engagement, mental health and well-being, and legal and victim assistance.

## **More Information**



https://www.agingcarefl.org/



1-800-963-5337 (helpline)



info@aaapp.org



## **Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay**

eniors in Service of Tampa Bayniors in Service of Tampa Bay was founded in 1984 and is on a mission to provide solutions to community challenges by engaging volunteers aged 55 and older. The organization connects these volunteers to meet the needs and challenges of at-risk seniors, children and families, and veterans in the community. Seniors in Service of Tampa Bay serves Pinellas and Pasco counties and engages over 900 volunteers annually in collaboration with more than 150 community partners to assist over 7,500 underserved individuals. Volunteers participate in various ways, including serving as tutors and mentors for children, senior companions, "telepals" to reduce feelings of social isolation, and health buddies to empower individuals with chronic disease. The organization strongly advocates for geriatric issues and seniors needs and tracks trends that impact aging populations.

### **More Information**



https://seniorsinservice.org/



813-932-5228



## **Senior Friendship Centers** – Sarasota

enior Friendship Centers (SFC) was founded in 1973 by Brother William Geenen, a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross. SFC quickly led the way in developing innovative, cost-effective solutions to the challenges of aging. The group's belief in "people helping people" focuses on volunteerism and has shaped the organization since inception, creating a national model for the delivery of services to older adults. SFC's mission is to build vibrant communities by advancing wellness, connection, and enrichment throughout the journey of aging. SFC embodies the core values of respect, compassion, integrity, and collaboration and has expanded its services to over four counties, including Sarasota, DeSoto, Charlotte, and Lee counties. Programs and services include senior activity centers, adult day services, caregiver support, nutrition and dining, lifelong learning, and resources for aging. Today, SFC is at the forefront in developing innovative approaches to serve older adults and to help them discover ways to connect.

## **More Information**



https://friendshipcenters.org/



941-955-2122



info@sccmail.org.



## Hillsborough County Aging Services

illsborough County Aging Services offers a wide variety of services designed to enhance the lives of adults aged 50 and over. Frequently requested services include locating a senior or activity center, dining services, transportation, emergency home assistance, Medicare enrollment, adult and senior classes, in-home care, adult day care, and senior meal services. Visit the Hillsborough County Aging Services Seniors website to find resources for older adults, apply to become a volunteer, register a senior for activities, and report elder abuse.

### More Information



https://www.hillsboroughcounty.org/ en/government/departments/aging/



1-800-962-2873 (resource helpline)



813 272-5250



AgingServicesCustomerCare@HCFL-



## Florida WINGS – Stetson University **Center for Aging**

The Center for Excellence in Elder Law at Stetson University College of Law has adopted WINGS, a national guardianship program incubated by Florida's courts and now transitioning to the state's acknowledged experts and national leaders in this area of specialization. The terms "WINGS," or Working Interdisciplinary Network of Guardianship Stakeholders, began with a grant awarded to Florida's Office of the State Courts Administrator from the American Bar Association's Commission on Law and Aging. WINGS program is supported by two chairpersons, Judge Jose Rodrigues and Melinda Coulter. The efforts of the WINGS working groups are responsible for several accomplishments including the identification of state priorities surrounding laws impacting aging populations, the creation of a program of study approved by the National Judicial College aimed at addressing issues within the judicial system that pertain to the population of focus, and the development of tools containing comprehensive information about decision-making options for aging adults and distributing them to the public. Several members of USF faculty from the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute and the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy are currently advisory members of the WINGS program.

### **More Information**



https://www.stetson.edu/law/wings/



Elderlaw@law.stetson.edu

## Campus Programs & Centers

## Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute

The USF Health Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute was established in 2002 by the state legislature as an autonomous facility dedicated to finding a cure for Alzheimer's disease and is committed to the prevention and treatment of Alzheimer's and related disorders. With highly qualified researchers, doctors, clinicians, and educators, the institute is at the forefront of Alzheimer's research and care.

The Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute is a center of excellence at USF, performing cutting edge laboratory and clinical trial-based research. The institute also provides compassionate patient care services, which include diagnostic memory evaluation and ongoing management, occupational therapy services, driver safety and assessment, individual and family counseling, and free memory screenings. Part of their mission is to deliver family caregiver support services by offering monthly support group meetings, caregiver workshops, and printed support materials. The institute also recently started a caregiver podcast. As an estimated 5.8 million Americans are at risk of being diagnosed with Alzheimer's, the institute has prepared for the overwhelming demands on families, communities, and the nation by providing public and professional education resources. The institute currently provides education and training, consultation for facilities, sponsorship opportunities, and presentations at meetings, workshops, and training programs.

Today, the Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute is a multi-disciplinary destination for discoveries in Alzheimer's care, cures, and causes. The institute is comprised of skillful researchers, advisory board members, and volunteers. The USF Health Byrd Alzheimer's Center and Research Institute is located at 4001 E. Fletcher Avenue, Tampa, FL 33613. For more information, please visit health.usf.edu/medicine/byrd.

## Palliative Care Education Assisted Living Lab

The mission of the Palliative Care Education Assisted Living (PCEAL) Lab is to implement interventions to improve quality of end-of-life care outcomes for persons who live in assisted living facilities. The goal is to educate providers of persons with life-limiting illnesses with dementia in assisted living care about how to provide palliative care and serve as an outlet for educational resources and tools for assisted living communities with the hope to provide quality palliative and end-of-life care. Through collaboration with local community hospice centers in Florida, the PCEAL Lab has been able to offer direct care nursing and other licensed staff six continuing education credits that have been approved through CE Broker. The following community hospice centers have partnered with the PCEAL Lab at USF: The Community Hospice of Northeast Florida; LifePath and Pasco Hernando Hospice of Chapters Health; Suncoast Hospice of Empath Health; and the USF Center for Hospice, Palliative and End-of-life Studies.

Dr. Debra Dobbs serves as principal investigator of PCEAL. Her research interests have surrounded palliative, hospice and end-oflife care, and palliative care education in assisted living with a specific focus on providers of persons living with dementia. Since 2010, she has led a series of pilot studies to develop a palliative care education intervention for staff in assisted living communities in collaboration with area hospice organizations in Florida, with the goal of expanding it to other states. The PCEAL research team has produced numerous publications related to hospice, palliative, end-of-life, and dementia care over the past several years. They continue to provide resources and services to PCEAL facilitators that would like to partner with the lab and offer programs to assisted living communities and USF students who are interested in gaining research experience in this field. For more information about PCEAL, please visit usf.edu/ cbcs/aging-studies/pceal\_lab/

## Sleep, Stress, and Health Lab



The Sleep, Stress, and Health (STEALTH) Lab is a research laboratory in the School of Aging Studies. The research laboratory is led by its

director, Dr. Soomi Lee, an assistant professor in the School of Aging Studies. Dr. Lee and her collaborators examine the role of sleep as the link between stress and health across adulthood.

Dr. Lee has expertise in the substantive area of work, sleep, and healthy aging. She has extensive experience in measuring sleep using an actigraphy method and assessing daily experiences using intensive micro-longitudinal designs. The research mission of the laboratory is to study the causes of poor sleep health, such as work-related stress, while examining the impacts and health consequences of poor sleep health, especially on cardiovascular and cognitive outcomes. Additionally, the lab aims to develop and test new interventions to improve sleep health in middle and late adulthood.

Dr. Lee is assisted in the lab by Dr. Claire Smith, a postdoctoral scholar. She supports STEALTH Lab grants and projects through study development, data analysis, and writing. Her content expertise lies in worker stress and health, and her methodological expertise lies in within-person designs and analyses. In addition to Dr. Smith, the lab is also supported by the contributions of four doctoral students within the School of Aging Studies. The STEALTH Lab has a long list of impressive alumni and is currently conducting research on three grant-funded research studies. Dr. Lee and her team's latest work was recently presented at the American Psychological Association Annual Conference in August 2022, and they will be presenting again in November 2022 at the Gerontological Society of America Annual Conference. For more information about the STEALTH Lab, please visit usf.edu/cbcs/agingstudies/stealthlab/

## **Positive Aging Lab**



The Positive Aging Laboratory (PAL) at USF is a place where behavioral science and integrative health meet to offer solutions to living a long and healthy life. The research laboratory is devoted

to the development and testing of integrative health and social engagement interventions to promote the health and well-being of middle-aged to older adults. The lab's mission is focused on developing, translating, and integrating evidence-based, non-pharmacological approaches from multiple disciplines to improve the physical, mental, and social health in both clinical settings and in the community.

The Positive Aging Lab is overseen by Dr. Hongdao Meng. Dr. Meng's research focuses on examining the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of complementary and integrative health interventions to improve health and functional outcomes among middle-aged and older adults in the community. He has expertise in health promotion, disease management, integrative health, research methods, and health economics. Dr. Meng's expertise and research interests blend perfectly into the mission of the lab. He is assisted by Cassidy Doyle, PAL laboratory manager. Ms. Doyle is a first-year PhD student in the School of Aging Studies. She has similar research interests that compliment Dr. Meng's work with persons living with dementia and their caregivers. She previously worked for Age-Friendly Pennsylvania.

The Positive Aging Lab has many strong partnerships with organizations at the national, state, and local level. Within the Tampa Bay area, the lab partners with several residential care facilities, the Senior Connection Center, and the Center for Caregiver Support. The lab also works collaboratively with the USF College of Public Health and the USF College of Nursing to conduct research and carry out initiatives within the community. For more information about PAL, please visit usf.edu/cbcs/aging-studies/pal/

## **Events & Happenings at FMHI**

## **FMHI Education and Training Initiatives**

Over the years, FMHI has continued to grow its role within the community of providing education and training for human service professionals. FMHI has worked closely to provide support and training to the Departments of Children and Families, Corrections, Education, Elder Affairs, and Juvenile Justice, and the Agency for Health Care Administration. Today, FMHI continues to focus on some of society's most challenging issues through its research, consultation, and training and has remained active in the community and in creating community-based partnerships. Currently, FMHI and its affiliates have been providing trainings focused on mental health first aid for youth and adults, mental health in the workplace, motivational interviewing, and substance use prevention and treatment. Below is a list of partnering organizations that FMHI has provided training to this year.

JAN 2022 Jewish Family & Children's Services (JFCS) – JFCS approached FMHI earlier this year to train two groups of their staff in mental health first aid for adults. These in-person trainings were funded through a grant that JFCS received and were held in Sarasota, Fla. The trainings were attended by various levels of JFCS staff from senior management to clerical staff.

MAY 2022 Adolescent and Children Together for Health (ACT for Health) – ACT for Health is a local Hillsborough County agency that brings together individuals and organizations to promote a holistic and coordinated approach to improving the mental health and well-being of children and adolescents. ACT for Health partnered with FMHI and the Gulf Coast North Area Health Education Center in the development of the online event "Psychological, Social, and Emotional Well-being: Are Florida's Youth Flourishing?"

MAY/JUN 2022 Manatee County Substance Abuse Coalition — FMHI partnered with the Manatee County Substance Abuse Coalition, also known as Drug Free Manatee, to present a four-part training series that addressed substance use across the lifespan. National and local experts in each age demographic presented on both academic data and applied, community-based information on the local substance use trends and treatment options.

JUN 2022 USF Center for Urban Research and Transportation (CUTR) — USF CUTR contacted FMHI to hold training on suicide awareness and prevention at their Annual Transportation Summit. The aim of this training was to help raise awareness about suicide and empower summit attendees by giving them the tools needed to help an individual in crisis and information on seeking appropriate help and resources.

**JUL 2022 Economic Club of Tampa** — After speaking with a board member for the Economic Club of Tampa, FMHI held a training on mental health and wellness. The Economic Club of Tampa held a luncheon for representatives from local businesses within the Tampa Bay area.

**AUG 2022 Florida Behavioral Health Conference 2022** – FMHI was contracted by the Hanley Foundation to present at the Florida Behavioral Health Conference, which was held in Orlando, FL. The training focused on the correlation between adverse childhood experiences and substance use in adulthood.

**AUG 2022 Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Problem Solving Courts** – FMHI was contracted to provide technical support and assistance to the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Problem Solving Courts in Hillsborough County, Fla. FMHI staff completed a six-hour mental health first aid training, which was attended by a combination of staff from juvenile court, several judges, and staff from the Office of Problem-Solving Courts.

**SEP 2022 Florida Department of Transportation** — The Florida Commission for the Transportation Disadvantaged requested a training focused on mental health and well-being in the workplace. The training was delivered at the commission's Annual Transportation Summit in Orlando, FL.

**OCT 2022 Sixth Judicial Circuit Mental Health Court** – The Sixth Judicial Circuit received a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance to create and implement a Mental Health Court in Pinellas County, FL. FMHI has been contracted to provide training and evaluation services, which consist of providing training in mental health first aid and motivational interviewing to identified court staff and administration.

## This is My Brave – a OneUSF Production



n April 2022, FMHI co-sponsored an empowering event called This is My Brave – College Edition, a OneUSF production. The mission of This is My Brave is to combat the stigma surrounding mental illness by sharing personal stories of individuals overcoming mental illness through poetry, essay, and original music, live on stage with the simple goal of saving lives through storytelling. The cast used the power of storytelling to break down the stigma surrounding mental illness, normalize conversations about mental health, and offer hope within the USF community. Powerful storytellers included USF students Christian Marquez, Aishwarya Vuppala, Bianca Romano, Emilee Carreras, Gabby Fotopoulos, Sammy Kedziora, Kellan Johnston, Ashley Accius, Kailen Bell, and Katrina Paschke. The show was produced and directed by USF Assistant Professor Kristin Kosyluk, PhD who has partnered with This is My Brave over the last serval years. The production was also supported by many CBCS faculty, staff, and students who served on the



production team, including Jennifer Tran, B. Michelle Wilks, Patty Harrison, Molly Urnek, Melissa Carlson, Amariah Novoa, Jackeline Casco, and Kathleen Moore, PhD.

## **Events & Happenings at FMHI**



## FMHI Special Reception and Awards Ceremony – Honoring Dr. David Satcher

In May 2022, FMHI hosted a Special Reception and Awards Ceremony to recognize individuals for their dedication to improving the lives of those with mental illness and addictive disorders through research, training, and education.

This event honored former Surgeon General David Satcher, MD, PhD who received the Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Humanitarian Service Award. Dr. Satcher served as the 16th surgeon general of the United States (1998-2002) and the 10th assistant secretary for health in the Department of Health and Human Services (1998-2001). Before the ceremony, Dr. Satcher met with CBCS faculty and doctoral students to discuss disparities in health.

The Community Leadership Award was presented to Jack Espinosa, Jr., JD for his collaboration with FMHI in the problem solving courts. Espinosa was elected to the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit Court in Hillsborough County Florida in 1996 and re-elected in 2008 and 2014.

The Outstanding Behavioral Health Research Faculty Award was presented to Kristin Kosyluk, PhD, assistant professor in the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy. Dr. Kosyluk's research focuses on promoting recovery among people with mental illness, with an emphasis on understanding and addressing stigma as a barrier to recovery.

The Inaugural Bob Friedman Endowed Scholarship was awarded to Sarah Sheffield, MA, a PhD candidate in the Behavioral & Community Sciences program, mental health professional, and peer mentor for the Institute for Translational Research Education in Adolescent Drug Abuse.

Drs. David Shern and Mary Evans were also recognized for their planned gift to FMHI.



## **Summer Research Institute at FMHI**

FMHI is dedicated to research and education related to substance use and co-occurring disorders. FMHI invites undergraduate students to apply for a highly selective Summer Research Institute (SRI) that is funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. SRI@FMHI is designed for students interested in building their research skills within the context of substance use and co-occurring disorders to help them prepare for a senior thesis and/or graduate school.

In early August, SRI@FMHI Scholar Research Day 2022 showcased and celebrated the work of this year's cohort of undergraduate researchers. Scholar Research Day marked the end of 11 weeks of intense in-person instruction in which each scholar was matched with a faculty mentor with whom to conduct their research study. Students also participated in a variety of activities, including community field experiences, research seminars, and a workshop series, coordinated by the institutes core faculty, Dr. Kathleen Moore and Dr. Khary Rigg.



SRI Scholar Eli Zemach with mentor Linda Callejas, PhD



SRI Scholar Destin Rothe, with mentors from the Hillsborough County Anti-Drug Alliance (HCADA)



SRI Scholar Courtney Chase with Mentors George Burruss, PhD and Chae Jaynes, PhD

## **Events & Happenings at FMHI**



## Florida Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse Meeting

The Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse held its first in-person, two-day, meeting at USF in the Marshall Student Center. Dr. Kathleen Moore, a research professor in the Department of Mental Health Law and Policy and executive director of FMHI, is a member of the commission.

As required by 394.9086, F.S., the Commission on Mental Health and Substance Abuse was established in 2021 by the Florida Legislature to examine the current methods of providing mental health and substance abuse services in the state. The commission also works to improve the effectiveness of current practices, procedures, programs, and initiatives in providing such services, identify any barriers or deficiencies in the delivery of such services, and recommend changes to existing laws, rules, and policies necessary to implement the group's recommendations.

During the first day, key stakeholders in the state of Florida spoke on behavioral health issues, such as community behavioral health systems of care, forensic diversion, behavioral health responses within emergency services and law enforcement, legal aspects of data sharing, and supportive employment and housing. During the second day, the four subcommittees — Data Analysis, Business Operations, Criminal Justice, and Financial Subcommittees — presented on their individual report progress and proposed recommendations.

Public comment was also held at the end of each session, which allowed community members to share their experiences and thank the commission for their continued efforts focused on improving the behavioral health system.

## FMHI 2022 Annual Fall Colloquium

This year's annual Fall Colloquium will focus on the challenges facing older adults. The event will bring together subject matter experts to discuss the domains of financial capacity with aging, elder abuse and undue influence targeting elders, reducing aggressive behaviors in persons with dementia, and mental health and aging. Following the presentations, a Q&A session will be led by USF faculty and community partners. The event will take place in-person at the Embassy Suites by Hilton Tampa USF on Friday, Oct. 21.



## The Challenges Facing Older Adults

## **Mental Health, Financial Capacity, and Exploitation**

Friday, October 21, 2022

9:30 AM - 12:00 PM

## **Featured Presentations**

### Assessing the Domains of Financial Capacity: A Person-Centered Approach

Peter Lichtenberg, PhD, ABPP Distinguished Service Professor of Psychology, Director, Institute of Gerontology and Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute, Wayne State University

### When Bad Things Happen: Elder Abuse & Undue Influence Targeting Elders

Rebecca Morgan, Esq Boston Asset Management Chair in Elder Law, Stetson University

### A Person-Centered Approach to Reducing Aggressive Behaviors in Persons with Dementia

Victor Molinari, PhD, ABPP Professor, USF School of Aging Studies

Q&A

William Haley, PhD Distinguished University Professor, USF School of Aging Studies



SPONSORED BY:

Drs. Carl and Cynthia Hawkins

USF College of Behavioral & Community Sciences

Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute

## **Educating Tomorrow's Leaders**



The main objective of her dissertation is to gain a better understanding of the synergistic effects of sleep and pain among healthcare workers.

## **Christina Mu**

Christina Mu is a fourth-year doctoral candidate in the School of Aging Studies at USF. She was recently awarded the National Institutes of Health (NIH)/National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, Ruth L. Kirschstein National Research Service Award – Predoctoral Fellowship to Promote Diversity in Health-Related Research (F31-Diversity). Her project, titled "Protecting Healthcare Workers' Health and Well-being: The Joint Effects of Sleep and Pain, and Moderations by Work Characteristics," is a collaborative effort with experts in the field from USF. This includes Dr. Soomi Lee, who also serves as her dissertation chair, Dr. Brent Small, and Dr. Ross Andel. She will also be collaborating with Dr. Christina McCrae from the University of Missouri-Columbia and Dr. Katie Stone from the University of California San Francisco.

Christina is hard at work on her dissertation, which she anticipates defending in the spring of 2024. She explained that the main objective of her dissertation is to gain a better understanding of the synergistic effects of sleep and pain among healthcare workers, who are typically at a greater risk of poor sleep and pain concerns compared to that of the general population. Earlier this year, while working on her doctoral studies, she assisted Dr. Soomi Lee on her grant which was funded by the NIH and the National Institute on Aging (NIA). The grant focused on sleep health profiles in middleaged adults and its relationship with health outcomes, such as cardiovascular disease and mortality. Additionally, Christina is working on a few other projects related to sleep, pain, and various health outcomes amongst middle-aged and older adults. For instance, she's currently involved in a project that focuses on the relationship between back pain and mental health. In addition to her work on various research projects and completing work on her dissertation, she is also one of the lab managers at the Sleep, Stress, and Health (STEALTH) Lab on USF's campus. She works closely mentoring seven undergraduate researchers who are conducting research on projects with a wide range of interests pertaining to sleep and health.

When looking toward the future, Christina is hopeful that she can pursue a career in academia after graduation. Her ultimate goal is to produce meaningful research while also inspiring young researchers, particularly those coming from untraditional or challenging backgrounds (first-generation students, low-income backgrounds, etc.). Initially, after her doctoral work concludes, she plans to apply for

postdoctoral research positions that will allow her the opportunity to nurture her interest in sleep and pain, while preparing her for a career in academia.

Christina feels that her program of study has helped her prepare for a career in aging studies, and she credits that to the support and encouragement she has received from program faculty. In particular, she is grateful for the guidance and instruction she has received from Dr. Brent Small, who has helped her immensely with her own grant writing, and Dr. Bill Haley, for everything he has taught her about ethical research and giving her the confidence to be an independent researcher. Lastly, she is thankful for the guidance and support she received from her academic mentor, Dr. Soomi Lee.

"Dr. Soomi Lee allows me the room to make mistakes, and learn from them, which is a hallmark of a strong mentor," says Christina. ■



## Manninkattil Sridevi (Sri) Unni

The program of study for students in the Master of Science in Applied Aging Sciences has a particular focus on applied gerontology. The students are encouraged to apply research on aging to both their coursework and in their clinical experiences. Manninkattil Sridevi Unni is a student in the Applied Aging Sciences program and is both excelling at conducting research and achieving impressive clinical experiences. Sri is currently completing an internship with the Department of Elder Affairs. Her internship project focuses on developing a comparison model using pilot data being procured as a part of the Navigating Aging Needs program in Florida.



Recently, Sri completed a project in USF's Department of Clinical Psychology. While conducting this project, she was able to learn standard practices involved in administering neuropsychological testing, which included the assessment of the mental health of patients who have suffered a traumatic brain injury. She feels fortunate to have been a part of this project and for the experiences it offered her.

Conducting research out in the field is not a new practice for Sri. She began her research career at the Institute of Genomics and Integrative Biology located in India. The research that she conducted at the institute helped pave the way for her to conduct independent research at Washington State University (WSU). While working at WSU under the supervision of Dr. Maureen Schmitter-Edgecombe, she was able to identify the genetic and clinical biomarkers associated with cognitive ability in older adults. Sri has also conducted research on the use of assisted devices with individuals that have cognitive

impairments. These experiences afforded her the ability to see firsthand how technology-based rehabilitation intervention can be beneficial in aiding aging adults. After working with aging adults, Sri wants to continue to learn more about evidence-based research for this population and how to apply it to real-world scenarios.

Sri feels that with the growing demand for aging adult care services, it is essential to have an in-depth understanding of the issues faced by this population. However, in her search for the right program, she found that very few universities offer courses specialized in aging science. For this reason, she feels fortunate to have found the School of Aging Studies at USF.



## **Educating Tomorrow's Leaders**



## **Charity Lewis**

In 2021, Charity Lewis earned her master's degree in gerontology from the School of Aging Studies and enrolled in the PhD program thereafter. She credits the support she received from faculty and staff while completing the master's program for inspiring her to continue for a doctoral degree.

"The department exudes kindness and warmth," says Charity. "Faculty and students are willing to help one another; it is a very pleasant and nourishing environment."

Currently, Charity is working on a collaborative project funded by the USF Health Judy Genshaft Women's Health Seed Grant. She and her colleagues have implemented a study to identify knowledge gaps regarding hearing loss and hearing healthcare among Black women. During her previous role at USF Health in the Audiology section of the Division of Otology, she noticed racial disparities in her patients who decided to treat their hearing loss with the use of hearing aids and found that current literature confirms her observations that aging Black adults were less likely to own hearing aids.

As Charity explored grants that would allow her to continue to research this concept, she eventually received grant funding for a project titled, "Hearing Health Awareness among Black Women: A Multimethod Analysis." The study applies the Health Belief Model to assess and understand factors that influence access to and utilization of hearing health services among Black women. Charity explained that hearing loss is a silent epidemic because it is the leading cause of morbidity and lost productivity in the world. She further explained that when left untreated, hearing loss is associated with many adverse health outcomes for older adults including depression, isolation, brain fatigue, and cognitive decline. The aim of her study is to identify potential barriers to receiving hearing healthcare for members of the Black community. Her main goal is being able to use her findings to implement preventions tailored specifically for the Black community and to produce culturally competent patient education materials.



In addition to being a mother to two young girls and the wife of a Tampa police officer, this first-year doctoral student is juggling a full course load, managing a grant-funded project, and is a teaching assistant for a Psychology of Aging course, taught by Dr. Bill Haley. Charity states that one of the most rewarding parts of being a teaching assistant is the interactions she has with her students. She is also thankful for the opportunity to teach beside Dr. Haley, whose work she has admired for a long time.

Charity understands that graduation is a long way down the road, but she is looking forward to the day when she can create effective ways to positively change the lives of aging adults and mentor students in the same way she was mentored at USF.

## **Carlyn Vogel**

Carlyn Vogel is set to defend her dissertation later this month in the School of Aging Studies. Her dissertation, for which Dr. Debra Dobbs serves as chair, is a mixed methods approach that examines the impacts of COVID-19 on varying aspects of the workforce at assisted living facilities and understanding the perception of administrative leaders at each of the participating facilities.

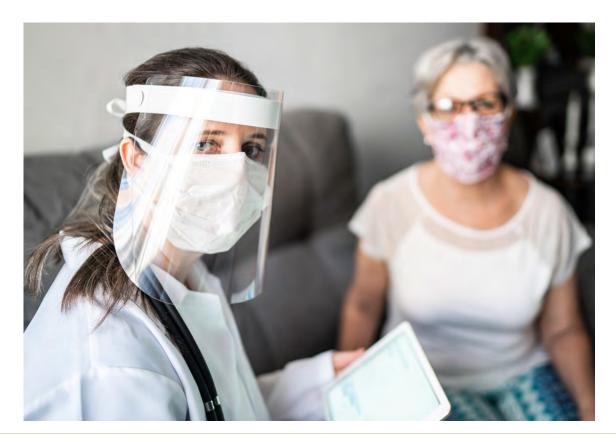
During her time as a doctoral student, Carlyn has served in many positions at USF. This includes roles as a graduate assistant in the School of Aging Studies, a teaching assistant for the Psychology of Aging course, and an instructor for the Life Cycle course and several sections of the Death and Dying course. In addition to her teaching experiences, she was a program manager on a grant led by Dr. Dobbs as the principal investigator. The grant was awarded by the Department of Health Education and Ethel Moore Alzheimer's Disease Research Program and entitled "Palliative Care Education in Assisted Living for Care Providers of Residents with Dementia Florida." The project was a two-year cluster randomized trial among 12 assisted living facilities with 225 resident participants. The aim was to examine the quality-of-care outcomes for: 1) appropriate hospice referral and use, 2) increased assessment of pain, and 3) increased documentation of advance care planning.

After graduation, Carlyn is interested in both academic and industry positions. She feels that her interdisciplinary approach to her studies and field experiences within the Aging Studies program has prepared her for a variety of career opportunities.

"As someone who is interested in both academic and industry positions, I am grateful for the training and experience I have gained that will fuel my success in both career paths," says Carlyn.



Examining the impacts of COVID-19 on varying aspects of the workforce at assisted living facilities



## **Thank You**

## A Special Thanks to our 2021-2022 Donors

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