

Population Health Center Annual Report 2020-2021

George Mason University College of Health and Human Services



Dear friends, colleagues, and partners,

This October, we marked the second anniversary of the College's [Population Health Center](#) (PHC). You may recall, the PHC's official opening was on October 18, 2019, with Virginia Secretary of Health and Human Resources Daniel Carey giving keynote remarks for the 236 registered participants. Despite the marked interruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, the PHC has been able to deliver upon its threefold mission of interprofessional clinical care, research of consequence, and professional development. A few of this past year's highlights for each component of the Center's mission follow.



With regard to clinical care, the PHC has cared for patients and communities in Northern Virginia and beyond with careful attention to social determinants of health. Faculty and students have provided coordinated care for chronic disease management for 800 patients during the COVID-19 pandemic. These patients were seen through Mason and Partners Clinics using the Center's telehealth infrastructure, which was made possible by the O'Shaughnessy Hurst Memorial Foundation. Telehealth visits have included preventive and chronic disease management, medication checks, substance misuse management, and addressing

the social determinants of health such as food and housing security. Supplemented by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture to support telehealth and led by Dr. Rebecca Sutter, the PHC will continue to provide telehealth services to rural low-income residents throughout Virginia and West Virginia in the coming year.

The PHC delivered upon its vision to be an experiential learning environment where students provide clinical care for vulnerable populations, design and implement research of consequence, and engage with professional development initiatives.

During the past few months, nursing faculty have partnered with clinical psychology faculty from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences to design behavioral health services. Dr. Melanie Yousefi, from the School of Nursing, is leading the team that will provide community-based behavioral health services in the PHC. Psychiatric Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) faculty and students will conduct medication visits in support of counseling services, with payments provided on a sliding scale.

With regard to the design and implementation of research of consequence, the PHC pivoted its research support to a virtual environment early in the COVID-19 pandemic, returning to full onsite support in June 2020. The Center was able to roll out web-based consents for study participants and online data collection and management, including biospecimens. There were notable accomplishments.

Currently, the PHC provides infrastructure support for two prospective cohort studies that are underway:

- [Mason: Health Starts Here](#) Student Cohort Study (funded by grants 215030 and 223707 from the Institute for Biohealth Innovation) is designed to answer questions about the health status of young adults aged 18 to 24 years who are enrolled as students at Mason. The study was designed in recognition of the importance of establishing healthy behaviors and social mobility for young adults, while empowering them to understand their health status. The study recruited 350 first-year Mason undergraduate study participants in 2019 and 169 participants in 2020, with enrollment currently open for 2021. Participants undergo a physical examination, complete diet and lifestyle questionnaires, and provide blood, urine, and saliva biospecimens for future biomarker and discovery research. Health information is reported back to participants, empowering them to adopt and maintain healthy lifestyles with the overarching goal of ensuring health across their lifespan. Drs. Larry Cheskin and Alison Cuellar are co-principal investigators for this transdisciplinary collaborative research, along with colleagues from other colleges at Mason. Follow-on studies are being planned as the Cohort enters its third year. The [baseline study design paper](#) has been published, and other papers are in preparation or under review.
- The [Environmental Influences on Child Health Outcomes](#) (ECHO) Study aims to understand the impact of environmental exposures on children's health and development. Mason is a participating site for the National Institutes of Health's multisite, seven-year funded study (5UH3OD023337-06) under a contract with the Mount Sinai Icahn School of Medicine. While the pandemic presented challenges, it simultaneously positioned the team to include COVID-19 as an exposure in working to understand its impact

on children's health. Much work has been conducted with the cohort whose participation in many ways moved to the home for data and biospecimen collection during the pandemic. To date, 1,351 children and families from Northern Virginia have been enrolled, and they are being seen in the PHC for clinical examinations. Notable findings to date include identifying [strong geographical differences in children's body mass indices](#), and an overall child obesity rate of 35%. Dr. Kathi Huddleston serves as principal investigator with Drs. Rosemary Higgins and Michael Bloom as co-investigators.



With the safe return to campus effective August 1, 2021, other research initiatives are planned for the PHC.

With regard to training and professional development, the PHC has as its third goal a prepared (public) health workforce. As such, the PHC provides interprofessional experiential learning opportunities for students working with physicians, nurses, social workers, nutritionists, and health informaticians. In addition, the PHC provides professional development and training opportunities for the existing workforce in support of lifelong learning. Access to professional development is a key feature of the PHC's workforce development services by offering web-based professional learning and

training opportunities, and often at little to no cost. Below are some examples of services offered during the past year by targeted audience.



For health professionals, the PHC offered:

- 9 professional development events for 763 regional health professionals, all of whom were awarded more than 1,000 continuing education credits at no charge.
- 20 [Screening, Brief Intervention, Referral to Treatment](#) (SBIRT) workshops on micro-skills, motivational interviewing, and managing during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Development of telehealth training modules and the coordination of telemental health training opportunities for students and the regional health workforce.
- Seminar support for community groups (e.g., ImmunizeVA, Community Healthcare Coalition of Greater Prince William, Prevention Alliance, and Trauma Informed Care Network) while helping other groups (e.g., Virginia SBIRT, Community Resilience for COVID-19) to pivot from in-person training to an online learning platform for their audiences.

For foundations, the PHC supported:

- The Claude Moore Health Scholars program, which aims to build an online resource library

to support and advance high school health certificate programs throughout Virginia. Training was provided to eight Claude Moore grantees, which included more than 2,300 students. Health certificates prepare high school graduates for entry-level jobs in health care including eventual pathways to professional health careers.

For Mason, the PHC supported:

- The [Dean's Seminar](#) series that focused on health equity, which is a tenet of public health.
- Mason's Early Identification Program (EIP) to educate students about health careers to help ensure a workforce pipeline.

Also of note is that the PHC is home to [Northern Virginia's Area Health Education Center](#) (NVAHEC) whose goal is to improve health care access and quality in Northern Virginia. In addition to the traditional workshop activities noted above, NVAHEC has overseen the training requirements for all COVID-19 volunteers and Mason employees who served as vaccinators at mass vaccination sites in Fairfax and Prince William counties. More than 100,000 vaccinations were provided through August 2021 by Mason employees and students in Northern Virginia, helping to keep our communities strong and healthy. Our nursing faculty and students provided much of the workforce for mass vaccination clinics. Other roles provided by NVAHEC included:

- Partnering with the Northern Virginia Coalition for Refugee Wellness to plan a fall forum attracting 62 attendees, partnering with Inova iThrive to offer a Health Care Disparities Conference for 320 attendees, and sponsoring continuing education credits and providing Cultural Competency Training to the Arlington Free Clinic.
- Assisting Virginia's Department of Health by coordinating a skills check site for their Medical

Research Corp volunteers, who were vaccinating at other locations. NVAHEC also coordinated training for medical and non-medical volunteers at COVID-19 vaccination clinics through the Mason and Partners Clinics and at the University's mass vaccination clinics.

- Developing an agreement with Princeton Review to provide test prep materials for college and professional entrance examinations (SAT/ACT, MCAT, GRE, DAT) with a marked reduction in costs for aspiring students.
- Coordinating the implementation of the Department of Social Work's ECHO project and arranging continuing education credits. Specifically, this is a multisite program, comprising 9,000 nursing homes in 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico and an interdisciplinary effort by the National Nursing Home COVID-19 Action Network to engage cohorts of nursing home staff in a virtual learning community. The staff receive mentoring, technical assistance, and critical peer support. This grant was funded by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and the Institute for Healthcare Improvement (funded by grant #75Q80120C00003).

The COVID-19 pandemic caused many disruptions to "normal operations" at the University – including all courses moving online and the cancellation of all in-person events through August 2021. Despite these challenges, the PHC delivered upon its vision to be an experiential learning environment where students provide clinical care for vulnerable populations, design and implement research of consequence, and engage with professional development initiatives to ensure a well-prepared health workforce. Moreover, students learned these skills as applied to either a virtual or in-person environment. Working side by side with faculty members, we remain committed to preparing career-ready graduates who will advance

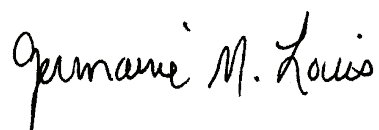
the public's health through research discoveries, integrated care, and community connectedness.

**Thank you to our donors, faculty,
and students who work to deliver
and promote the public's health.
Here's to another great year in the
Population Health Center.**

In the coming year, the PHC remains a resource for faculty, students, and our community. We will continue to offer clinical training, research, and professional development opportunities, including those related to the pandemic. Drs. Rosemary Higgins and Caroline Sutter served as co-directors for the PHC, and are available to help faculty and our community partners advance our mission. The PHC is a valuable resource with endless opportunities for our College's faculty and students, and we welcome bold and creative thinking so that we can continue to deliver innovations for the public's health.

Thank you to our faculty and staff, who have helped to create this learning environment. As a result, the College is poised to promote and deliver care while advancing discoveries through research of consequence. We look forward to our continued work with community partners in making health visible.

Thank you to our donors, faculty, and students who work to deliver and promote the public's health. Here's to another great year in the Population Health Center.



Germaine M. Louis
Professor and Dean
College of Health and Human Services