



## INTEGRATED HEALTH SCHOLARS PROGRAM IMPROVES ACCESS TO CARE IN UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES

For many people living in Kansas' vast rural areas getting the medical and behavioral health care services they need is a challenge. One barrier to accessing services is the shortage of health care professionals, including social workers, serving in their communities. The University of Kansas Integrated Health Scholars Program (IHSP) at the School of Social Welfare was funded to address this problem.

The goal of the IHSP is to expand the number of social work professionals working in underserved communities in Kansas, boosting patients' access to care and infusing the communities with social workers who are trained to support clients in a variety of settings, from federally qualified health centers to mental health clinics, to school systems, and to substance use treatment centers.



Michelle Levy  
Principle Investigator



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Sponsor: U.S. Department of Health &  
Human Services' Health Resources &  
Services Administration





## A WIN-WIN FOR STUDENTS AND COMMUNITIES

IHSP is one of those win-win programs that benefits everyone involved, says Michelle Levy, research project director for the School of Social Welfare. First, the students pursuing their master's in social welfare gain invaluable experience serving with a diverse team of health care professionals in a variety of practicum settings. Plus, they receive a \$10,000 scholarship, assistance that can mean all the difference for students who may be struggling to pay for their graduate education. Second, medically underserved communities in Kansas benefit from an influx of talented behavioral health professionals. Students in the IHSP must commit to working in these areas upon graduation.

IHSP is one of those programs that is easy to love, says Jason Matejkowski, Ph.D., associate professor and associate dean for Academic Programs at the School of Social Welfare. Together, he and Levy oversee the program, which is funded through a grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Since its launch in 2014, 187 master's level clinical social work students have completed the IHSP. In 2019 and 2020, 87.5 percent of IHSP graduates were working in medically underserved communities, far exceeding the program goal of 50 percent.

"Agencies are eager for a trained workforce, and they need graduates coming into the field," says Levy. "With these almost 200 students we have offered scholarships to, if you think of each one of them, and the number of clients they have, it's a large impact across the state."

These graduates are also helping to add diversity to the workforce in the areas where they serve. "A few years ago, we had a number of Scholars in Garden City who were bilingual," Levy explains. "It gave me goosebumps to think about what an impact that was going to have on that community, with this many new professionals being able to provide services in Spanish."

## ADDRESSING A LACK OF ACCESS TO CARE

The IHSP rose out of a growing understanding in Kansas and across the country that where you live can have a profound impact on your health, a concept known as the social determinants of health. In underserved areas in Kansas, a lack of access to health care is negatively impacting people's health. "Without accessible services and professionals, you are not getting the care you need, and then your health is negatively impacted," explains Matejkowski.

The role of the social worker in an integrated healthcare setting is to work with the medical team and patients to identify patient needs and develop plans for seeing that they are met. "When a nurse or physician makes a referral to an outside agency, patients may not follow-through for myriad reasons," says Levy. "Having the social worker right there as part of the team to address those needs immediately, and even help to identify the needs, is invaluable."

Matejkowski adds, "That's what a lot of social workers do in this setting. It's not just therapy and behavioral health treatment, it's working with clients to figure out how to stabilize their life in a way that puts them in a position to be able to access care and supportive services more regularly. Social workers help problem solve and address those needs in a way that is person-centered and accessible."

## STUDENTS LEARN INVALUABLE SKILLS

The year-long program includes monthly training that takes a deeper dive into the knowledge and skills students will need in an integrated healthcare setting. Several of the trainings are interprofessional, says Levy, allowing the Scholars to work with nursing or pharmacy students.

"Our students have an opportunity to experience being a part of an interprofessional team and working on a case together, practicing their skills and learning from each other what each profession is bringing to the team," she explains.

The scholars are also required to do a capstone project that features innovative work they have done during their field practicum. "It can be developing a new type of intervention or evaluating a program," Matejkowski says. "It's a valuable product both for the agency and for the students. It's a learning experience that bolsters leadership and advocacy skills, and increases their ability to get a job following graduation."

The current IHSP grant concludes in September 2021, but Levy and Matejkowski have submitted a new grant with HRSA to fund another group of scholars, this time with a new focus on innovative ways to provide telebehavioral health care, sparked by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"This program is a huge benefit to Kansas," Matejkowski concludes. "We are providing scholars who are trained in this and other evidence-based models, and who are willing and committed to working in underserved communities."

**112 (\$1.12M)**  
MSW students will each receive a \$10,000 scholarship over four years through the HRSA Integrated Health Scholars Grant





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