

A research  
publication of the  
USC School of  
Social Work  
Hamovitch Center  
for Science in the  
Human Services

Vol. 2, Issue 3  
Fall 2012

[ from the director ]

One of the foremost and leading research pillars of the Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services is the USC Roybal Institute on Aging, carrying the name of the late Southern California Congressman Edward R. Roybal and building on his legacy of dedication to public services. The Roybal Institute is a true representation of translational research, bringing high-quality research evidence into low-income and multiethnic communities, neighborhoods, and families. The featured articles of this issue bring us closer to the people and ideas that make the institute a significant force in terms of policy and practice among aging and disadvantaged communities.

The fall semester is often the time when new high-profile faculty members join the USC School of Social Work and the research center, and this year is certainly no exception. We are delighted to welcome the Dean's Professor of Social Work and Preventive Medicine and Associate Provost for Community Research Initiatives Hortensia Amaro, a well-known expert in substance abuse treatment, HIV prevention, and health disparities. We also welcome assistant professors Jeremy Goldbach and Ben Henwood, whose research on critical social issues such as homelessness and HIV risk behaviors are unique assets to the research center.

**Haluk Soydan, Ph.D.**  
Director of the Hamovitch Center

# Hamovitch P.I.

## Pioneering Interventions

[ news ]



Photo/Steve Cohn

Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard (center) talks with Marilyn Flynn, dean of the USC School of Social Work, and William Vega, executive director of the Roybal Institute on Aging, about efforts to expand research on aging populations.

## School bolsters aging research

**DESPITE THEIR STATUS** as the fastest-growing segment of the aging population in the United States, ethnic minority groups face significant health care disparities and remain at higher risk than the general population for serious illness such as diabetes and cancer.

The issue is especially pronounced in low-income areas of Los Angeles with large populations of older adults. Highlighted by the economic downturn, critical questions have emerged in recent years about how best to support older minority adults, to promote sustainable aging,

and to ensure that basic needs such as food, social support, and mental stimulation are being met.

“It really means we have double duty to do here, both in the arena of carrying out a lot of research to develop more effective interventions but also determining the public policy that is going to support these people,” said William Vega, executive director of the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging. “These policy issues are so dominant, no matter how we tinker with the existing delivery system, we’re tinkering at the edges.”

**ROYBAL** | continued on page 10

[ inside this issue ]

Roybal Institute director focuses on health disparities among aging populations  
*page 2*

New professors bring expertise in substance abuse, HIV, homelessness  
*page 4*

Scholars to gather at USC for conference on Hispanic health and aging  
*page 6*

**USC School**  
of Social Work

## [ research spotlight ]

# Health disparities expert leads research on aging populations

**TO SAY THAT** William Vega is a man in demand would be a bit of an understatement.

As a Provost Professor at USC, he holds appointments in psychiatry, preventive medicine, family medicine, psychology, and gerontology, not to mention his main role at the USC School of Social Work, where he serves as executive director of the Roybal Institute on Aging.

“It’s an all-out effort and it’s taking all my energy and aspirations,” he acknowledged. “I’ve been more than willing to do it because I feel it’s part of my mission here.”

A self-described specialist in behavioral health and multicultural epidemiology, Vega has pursued groundbreaking research on a wide array of topics, from Latino immigration and the process of cultural adaptation to mental illness.

It’s precisely his diverse background that makes Vega such a strong fit for the institute, which is tasked with bridging the many disciplines that touch on issues of aging.

“His interdisciplinary focus is exactly what is needed in any kind of program addressing older people,” said Marilyn Flynn, dean of the School of Social Work. “He is able to relate to different methodologies and bodies of knowledge, he’s willing to accept leadership responsibility, and he’s able to work with both local and national constituencies. He’s one of the most gifted scholars I’ve ever met.”

Born in White Memorial Hospital, Vega spent his formative years in the neighborhoods of South Los Angeles. Although his family initially lived in Lincoln Heights, his childhood was punctuated by frequent moves.

There was no cure for tuberculosis in the 1950s, and when Vega’s mother contracted the infectious disease, hospitalization became a common occurrence.

“She would come out, she would lapse, and she would go back in again,” he said.

Vega’s father, a farm worker and gardener, could not take care of a young child during the day, so

Vega was shuffled among different family members in some of the most impoverished areas of Los Angeles, an experience he credits for his lifelong interest in minority communities.

As a young man, he took a job in Huntington Park at a cannon shell manufacturer for the Army and Navy during the Vietnam War. But grinding away on the graveyard shift soon took its toll on Vega’s back as well as his psyche.

“I thought, man, I can’t do this forever,” he said. “I found my crooked path into academia.”

After an initial start at the University of Oregon, he completed his undergraduate studies in sociology in 1967 at the University of California, Berkeley, where he also earned a master’s degree and doctorate



Photo/Brian Goodman

in criminology.

“That was my intellectual bathhouse,” he said. “I was exposed to fantastic scholars, especially in sociology.”

By the late 1970s, Vega was working in the research unit of the California Department of Mental Health, conducting epidemiological studies in communities with significant need for mental health services. The experience gave him a unique perspective on how services are distributed to different socioeconomic groups.

In addition to holding several professorships, Vega continued to examine community-based interventions and mental health issues, in addition to exploring broader issues such as maintenance of adequate weight and nutrition among underserved populations.

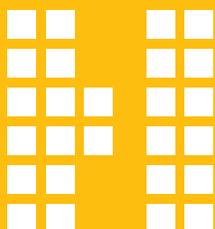
After spending several years pursuing longitudinal research on children and families, Vega shifted his focus to large-scale studies of adult mental health and substance abuse during specific life stages. He conducted some of the largest studies using biological samples to connect issues such as substance abuse and pregnancy.

“I spent an enormous number of years looking at the life course,” he said. “Most of my research has been on behavioral health, both mental

**VEGA** | continued on page 3

“We know we need coordinated care, it’s just we don’t quite know how to do it. We’re just now learning for the first time about something that should have been done from the beginning.”

**William Vega**



**VEGA** | from page 2

health-related problems and substance abuse-related problems, and trying to understand them in the context of the life course across generations.”

A particular issue that caught his attention was the phenomenon of adaptation among Latino populations. In general, international immigrants tend to have problems adjusting to new cultures, which is often reflected in higher rates of mental disorders such as schizophrenia.

However, Vega found that the experience of Mexican immigrants stands in stark contrast to their counterparts in Europe and other countries.

“Mexico is unique in the world from the standpoint of having this wide common border and such a tremendously high volume of immigration between two countries with widely different income and education levels,” he said. “The information we’ve had in the last 30 years has been that despite the fact that these immigrants are coming with very poor educational backgrounds compared to the United States as well as much lower income, they seem to do very well.”

Data suggests that despite a rough life of manual labor and poor social support, these immigrants tend to live a little longer, or as Vega puts it, “get a couple more years on the road.” These findings have critical implications for social programs, public policy, and aging research in general.

However, it could be a temporary phenomenon, he noted, adding that rates of mortality and chronic disease seem to normalize over time. In addition, the children of immigrants tend to struggle with mental health and substance abuse issues earlier in life and more frequently than their native-born peers.

Vega is interested in further exploring those intergenerational cycles, in addition to minimizing risk and addressing the lack of social mobility for disadvantaged populations.

“U.S.-born children of immigrants are left in the backwater and are at higher risk for chronic disease earlier in adulthood than are immigrants,” he said. “It’s a dynamic trend that we’re trying to determine how best to intervene in and address. It should also be said that recently the health of immigrants seems to be deteriorating due to weight-related health problems as well.”



Photo: Eric Lindberg

As executive director of the Roybal Institute, William Vega has guided the institute’s focus on research and training that supports the physical, mental, and social health of older adults in low-income communities.

During the last decade, Vega has broadened his research focus beyond families and communities to entire systems of care. It’s an area that has gained considerable attention in recent years, particularly with the advent of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, the recent national health care reform effort.

As researchers begin seeking ways to create accessible health care systems and improve the effectiveness and quality of care, Vega

said aging research has remained on the margins, particularly for minority populations.

“Health care is really an area we have to keep hammering at because serious gaps in care and quality of treatment have persisted despite reforms,” he said. “We know we need coordinated care, it’s just we don’t quite know how to do it. We’re just now learning for the first time about something that should have been done from the beginning.”

**VEGA** | continued on page 9

## Exclusive access



Photo: Brian Goodman

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF social work Dorian Traube became the first researcher to receive access to an expansive collection of data on the mental health of children in foster care in Los Angeles County after securing a pilot grant from the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute.

The one-year, \$30,000 award will enable Traube to partner with county mental health and child welfare officials to explore data on how well children in foster care are screened and treated for mental health issues.

"I'm the first person outside of the Department of Mental Health or the Department of Children and Family Services to be given access to this information," she said. "They are very protective of this data because it's such a vulnerable population."

County mental health and child welfare officials began gathering the data in response to a class action lawsuit brought against the state alleging that not enough was being done to provide adequate mental health care for children in the foster care system.

"They said that children were not being screened appropriately and when they were treated, they were frequently being overtreated," Traube said. "They would be given too much medication so their behaviors could be easier to control and they would be easier to place."

Over a four-year period, Los Angeles County officials have screened roughly 60,000 children who came in contact with the child welfare system. Traube

**TRAUBE** | continued on page 5

## [ news ]

## High-profile researchers join school

THREE NEW PROFESSORS joining the USC School of Social Work this fall will strengthen the school's focus on substance abuse and HIV prevention, serious mental illness, and homelessness research.

Hortensia Amaro will serve as Dean's Professor of Social Work and Preventive Medicine, in addition to working with the USC Office of the Provost as associate provost for community research initiatives. The school is also welcoming new assistant professors Jeremy Goldbach and Ben Henwood.

"I am delighted to welcome Hortensia Amaro, a leading researcher who studies complex social and behavioral problems, and Ben Henwood and Jeremy Goldbach, both bright and promising scholars interested in critical social issues," said Haluk Soydan, director of the school's Hamovitch Center for Science in the Human Services. "They were strategically selected and recruited in our pursuit of advancing excellence of our research clusters and promoting betterment of disadvantaged communities, locally and nationally. Furthermore, they are all well equipped to contribute to research on health disparities among Latino populations, especially in urban settings such as Los Angeles."

Amaro previously served as associate dean of the Bouvé College of Health Sciences at Northeastern University, where she founded and directed the Institute on Urban Health Research. During the past three decades, she has centered her research on issues surrounding substance abuse treatment, HIV prevention, trauma, and health disparities among disenfranchised populations.

She traces her interest in intervention research to her time as a young investigator in Boston working on a study on drug use during pregnancy. The project took place during the onset of the AIDS epidemic and Amaro interviewed pregnant drug users and female sex workers who had



Photo: Courtesy of Hortensia Amaro

**Hortensia Amaro**

been diagnosed with HIV.

"It became very clear to me that these women faced a host of problems in their lives and HIV was probably number 20 on the list," she said. "They were in abusive relationships, they were homeless, they were close to losing custody of their

children, and they had significant mental health problems that stemmed from abuse, both in their childhood and from their life on the streets."

That realization inspired her to focus on integrated care that didn't simply treat addiction but also addressed trauma and mental health issues. She was able to show that women who received integrated care did much better than those who received standard substance abuse

treatment in terms of abstinence from drugs, mental health and trauma symptoms, and HIV risk behaviors.

During the following years, Amaro worked closely with the city of Boston to

**FACULTY** | continued on page 5

---

**"I've been very impressed with the initiatives that USC has pursued, such as addressing health disparities in Latino and African American communities."**

---

**Hortensia Amaro**

**FACULTY** | from page 4

develop residential treatment programs for Latina women and their children, interventions for people entering the community after incarceration, and outpatient treatment programs for women. She is interested in expanding that work to address the economic and structural factors that negatively impact the health and life opportunities of families in the neighborhoods near USC as well as other low-income communities in Los Angeles.

"I've been very impressed with the

initiatives that USC, both in social work and preventive medicine, has pursued, such as addressing health disparities in Latino and African American communities and training the next generation of researchers who will be equipped to contribute to that knowledge base," she said.

Amaro was raised in Los Angeles from the age of 10 and volunteered as a tutor in schools with large Latino populations. As an undergraduate at UCLA, where she eventually earned a doctorate in psychology,

**FACULTY** | continued on page 10



Assistant professors Jeremy Goldbach and Benjamin Henwood will reinforce the USC School of Social Work's research profile in the areas of homelessness, substance use and HIV prevention, and mental health.

"Children were not being screened appropriately and when they were treated, they were frequently being overtreated. They would be given too much medication so their behavior could be easier to control and they would be easier to place."

**Dorian Traube**

**TRAUBE** | from page 4

will examine the assessment tool to determine whether it is effective in screening for mental health problems.

"The people in the child welfare offices aren't mental health practitioners, they are child welfare social workers," she said. "They are trained to look at other things to figure out if a child is being abused or neglected, not if they have mental health needs."

Approximately 60% of children who are screened using the assessment tool are determined to require mental health care, a figure that Traube described as higher than previous assessments. "I have a feeling that it's a pretty accurate estimate," she said, "especially if you think about the damage that maltreatment causes."

She hopes to validate the assessment tool and have it listed in the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare, an online resource that reviews and rates practices and assessment tools related to adolescent and child welfare.

Traube will also track the progress of a smaller sample of children who screened positive for mental health problems to examine what services they received, how long their treatment lasted, and other aspects of their care.

She expects to find that it is difficult for the Department of Mental Health to keep families in treatment, particularly those who are not mandated by the court system to remain in treatment.

"This data has always been collected on these kids, it's just never been linked and looked at to see what happens over the course of time," she said. ❁

## Practice perfect

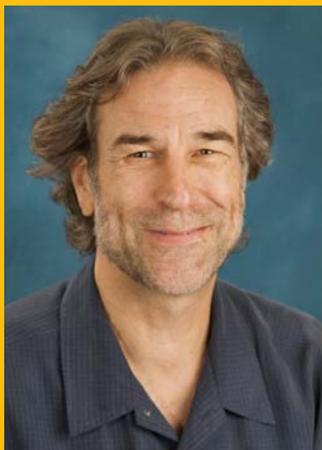


Photo: Brian Goodman

USING A UNIQUE research model that has proven successful in the field of medicine, professor John Brekke is leading an effort to bring together mental health practitioners to determine what type of research is most needed to improve services for people with serious mental illness.

Known as a practice-based research network, the group of providers will be tasked with outlining key topics or questions related to their work and engaging with researchers to address those issues.

"They've been very successful in primary and specialty care medicine, but they have not been tried very often or with much success in mental health and psychiatry," Brekke said. "It's really an exciting project."

Along with Didi Hirsch Mental Health Services, a local treatment agency that is partnering with Brekke to lead the project, the initial collaborative will include clinicians and consumers of mental health services from Exodus Recovery, Mental Health America of Los Angeles, and Pacific Clinics.

The group, known as the Recovery-Oriented Care Collaborative, will consider the best approaches to integrating primary health care and mental health treatment. In addition to moving one critical question through the research process, from inception to study publication, the network will develop a set of issues and priorities to guide future research studies.

"All the agencies are very enthusiastic about this, because there is such a critical

**BREKKE** | continued on page 7

## [ event ]

## USC hosts conference on aging

By Vincent Lim

A WELL-KNOWN CONFERENCE series focused on issues surrounding Hispanic health and aging will be hosted by the Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging at the USC School of Social Work.

The 2012 International Conference on Aging in the Americas (ICAA) will take place from Sept. 11-13 on the USC campus and will provide an opportunity for scholars to disseminate and discuss current research on a large and growing segment of the U.S. population.

According to U.S. Census data, individuals of Hispanic origin are the nation's largest ethnic and racial minority, and Hispanics older than 65 are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. older adult population. Fittingly, the conference will take place during National Hispanic Heritage Month, which celebrates the contributions that Hispanic Americans have made to American society and culture.

"The timing of this conference coincides with a growing urgency to develop more effective research and interventions to address the social and health needs of the rapidly expanding population of people over 65 and the transnational nature of aging among people of Mexican origin, who experience aging within family networks in both countries," said William Vega, executive director of the Roybal Institute and co-organizer of the conference.

The 2012 ICAA—held in partnership with the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs and the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, as well as the University of Texas Medical Branch—is the fifth installment of a successful series of meetings exploring the health and aging of Hispanic populations.

The conference series was established in 2001 at the University of Texas at Austin with the aim of utilizing research to augment knowledge about dimensions of healthful aging for people of Hispanic

descent in the United States and Mexico.

One of the major goals of the series is to promote interdisciplinary collaboration by gathering a broad array of researchers in the fields of health, health care policy, and behavioral and social aspects of aging into a single forum to exchange ideas and foster collaborative efforts aimed at addressing key issues affecting the health of aging Hispanics.

"The conference brings together major scholars in aging research working in distinguished universities and institutes in the United States and Mexico, and provides a unique opportunity to share new findings and advance methods in the field," Vega said.

The upcoming conference, which has a theme of "National, International, and Comparative Studies of Hispanic Aging and Related Methodological challenges," was co-organized by Vega, Kyriakos Markides of the University of Texas Medical Branch, and Mark Hayward of the Population Research Center. Past conferences examined the social and economic causes and consequences of health problems among older Mexican-origin individuals in the United States and Mexico.

Presenters include Eliseo Pérez-Stable, chief of the Division of General Internal Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco School of Medicine; Fernando Torres-Gil, former U.S. assistant secretary for aging, current director of the

UCLA Center for Policy Research on Aging, and adjunct professor at the USC Davis School of Gerontology; and Eileen Crimmins, American Association of Retired Persons chair in gerontology at the USC Davis School of Gerontology and director of the

USC/UCLA Center on Biodemography and Population Health.

The conference will also include a poster session featuring the work of graduate students and emerging scholars that demonstrates how social, psychological, and biological factors profoundly impact the long-term health of Hispanics. ❀

---

Visit [roybal.usc.edu](http://roybal.usc.edu) for more information about the upcoming International Conference on Aging in the Americas.

---

[ award ]

## Prevention researcher honored for work with homeless youth

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR ERIC Rice has been recognized with the John B. Reid Early Career Award from the Society for Prevention Research for his innovative research on HIV and substance abuse prevention among homeless youth.

The award is given annually to honor a promising new investigator in the field of prevention research, which focuses on the prevention of social, behavioral, and physical health issues as a path to promoting overall well-being.

"It is nice to be recognized by an interdisciplinary group of people at a national level that is very actively involved in the research that I am pursuing," Rice said. "That they see me as someone who has the potential to contribute to the field is very rewarding."

Officials with the Society for Prevention Research highlighted Rice's commitment to prevention science and his focus on the use of new technologies and social network theories to promote healthy behaviors among disadvantaged youth.

"His scholarly accomplishments, his forward-thinking research agenda regarding the utilization of social media for social network-based prevention programs, his dedication to the next generation of prevention scholars, and his commitment to community-based leadership efforts make him ideally suited for this award," officials noted in the award citation.

Since joining the USC School of Social Work in 2009, Rice has received roughly \$2.5 million in federal funding to investigate how advances in technology and social media can be used to positively impact the health and behavior of adolescents.

Working with youth populations is a major focus of prevention researchers, Rice said, given that long-term health and behavioral problems in adulthood can

be avoided by intervening with clients at an earlier age. However, his focus on the applications of technology to promote well-being among homeless youth is an innovative and emerging field of study.

"I think it's growing but it's relatively underdeveloped," he said.



Photo/Brian Goodman

Rice is also interested in exploring the social networks of disadvantaged youth, another area of research that is gaining more interest among prevention investigators. He is currently leading a \$2.1-million study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health to examine the impact of social networks on HIV/AIDS risk behaviors of homeless youth, with the ultimate goal of developing new interventions and bolstering positive sources of support within those networks.

"A lot of prevention programs are community-level programs or are designed for small groups," he said. "Both levels of programming inherently involve social networks, yet the social network science aspect of prevention research is also relatively underdeveloped. I'm trying very seriously to understand how social network processes work in the context of people's lives and how we might be able to utilize those insights in prevention."

In addition to citing his strong record of publishing manuscripts in leading journals such as *Prevention Science* and the *American Journal of Public Health*, award officials also noted Rice's dedication to community-based service and involvement with local organizations that serve homeless youth.

Rice said he was particularly humbled to be the first person to receive the award after it was named in honor of John Reid, a pioneer in the field of prevention research who died earlier this year.

"It's nice to have your heroes think that what you're doing is good work," he said. ❀

"This will really solidify a partnership to develop clinically rooted and clinically relevant research that will transform clinical practice."

**John Brekke**

**BREKKE** | from page 6

research-practice divide," Brekke said, noting that experts have suggested that it can take up to 15 years before research findings are implemented in real-world practice. "This is really a way to try to bridge that divide."

Brekke has worked closely with several of the providers that will be involved in the initial stage of the network, particularly Pacific Clinics. He said that although community agencies have been incredible hosts and participants in past research efforts, the practice-based network will transform the process of developing and conducting research projects in the arena of mental health services.

"This will really solidify a partnership to develop clinically rooted and clinically relevant research that will transform clinical practice," he said. "What's great is that clinicians become engaged and generate the most relevant ideas to their own work."

The one-year project received approximately \$30,000 in seed funding from the Southern California Clinical and Translational Science Institute (CTSI), and Brekke plans to seek additional support to extend the project in future years. He will be working alongside Matthew Meyer, the project's coprincipal investigator and vice president of best practices at Didi Hirsch, as well as Lyndee Knox, a consultant who has led successful practice-based research networks in primary health care settings.

Toward the end of the first year, the collaborative will hold a session with the CTSI to present research topics and find investigators who may be interested in pursuing related projects.

"If we pull this off, and of course we're planning to publish the process of it as well, it could be a model for other fields within social work," Brekke said. ❀

## [ news ]

## Professor leads outreach to African American elders

**WHEN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR** Karen Lincoln joined the USC School of Social Work several years ago, she quickly noticed a critical issue in the lower-income areas of Los Angeles.

Despite experiencing high rates of mental illness and other chronic health conditions, older African American residents were struggling to access care and seemed to be slipping through the cracks.

“I’ve always been involved in the community and I really see a need here,” Lincoln said. “I don’t see advocacy for African American elders in particular. We have a very diverse city, but there seems to be a lack of visibility of this population.”

In an effort to boost awareness and help older African Americans advocate for their own health and mental health needs, Lincoln has launched a collaborative effort with an impressive array of governmental, nonprofit, and community groups.

The outreach and engagement partnership, known as Advocates for African American Elders, includes community activists and leaders from the Los Angeles County Department of Mental Health, Pacific Clinics, Alzheimer’s Association, AARP, Ward Economic Development Corporation, California Senior Leaders, and local churches.

Officials with the Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging at the USC School of Social Work, where Lincoln serves as associate director, are also offering their strong support and will work to bring visibility to the project.

In addition to general advocacy efforts to improve services in African American communities, Lincoln said the group will seek stronger collaboration between agencies and community organizations, develop training programs and mental health interventions specifically tailored for older African Americans, and increase education among the target population.

“There is a need for more mental health services for older African American adults in particular, but there is also a need for more education around the stigma of mental health issues,” she said. “We really want to get the word out that there is



Photo/Brian Goodman

Advocates for African American Elders, a collaborative partnership of governmental, nonprofit, and community-based groups, seeks to improve outreach and engagement efforts related to mental health treatment and services for older African American residents in Los Angeles communities.

treatment available for mental illness. We want people to recognize the symptoms and get help.”

As much as Lincoln is concerned about the current state of affairs, she is even more troubled by the prospects for the future. By 2050, it is estimated that there will be more than three times as many African American elders in the Los Angeles region, she said, requiring a much higher level of care.

That rapidly expanding need, when coupled with cuts to adult day care services and the increasing necessity for health services for other low-income and disadvantaged populations in the community, spurred Lincoln to action.

“I decided this is something I just had to do,” she said.

This isn’t new territory for Lincoln. As

an assistant professor at the University of Washington in the mid-1990s, she developed a similar effort known as the African American Elders Project, now a free-standing community agency in Seattle that helps isolated and hard-to-reach residents access social services and health care.

Similar to the population in Los Angeles, older African Americans in Seattle were facing high rates of dementia, depression, and chronic health conditions.

“There were just very few services that were culturally competent that were available to seniors in the community,” Lincoln said.

In 1995, the mayor of Seattle, Norman Rice, launched a council on issues related to African American elders designed to develop a comprehensive continuum of

**LINCOLN** | continued on page 9



Photo/Brian Goodman

### LINCOLN | from page 8

services. Mayor Gregory Nichels later appointed Lincoln, whose research at the university was focused on the mental health needs of older African Americans, to serve as chair of the advisory council.

“As a result of our advocacy efforts, we were able to get this particular program serving African American elders,” she said.

Lincoln hopes to replicate that success in Los Angeles. Initial discussions with the Department of Mental Health proved fruitful and led to funding for the project, which has been in development for

approximately six months.

Although still in its infancy (the group held its first meeting in July to develop an official mission statement), the collaborative is already starting to spread the word among community organizations and other agencies that work closely with older adults.

By sharing information and partnering on various events, Lincoln is hopeful that the advocacy group will be able to create a strong network of services and boost awareness of critical issues for African American elders.

For example, at Alzheimer’s Association events, officials might address depression and mental illness alongside discussions of Alzheimer’s disease and dementia. During gatherings hosted by AARP, participants may learn about health literacy and technology as well as mental health.

“We really do need to deal with the issue of education, just in terms of what is mental illness,” Lincoln said. “There is a lot of stigma around mental illness in African American communities.”

Members of the advocacy group plan to highlight particular symptoms that are unique among older African Americans and focus on comorbid health and mental health conditions.

---

**“We really want to get the word out that there is treatment available for mental illness. We want people to recognize the symptoms and get help.”**

**Karen Lincoln**

---

Participants will also work with providers, primarily in South Los Angeles, to develop culturally competent ways to treat mental health issues. Lincoln noted that despite having the highest prevalence of mental

distress and chronic health conditions in the region, South Los Angeles is particularly underserved.

“People aren’t sure what to do because the resources just aren’t there,” she said.

In addition to outreach and engagement strategies, Pacific Clinics has offered support for a part-time therapist to work in community-

based organizations. Lincoln said efforts are also underway to tailor a cognitive behavioral therapy intervention provided by the Department of Mental Health.

In addition to adapting the mental health training module to fit the specific needs of older African American adults, group members will also seek to train agency staff and others in the community to deliver the intervention.

Accountability is a critical component as well, and Lincoln is submitting a grant proposal to study whether health and mental health outcomes improve as a result of efforts by Advocates for African American Elders. If funded, the project could begin pilot testing as early as next spring. ❀

### VEGA | from page 3

Five years ago, Vega made his return to Los Angeles—the first time he had lived in the region since childhood. He spent several years as a professor in the Department of Family Medicine at UCLA, where he also directed the Luskin Center for Innovation.

But when the opportunity to lead the Roybal Institute on Aging presented itself, Vega jumped at the chance. It was clear that USC officials recognized the enormous social value of aging research, he said, particularly for low-income populations in the communities of Los Angeles.

“It looked like a tremendous opportunity that would be just right for me at that point in my career,” he said. “Of course, that brings with it an enormous obligation to fill

a lot of different shoes and build the public visibility of the institute as well as the substantive capacity to carry out its mission.”

In addition to leading a marked expansion of the institute’s active research, Vega is developing new relationships with colleagues in Latin America and China. He is also working with the USC Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics to build a resource center for minority aging research.

One of Vega’s most fulfilling experiences since returning to Southern California has been introducing himself in the community and getting to know the network of providers and agencies.

“It’s one of the things that has given me the most satisfaction, meeting people in

these agencies who are so committed,” he said. “I was one of the obnoxious protesting students at Berkeley in the 60s, so I come from a background of understanding the necessity of activism and advocacy to move ahead with major goals in social justice. I’m committed to that.”

As for his responsibilities at USC, Vega acknowledged that he has been stretched a bit thin by his many scholarly appointments. In recent months, he has worked to cut back on some outside projects and focus more attention on the Roybal Institute.

“I firmly want to focus on how to get healthy populations aging in place,” he said. “My role is really to be the person to set the tone and get the momentum it requires to keep moving forward.” ❀

**ROYBAL** | from page 1

As a research entity within the USC School of Social Work, the institute is formally tasked with addressing those key questions through innovative translational research and training that focuses on improving and sustaining the health and mental health of aging minorities and their families.

For Marilyn Flynn, the school's dean, the purpose of the institute is twofold: to develop a more responsive community environment for older adults, particularly members of underserved minority groups in Los Angeles, and to advance knowledge and promote understanding of the specific needs of those populations.

"Especially under the current budget constraints, our approach to not just maintaining services but promoting health among older people and disadvantaged minorities is, from my point of view, one of the most important issues of our time," she said.

The multifaceted approach of the Roybal Institute includes a robust research agenda driven by a focus on three key areas: the development of new knowledge about the social issues that affect older adults, strategies to transfer that knowledge into practice among providers that serve older populations, and

---

**"Our approach to not just maintaining services but promoting health among older people and disadvantaged minorities is, from my point of view, one of the most important issues of our time."**

**Marilyn Flynn**

---

policy research that seeks ways to improve quality of life for underserved and aging groups.

Vega sees a particular need to focus on comprehensive improvements to the health care system, as older adults are finding it more difficult to sustain a healthy and happy lifestyle in the face of deteriorating sources of public support and poor access to long-term care. A critical focus of the institute is to bolster an environment in which older people can remain in their home and live safely and independently regardless of their financial resources, also known as "aging in place."

"How do you create those conditions in the situation we're in now with a collapsing social network of supply from the public side and a higher reliance on the personal social networks of individuals?" he said. "The official networks are weakening, but we don't know the impact that is having on personal networks."

Among recent research projects, Roybal Institute scholars completed a community pilot survey that examined the current living conditions and health status of older residents in select areas of East and South Los Angeles. Interviews with Latinos and African Americans between the ages of

**ROYBAL** | continued on page 11

**FACULTY** | from page 5

she started a bilingual and bicultural preschool near USC.

"It felt like a full circle for me to come back," she said. "I was very engaged in the Latino community, and the opportunity to come back and do work that is largely focused on that community and other disadvantaged populations such as African Americans in Los Angeles was very appealing."

Henwood was also drawn to USC due to its proximity to the epicenter of many serious social issues, particularly homelessness. The university's urban location made it a perfect fit for the young researcher, who is interested in the complexities of providing services to homeless individuals with serious mental illnesses.

As an assistant professor at USC, Henwood plans to build on his experiences as a master's and doctoral student at New York University, as well as the time he spent as the clinical director for a housing agency in Philadelphia.

"Obviously, Los Angeles and California in general has the biggest homeless population in the United States," he said. "I want to continue the work I've been doing in New York and Philadelphia but apply it on a much larger scale."

Henwood is a strong believer in the housing-first model, in which clients are provided immediate access to housing and then receive services for other mental or physical health needs using an integrated care model.

He plans to work closely with the school's research clusters on homelessness and serious mental illness, given that approximately one third of the chronically homeless population also struggles with serious mental health problems. However, Henwood said it is critical not to simply focus on mental health and ignore other issues.

"Sometimes I think there is a bit of an assumption that the mental illness is the cause of homelessness," he said. "Of course it's a more complicated relationship than that. There are bigger social and economic structures that also need to be considered."

He cited the USC School of Social Work's reputation for strong scholarship and a solid research infrastructure that supports innovation as one of the key factors in his decision to accept a professorship.

For Goldbach, a major draw was the school's interest in emerging technologies and investment in faculty development. As an assistant professor at USC, he plans to

specialize in HIV risk behavior and substance abuse prevention, with a particular focus on Latino and LGBT populations.

After completing undergraduate studies at the University of Rochester and earning master's and doctoral degrees from the University of Texas at Austin, Goldbach spent time as a community organizer focused on improving substance abuse prevention efforts for adolescents through community-level change.

He recently developed an intervention that targeted HIV risk behavior and substance use in Latino youth, and plans to launch a three-year efficacy study this year with funding pending from the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

Goldbach is also interested in measuring stress among LGBT youth and developing related assessment instruments, an area he said has been relatively neglected in the past but is starting to gain interest.

"It's really an exciting time to work with that population," he said. "People are starting to realize that these kids are experiencing a lot of negative outcomes. We certainly need to better understand what their needs are and how we can make their experience better." ❀

**ROYBAL** | from page 10

60 and 100 revealed that more minority older adults were living on low incomes compared to a decade ago.

More than half of the residents interviewed had an annual household income below \$15,000 and often faced health challenges due to their financial status. Those lower income levels were linked to poorer physical and mental health, as well as more restrictions on daily activities. Participants also had higher rates of obesity and serious psychological distress than the wider population of older African Americans and Latinos in Los Angeles County.

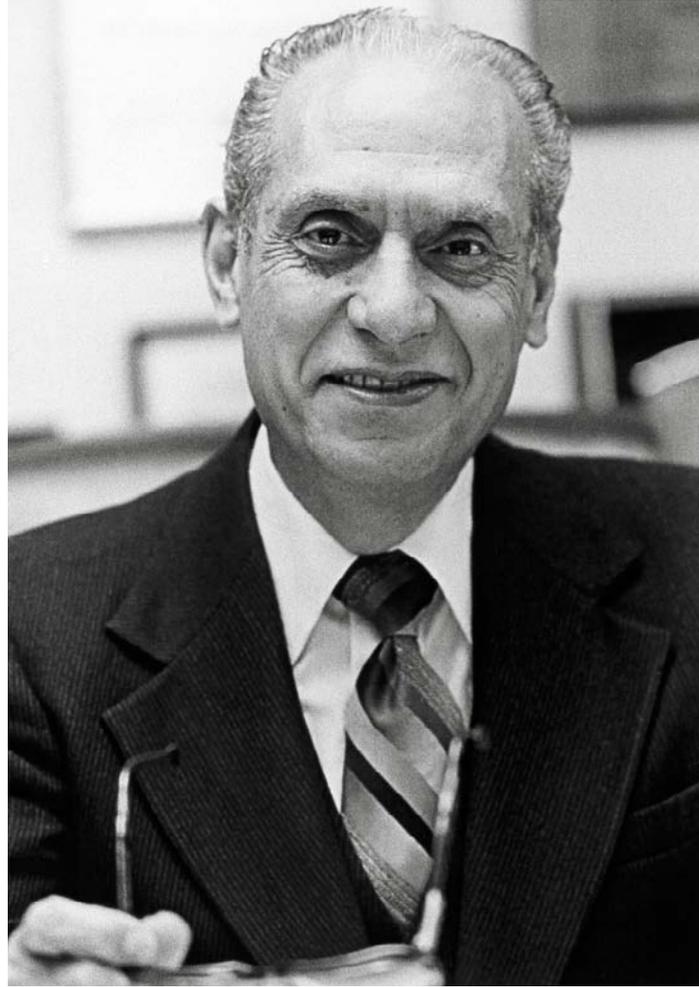
Roybal Institute researchers hope the report, which is being disseminated to local agencies and community groups, will offer guidance to policy makers and community leaders who are in a position to advocate and provide services for these underserved residents.

In addition to leading research projects on critical issues related to aging and low-income populations, the Roybal Institute works closely with local and national agencies on advocacy and education projects.

One major effort, known as Project HEAL, is a collaboration with AltaMed Health Services to train and empower new leaders to promote community health in underserved areas of Los Angeles and Orange counties. Institute scholars provide research information on health disparities and work with AltaMed and other organizations to develop policy initiatives.

Through the Lucille and Edward R. Roybal Foundation, the institute also coordinates financial assistance for master's students at the School of Social Work who plan to pursue careers that serve older adults, particularly in the field of health care.

Beyond their focus on issues that affect low-income African American and Latino populations in local and regional communities, Roybal Institute leaders are also seeking to generate a global understanding of commonly shared solutions to issues of aging.



The USC Roybal Institute on Aging was named in honor of Congressman Edward R. Roybal, a champion of services for aging and minority populations.

Photo/USC Roybal Institute

Flynn noted that both emerging and developed countries, particularly China and Mexico, are struggling to create effective strategies to address the needs of older adults.

“Everyone is trying to address the problem of healthy aging, or aging in place,” she said. “Everyone is trying to work on health care solutions and social solutions that prevent people from developing chronic problems such as cancer and heart disease.”

Vega and his colleagues have made a concerted effort in recent years to develop research opportunities and collaborations with peers in Latin America.

Institute leaders plan to develop a cross-cultural research venture focused on the similarities and differences between China and Mexico in terms of aging and health-related disparities.

“The ability to support healthy aging in those countries is a massive challenge,” Vega said. “We have an opportunity to do some very interesting work within that arena.”

The institute itself has also undergone some organizational changes in recent years. It was initially established by the late Congressman Edward R. Roybal at California State University, Los Angeles, to continue his legacy as a champion of causes related to aging and low-income minority populations.

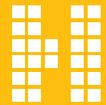
As a cofounder of the House Select Committee on Aging, Roybal led an effort to expand housing services for older adults, restored low-cost health care for seniors, and played a key role in legislation outlawing age discrimination.

He also helped expand mental health care services in rural communities as well as health care support for people with Alzheimer's disease. Roybal's daughter, Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard, became the first Mexican American woman elected to the House of Representatives following his retirement in 1992 and currently represents portions of downtown and East Los Angeles, including segments of Roybal's former district.

The institute was ultimately relocated to the USC Davis School of Gerontology in 2007 before being shifted to the School of Social Work about three years ago. Flynn noted the Roybal Institute maintains a very strong connection with the School of Gerontology and a handful of scholars have joint appointments with both schools.

As the institute continues to expand, Vega and other scholars have their hands full with a wide array of new projects, including a study on cognitive functioning that focuses primarily on Alzheimer's disease, an advocacy and training partnership designed to promote mental health care in low-income African American communities in Los Angeles, and the development of a new research center on minority aging in collaboration with the RAND Corporation.

“We're also writing research proposals and we're sponsoring big conferences,” Vega said. “We have a lot of work ahead of us.” ❀



## [ grants ]

**Concepción Barrio**, an associate professor with the USC School of Social Work, has received a \$229,103 subaward grant to help examine factors that may affect the enrollment of Latinos with schizophrenia in federally funded mental health research. Specifically, the three-year project—based at UC San Diego with \$1.4 million in total funding from the National Institute of Mental Health—will identify the degree to which language, acculturation, education, health, and research literacy affect the informed consent process.



Photo/Brian Goodman

The project will also involve testing an educational tool designed to teach potential participants about clinical research and informed consent prior to the consent process. Researchers will enroll 180 people with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder, including 60 Latinos who prefer speaking Spanish, 60 Latinos who prefer speaking English, and 60 non-Latino Whites.

In addition to exploring key factors such as language and health literacy, Barrio and her colleagues will conduct interviews with 30 participants to determine how they view the informed consent process and what influences their decisions related to participating in research projects. The grant runs through April 2015.

A \$146,332 grant will enable professor **John Brekke** to develop and test strategies to help mental health agencies implement and sustain a peer health navigator intervention designed to link health and mental health services for the seriously mentally ill. The project aims to create a manual for the implementation and sustainability of the peer health navigator tool, as well as a training program for agencies based on the manual.

Researchers will also recruit two organizations to test the protocol, in addition to developing assessment tools to measure the effectiveness of the implementation strategies. The two-year project is funded by Unihealth Foundation.

Assistant professor **Emily Putnam-Hornstein** has received a \$125,000 grant from the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation to generate new information on teen parenting among youth in California's foster care system, with a specific focus on dynamics and trends in Los Angeles. The project will involve linking administrative child protection records and vital birth records to examine such topics as the birth rate of youth in foster care; maltreatment as a risk factor for teen pregnancy and early childbearing; and intergenerational child maltreatment. The project runs through June 2013.



Photo/Brian Goodman

## [ event ]

**DOZENS OF INFLUENTIAL** policy makers, community leaders, and military officials will gather at the USC School of Social Work for the Military Child Education Coalition's California Public Engagement conference to collaborate on ways to support the education of military children in California.

Chaired by Professor Ron Astor, who leads the Building Capacity in Military-Connected Schools project, and Anthony Hassan, director of the school's Center for Innovation and Research on Veterans and Military Families, the event will bring together representatives from education, business, community groups, law enforcement, and other key stakeholder organizations.

Participants will discuss issues that affect children from military families, including the negative effects of deployment, injury, illness, and loss. Another key topic is the state's implementation of the Interstate Compact on Educational Opportunity for Military Children, which is designed to address issues related to class placement, records transfer, immunization requirements, graduation requirements, exit testing, and extracurricular activities.

The conference will focus on identifying available resources in the community and developing action plans to improve support for military children. The event takes place on Sept. 19 and 20 near the USC campus. ❁

**Pathways to Client-Centered Care**  
 Research to Practice: Completing the Circle

Designed specifically for professionals, researchers, and decision-makers, this **International Conference in Los Angeles, California**, will explore exciting research and innovative practices focused on client-centered social work amid the world-famous landmarks of Hollywood.

**Featured Topics**

- Aging
- Cancer Care
- Destigmatization
- Diversity
- Health Care Technology & Information Systems
- Health Equity
- Health Policy
- Health Reform
- Homelessness
- Latino Health
- Military Social Work
- Recovery Model

**Register Online:**  
[pathways2013.com](http://pathways2013.com)

**Save the Date:**  
 June 23-27, 2013

Follow us on Facebook and Twitter!

USC School of Social Work

LAC DMH  
 LOS ANGELES COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF MENTAL HEALTH