

LEADERSHIP, SCHOLARSHIP, AND PARTNERSHIPS ARE CORNERSTONES OF THE MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH PROGRAM



Guatemalan children look on at a village festival.

The Maternal and Child Health Program (MCHP) in the School of Public Health's Community Health Sciences Division, first funded in 1983, is one of twelve programs in schools of public health supported by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau of the Health Resources and Services Administration. The mission of the MCHP is "to be a maternal and child health center of excellence that builds public health capacity through science-based approaches that strengthen individuals, families, communities, and health service agencies." The overall program goal is to improve the health of mothers, children, and families by preparing leaders to tackle the complex problems affecting these groups. Program emphasis is on leadership, scholarship, and partnerships with public and private agencies serving the MCH population as well as with the communities in which MCH problems are most persistent and pervasive.

A multidisciplinary program faculty offers the MPH and doctoral degrees in a multicultural environment to students who are primarily from DHHS Regions V and VII. MCH faculty and students engage in a range of initiatives designed to enhance the development of relationships and the exchange of resources between academia and the wider community. These include collaborative research activities, field-based learning in courses and practica, provision of continuing education offerings, technical assistance and consultation, and work with state and local health, welfare, and education agencies, advocacy groups, and community-based health and social service organizations.

According to MCHP director Naomi Morris, MD, MPH, "The MCHP approach forms a synergistic triangle in which community service, research, and education enrich each other reciprocally to the benefit of community members, faculty, and students here at the School of Public Health." Some examples of MCHP initiatives follow.

Recent MPH graduate Nicole Stoller, working with the Oak Park Department of Public Health, developed and tested a "tool kit" for school staff and students, parent organizations, and health departments to use in assessing their schools' food and physical activity environments. The kit has sections to evaluate various environmental elements, such as school meals' availability and content, vending machines, and availability and intensity of physical education, among others. Along with the assessment tool, the kit includes a resource guide and instructions on developing a community action and evaluation plan. Availability of a tool kit such as this could provide an impetus for community change around the issues of childhood overweight and obesity.

MPH student and nurse-midwife Barbara Recker, CNM, MSN, recently completed a practicum placement with the Chicago Health Connection (CHC), a community-based organization that provides training, nurturing, and mentoring of community women to become doulas or birth companions and breastfeeding peer counselors. The trained doulas and peer counselors utilize their valuable expertise to support pregnant teens

and young mothers in their own communities. Recker was able to make use of both her professional skills and more recently acquired knowledge from the School of Public Health to assist the CHC with an evaluation of their doula program and the design of a centralized data collection system.

When asked about Recker's contribution, CHC executive director Rachel Abramson, RN, MSN, said, "We feel very fortunate to have had Barbara Recker working with us as a public health intern during this past term. She leaves us with a valuable, indeed a critical product for our work this year: a draft data collection system for an emerging national network of community-based doula programs. Integrating Barbara into our team was a delight. I hope we provided her with an interesting context for using her existing skills and learning new ones. For the Chicago Health Connection, this internship was a very positive experience."

While all MCH students complete a practicum placement, MCH faculty members are also increasing the use of fieldwork as a component in their courses. For example, the twenty-one students in Dr. Michele Kelley's spring 2003 Community Assessment in Public Health course spent time in the Puerto Rican Humboldt Park community as a "behavioral setting," interacting with community members and leaders. The students patronized local businesses, interviewed leaders and political representatives, learned about local "indigenous" knowledge, and observed this wisdom applied in culturally tailored programs developed by community members in response to their own health issues.

Because of this exposure to and involvement with the community, the students will be better prepared to work on real-world health issues in the future and to partner with communities, recognizing their strengths as well as their critical health concerns. Jose Lopez, educator, activist, and executive director of the Puerto

Rican Cultural Center, emphasizes the importance of "the dialogic process between the community and the academy" and how respect for this process must be instilled in future public health scientists and practitioners by "engaging them at a formative stage in their careers" through field-based learning.

Faculty members of the MCH Program recognize community partners as co-creators of knowledge for improving public health practice. Community wisdom, coupled with the power of science, can be directed to solve persistent community health problems and reduce disparities in health status. At a recent symposium hosted by the Midwestern Psychological Association on "Community Action, Development, and Social Capital: A Healthy Community Perspective," community members from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center working with Kelley disseminated information about their social capital, capacity and history, and responses to health issues.

The Maternal and Child Health Bureau funds four projects in Chicago under the Healthy Start Initiative with the goal of reducing rates of infant mortality, low birthweight, and premature birth. As local evaluators, Dr. Michele Issel, for the Greater Englewood Healthy Start, and Dr. Myrtis Sullivan, for the South Side Healthy Start, direct the local project evaluation or serve on the local evaluation team and work with Healthy Start project directors to assure that the projects meet both the criteria established by the bureau and the needs of the people they serve.

Noel Chávez, PhD, RD, LD, interim director of the Community Health Sciences Division, works with the Colores de la Tierra (Colors of the Earth) community gardening project. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Community Food Projects, Centro San Bonifacio, and ECOVIDA, Association House of Chicago and the UIC SPH are collaborating to improve family and community food availability and

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quality through education and training in ecology, urban gardening, vermiculture, aquaculture, and microentrepreneurial techniques for low-income Latinos living in the West Town and Humboldt Park community areas of Chicago. Chávez works with development of the program’s nutrition content as well as with its evaluation.

Faculty member Nadine Peacock, PhD, MPH, recently returned from Monteverde, Costa Rica where she was one of four UIC faculty members teaching community-based participatory health research methods to students enrolled in a six-week program, Field Methods for Community Health, sponsored by the UIC School of Public Health. Students in the course worked with community partners, learning how to assess community issues and develop practical solutions. Peacock is currently conducting research aimed at improving the understanding of the psychological and behavioral components of pregnancy intention, in order to direct interventions more effectively to those most at risk for adverse outcomes of unintended pregnancies.

Research assistant professor Joan Kennelly, PhD, MPH, RN, serves as a consultant with the Chicago Department of Public Health (CDPH). In the past three years, she has provided leadership on several CDPH-initiated collaborative projects working closely with community and state partners. Kennelly was instrumental in conducting a collaborative, city-wide strategic planning process to create an integrated system of services for women, children, and families in Chicago. The process identified key issues and culminated in the development of a detailed strategic plan. Portions of the plan are currently being implemented with new funding from the DHHS Health Resources and Services Administration’s Community Access Program. Kennelly also works with CDPH leadership and staff on another community project to establish priorities and mobilize prevention efforts around fetal and infant mortality. Kennelly believes that community-driven, multi-disciplinary partnerships and collaborations are essential for effective public health practice.

Reflecting upon her work with CDPH, she says, “Collaborative partnerships are very energizing. They

also have great potential for generating knowledge and moving public health science and practice forward for the benefit of the whole population.”

The MCHP offers a multilevel continuing education program to address the diverse needs of MCH professionals in state and local health departments, human service and education agencies, not-for-profit advocacy organizations, and community-based health and social service organizations. This past April, the MCH Program hosted the second conference in a three-year series devoted to the translation of research into MCH public health practice. The theme of this year’s conference was “Eliminating Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities.” A new continuing education offering, Successful Development and Management of a Public Health Program, was piloted this spring and summer under the direction of Kris Gupta, DrPH, to offer additional public health leadership and management skills to both community partners and professional students.

The unique approach the Maternal and Child Health Program takes to fostering leadership, scholarship, and partnerships contributes significantly to its success in preparing public health leaders and building capacity within the broader MCH community. According to Shirley Fleming, CNM, DrPH, first deputy commissioner, Chicago Department of Public Health, “The program’s triangulated approach makes a tremendous contribution to developing future MCH leaders, to working effectively with communities, and, ultimately, to improving the health and well-being of Chicago’s families.”

By Peg Dublin, RN, BSN

Editor’s Note: An article on development of the School of Public Health’s MPH and PhD Programs in Maternal and Child Health Epidemiology by MCHP faculty members Arden Handler, DrPH, Joan Kennelly, PhD, MPH, RN, and Deborah Rosenberg, PhD will appear in *HEALTHviews* Spring 2004.