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Moving Beyond the Campus to the Community

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Moving Beyond the

By Amy Oprean

Wayne State University's commitment to improving human conditions is far reaching, and the School of Social Work has taken this on as a serious challenge. In 2008, the school launched a new center that merges research and practice – with the goal of improving both.

The culmination of strong leadership, hard work and years of planning, the Center for Social Work Practice and Policy Research is a state-of-the-art hub that will assist WSU faculty in their research, engage in partnerships with Detroit community service providers and communicate social work policy and practice information to the public.

“We’re trying to generate and disseminate knowledge that improves the lives of the disadvantaged through research, consultation and dissemination,” said Joanne Sobeck, Ph.D., associate professor and director of research in the School of Social Work, and the center’s inaugural director.

Since its induction, the center has served as a dynamic resource to Wayne State faculty members for support in their research, outside community organizations for technical support and collaboration opportunities, and the public for developments in social work research and policy.

One of the main goals of the center is connecting faculty members with community organizations with similar interests. These mutually beneficial

partnerships bridge the gap between researchers and practitioners through a number of valuable exchanges, including idea mapping, research summits, and community research exchange networks – scaled down seminars for researchers and practitioners of a specific expertise to discuss issues in their field.

To help facilitate these dialogues, Sobeck and her collaborators teamed up with some of the



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Top left to right: Dr. Joanne Sobeck, associate professor and director of research; Dr. Debra Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, assistant professor; Dr. Cheryl Waites, associate dean;

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area's largest and oldest community organizations. These six "strategic partners" are Matrix Human Services, the Children's Center of Detroit, Oakland Family Services, Black Family Development, Inc., Spaulding for Children and Detroit-Wayne County Community Mental Health Agency.

Reaching out

Debra Hernandez Jozefowicz-Simbeni, Ph.D, assistant professor of social work, is involved in one such partnership. She and her colleague, Dr. Bart Miles, assistant professor of social work, will be collaborating with Matrix Human Services on a study of homeless youth and youth in care in Detroit. They will be collecting data from youth residing in homeless shelters and residential programs, focusing specifically on their adjustment, service needs and program experiences. In return, Matrix Human Services will be able to use the research to improve their facilities and services, as well as engage in study groups where improvements can be discussed.

The center will not only facilitate real change in social work practice, but will accelerate the speed at which research can progress from an idea in a researcher's notebook to a working study.

"When you do community-based research, there's so much that goes into developing relationships and maintaining them, that it can at times become very onerous for the faculty member as well as the agency," Jozefowicz-Simbeni said. "So I think the center is creating an infrastructure for facilitating

research collaborations that are meaningful and mutually beneficial to both academic research and community stakeholders."

This aspect of the center will be particularly useful to Cheryl Waites, Ed.D., associate dean in the School of Social Work, who uses a community-based, participatory method of research that relies heavily on interaction with local organizations. In beginning her research on "healthy aging," – an investigation assessing changes in senior centers and assisted living needed to accommodate older adults and baby boomers as they enter the later stages of life – the center assisted in locating community agencies focused on aging. Waites, who is new to the Detroit area, said the assistance saved her the time and energy of doing the legwork herself, and allowed her to focus on getting her research started.

For Shawna J. Lee, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Social Work and faculty associate of the Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute at Wayne State, the center will be a valuable mechanism for disseminating the findings of several studies examining paternal child abuse. Using data from a large sample of urban families, Lee's research assesses risk factors related to fathers' physical and psychological aggression toward their children. The center will connect Lee with agencies that provide intervention efforts focusing on fathers and with the community through "research dialogue" sessions that engage community members and practitioners with relevant and timely research intended to advance child abuse prevention efforts.

Improving the future

Reflecting on its first year, Sobeck said the center is off to a promising start in achieving its long-term goals of obtaining research funding, as well as heightening Wayne State's visibility as a source for expertise in ongoing social work research.

"Internationally, if someone in Germany is doing research on urban populations or policy issues, we hope that they will consider the expertise of our faculty here," Sobeck said. "If someone in L.A. is seeking partners for domestic violence research, we want them to see our center as a viable resource with researchers that address that issue. Locally, we'd like the center to be a go-to place for consultation and technical assistance as well as recent updates and integration of research and practice."

"I'll know I have done my job if we become known and accessed for what we do."

About Dr. Joanne Sobeck: Dr. Sobeck received a bachelor of social work degree from Northern Michigan University and a master of social work from Western Michigan University, where she studied policy, planning and administration. She received her Ph.D. in political science from Wayne State University. She joined Wayne State University in 1983 as a member of the staff at the Addiction Research Institute. She is the co-chair of the Community Practice Concentration and directs the Center for Social Work Practice and Policy Research.

