

Jan. 24, 2014

For Immediate Release

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Next-Generation Scholars Test Innovations for Improving Public Health Delivery

*New Studies Examine Obesity Prevention, Vaccine-Preventable Disease Control,
and Maternal-Child Health Promotion*

LEXINGTON, KY- Four early-career scholars from across the U.S. will receive two years of funding and scientific mentorship designed to speed the discovery of strategies for improving the nation's public health system. Along the way, the scholars are expected to become the next generation of national leaders in the field of public health services and systems research (PHSSR).

The two-year awards from the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services and Systems Research, housed at the University of Kentucky College of Public Health and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, provide \$100,000 in funding for each scholar along with targeted scientific mentoring, career development and technical assistance. Each scholar is based at a sponsoring academic institution that contributes the time of a senior scientific mentor and provides matching financial resources sufficient to protect at least 50% of the scholar's time for implementing their plan of research.

The scholars' studies investigate innovative public health programs and practices that have the potential to improve health status on a population-wide basis but currently have insufficient evidence about their effectiveness and value. These strategies include:

- enhancing access to publicly available data resources for targeting and tailoring public health programs, with a focus on childhood obesity prevention;
- using informatics tools within a statewide health information exchange (HIE) to improve the control of vaccine-preventable diseases;
- using decentralized local funding and decision-making mechanisms to improve the statewide implementation of a federally-funded nutrition and obesity prevention program; and
- using a comparative "positive deviance" approach to performance measurement to identify highly effective local strategies for maternal-child health promotion.

The Mentored Research Scientist Development Awards are designed to provide early career investigators with opportunities to improve their research skills as they become independent PHSSR researchers and compete for future funding opportunities, while building the evidence-base of public health practice and policy.

The projects, scholars and mentors (alphabetized by institution) are:

Improving Vaccine-Preventable Disease Reporting and Surveillance through Health Information Exchange (Indiana University)

Principal Investigator: Brian E. Dixon, Ph.D., M.P.A.; Mentor: Shaun J. Grannis, M.D., M.S.

Dr. Dixon's research will implement and evaluate a new electronic tool designed to improve clinical provider reporting rates for vaccine-preventable disease outbreaks in Indiana, and to support more efficient provider reporting to public health agencies. The tool takes advantage of Indiana's statewide health information exchange (HIE) that enables data-sharing between clinical and public health organizations, and replaces existing inefficient reporting procedures.

Building a Sustainable Open Data Ecosystem for Public Health Services and Systems Research (University at Albany – State University of New York).

Principal Investigator: Erika Martin, Ph.D., M.P.H.; Mentor: Guthrie Birkhead, M.D., M.P.H.

Dr. Martin's study will examine the utility of making existing, publicly-available health data more accessible to state and local public health professionals for use in targeting and tailoring their programs and policies. She will evaluate 200 federal, state, and local health datasets, interview New York State (NYS) health department and other state agency staff, and complete a NYS pilot study using measures of child obesity and built environment from publicly-available datasets.

Evaluating the Impact of the Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention Program Reorganization on California's Public Health System (University of California-Davis Health System)

Principal Investigator: Helen W. Wu, Ph.D., M.S.; Mentor: Kenneth W. Kizer, M.D., M.P.H.

Dr. Wu's research will examine the implementation and impact of recent policy changes within California's federally-funded Nutrition Education and Obesity Prevention (NEOP) program that decentralized key funding and administrative mechanisms from the state to the local government level. The changes give local health departments greater decision-making authority and discretion over how program funds are used within local communities, along with an enhanced ability to support obesity prevention activities beyond nutrition education, including policy, environmental and systems change strategies. Through a systematic literature review on decentralized public programs, local health department interviews, and information collected by the state, Dr. Wu will describe local health departments' NEOP program implementation including the resources used, and their selection of policy, environmental and systems change interventions. By assessing the benefits and challenges of centralized vs. decentralized program administration, she will develop recommendations for maximizing the effectiveness of the statewide obesity prevention program.

Learning from Outlier Local Health Departments to Improve Maternal and Child Health Services (University of the Sciences in Philadelphia)

Principal Investigator: Tamar A. Klaiman, Ph.D., M.P.H.; Mentor: Betty Bekemeier, Ph.D., M.P.H. (University of Washington)

Dr. Klaiman's research seeks to identify local health department practices for delivering maternal and child health (MCH) services that generate superior health outcomes. Using the Public Health Activities and Services Tracking (PHAST) database, a multi-state resource developed in collaboration with Public Health Practice-Based Research Networks (PBRNs), she will conduct a "positive deviance" statistical analysis of local data from four states to identify local health departments that achieve better-than-expected MCH outcomes. Interviews with local health department staff in each state will be used in combination with PHAST quantitative data to uncover the strategies that high-performing agencies use to achieve superior outcomes.

Collectively, the findings from these studies will generate new evidence about the effectiveness of innovations in policy and practice that are currently underway within real-world public health settings. With this evidence, the most-effective strategies can be scaled up and spread across the U.S. public health system to improve population health, while less-effective strategies can be retooled or replaced quickly. Coordinating Center staff will assist researchers with development of plans for dissemination and implementation of the findings within the practice and policy communities.

"These projects illustrate the broad array of research questions that PHSSR must address to improve public health practice and policy," observed F. Douglas Scutchfield, M.D., the founding director of the Coordinating Center. The center's current director and principal investigator, Glen P. Mays, Ph.D., added that "this next generation of emerging scientific leaders is poised to transform the public health enterprise into a true learning system, generating evidence from innovations and then rapidly feeding it back into the system to improve population health."

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About the National Coordinating Center for Public Health Services and Systems Research

The National Coordinating Center seeks to improve population health by expanding the production and application of scientific evidence about how best to organize, finance, and deliver public health strategies. The Center conducts research, coordinates the research of others in the field, develops data resources and methods to improve research quality, and supports the translation and application of research findings for stakeholders in public health practice, administration and policy. The Center also works to engage public health practice settings directly in the production and application of evidence by developing and supporting practice-based research networks (PBRNs). For more information, visit www.publichealthsystems.org.