

Projects for Societal Impact

Annual Report

2025



The University of Texas at Austin

Moritz Center for Societal Impact

School of Social Work

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Projects for Societal Impact (PSI)

Program Overview

The Projects for Societal Impact Program provides grant funding to University of Texas researchers to support promising research related to the Moritz Center for Societal Impact's focus areas: affordable housing, behavioral health, health needs of children and families, aging concerns, and individuals with disabilities.

The PSI Program strives to fund projects at the intersection of at least two of these focus areas through interdisciplinary research across UT Austin Schools and Departments and in collaboration with community partners. The grants require that UT students be included on each study team.

These grants seeded new and/or smaller projects with \$50,000 each, with the goal of supporting them as they seek larger funding for the next stage of their research. Grant funding can be used for UT students' tuition and living expenses, faculty time, and community partners' expenses.



Enhancing Parental Mental Health and Children's Outcomes in High Poverty Areas of Mexico Through a Low-Cost Scalable Program

Manuela Angelucci, PhD; Daniel Bennett, PhD; Raissa Fabregas, PhD; Antonia Vazquez, PhD

Community Partner: Reddes Sociales para el Desarrollo (REDDES)

Overview

This project, the continuation of a pilot supported by the Projects for Societal Impact 2024, evaluated whether the World Health Organization's Self-Help Plus (SH+) intervention could improve parental mental health and family outcomes in high-poverty areas of Mexico. Working with 1,236 parent-child dyads across 36 middle schools in Ecatepec, the research team and community partner implemented two waves of the intervention and achieved strong participation and follow-up rates. The study examined impacts on parental well-being, parenting behaviors, family relationships, investments in children's education, and adolescent outcomes..

Aims

The project aimed to recruit approximately 1,000 parent-child dyads, assess the feasibility of delivering the low-cost and scalable SH+ intervention, and evaluate its effects on parental mental health, human capital investments, family dynamics, and adolescent outcomes. Researchers sought to determine whether improving parental psychological well-being could also influence parenting practices and decisions that support children's development and future opportunities.

Findings

The intervention produced meaningful improvements in parental mental health, reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety, stress, and poor well-being by approximately 0.4 standard deviations. Parents also reported healthier behaviors, better sleep, improved parenting practices, stronger parent-child relationships, and a greater willingness to invest financially in their children's education. While the study found limited short-term effects on adolescents' own behaviors and well-being, the results suggest that improvements in parental mental health can quickly influence family dynamics and investment decisions, with potential downstream benefits for children over a longer period.

Next Steps

The research team's immediate priority is to prepare and submit a peer-reviewed academic paper reporting the study findings. They are also developing a policy brief with their community partner, Redes Sociales para el Desarrollo (REDDES), to share practical recommendations with policymakers and practitioners. Looking ahead, the team will use feedback from publication, conferences, and policy discussions to guide future research and funding opportunities, while also supporting REDDES in securing resources to continue community-based mental health programming.

Delaying Disability: Optimization of the Music-4-MS Intervention Based on Feedback from People Living with Multiple Sclerosis

Carolyn S. Phillips, PhD, MSN, RN; Angel Schroder, MT-BC; Laure Scott, PhD; Kathy Bolstorff, PT; Ryan Ha; Heather Becker, PhD; Shelli R. Kesler, PhD; Leorah Freeman, MD, PhD; Alexa M. Stuifbergen, PhD, RN, FAAN

Community Partner: Angel Schroder Music Therapy

Overview

This project focused on optimizing the Music-4-MS intervention, a 12-week eHealth program that teaches people with multiple sclerosis (MS) to play the ukulele as a way to support cognitive and overall well-being. The team developed new instructional videos, a revised participant manual, and a centralized website, then gathered participant feedback to improve the program's usability, accessibility, and effectiveness.

Aims

1. Develop an optimized 12-week Music-4-MS intervention that reduced cognitive burden and improved accessibility.
2. Evaluate participant perceptions of engagement, usefulness, and cognitive load while using the program. Both aims were successfully achieved through intervention development and participant focus groups.

Findings

Focus group feedback from 18 participants indicated that the optimized intervention was engaging, meaningful, and cognitively manageable. Participants reported emotional, cognitive, physical, and social benefits from learning the ukulele and viewed the program as a positive challenge. Feedback also identified opportunities for improvement, including slower progression in later lessons, enhanced website navigation, additional orientation materials, more social interaction opportunities, and clearer methods for tracking

Next Steps

The research team will continue refining the intervention based on participant feedback and has secured an NIH R21 grant to support the next phase of research. Beginning in July, a larger study will evaluate the feasibility and acceptability of the optimized Music-4-MS program, generating data to inform future efficacy testing and potential expansion to other populations experiencing cognitive challenges

Project Title: Promoting Recovery: A Pilot Study of Peer Support Specialists in the Child Welfare System

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Community Partner: Santa Maria Hostel

Overview

Promoting Recovery examined how peer recovery support specialists assist parents involved with both substance use recovery and the child welfare system in Texas. The research included an environmental scan of peer support programs across the state, interviews with peer support specialists, and extensive collaboration with community partner Santa Maria Hostel. The project aimed to better understand the availability, role, and effectiveness of peer recovery support services and to identify opportunities for improving support for families affected by substance use and child welfare involvement.

Aims

1. Conduct an environmental scan of peer recovery support programs serving child welfare-involved families in Texas.
2. Interview peer support specialists to understand their roles, practices, values, and experiences.
3. Engage community partners and stakeholders to inform interpretation of findings and recommendations.
4. Identify future research and evaluation opportunities.
5. Disseminate findings through reports, publications, and grant applications.

Findings

The study found that peer recovery support services exist across a variety of settings in Texas but are heavily concentrated in metropolitan areas, leaving significant gaps in rural communities. The research identified limited services tailored to fathers, culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and families needing long-term recovery support. Interviews with 20 peer specialists highlighted the importance of lived experience, trust, advocacy, nonjudgmental support, and relationship-building in helping parents navigate recovery and child welfare systems. The project also identified implementation challenges, including unclear role definitions, inconsistent training and supervision, limited cross-system collaboration, and a lack of long-term outcome data related to family preservation, reunification, housing stability, and recovery outcomes.

Next Steps

Project findings have already informed a pending National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) R25 proposal, SMART-CW (Scalable Microlearning for Addiction-Responsive Training in Child Welfare), which aims to improve child welfare workforce knowledge of substance use disorders and recovery-oriented practice. Future work will focus on strengthening education and training for child welfare professionals, integrating lived experience into workforce development, improving collaboration between child welfare and recovery systems, and addressing service gaps in rural and underserved communities. The team also plans to continue disseminating findings through peer-reviewed publications, pursue additional funding opportunities, and build on the community partnerships established through this project.

Supportive Outcomes through Listening, Validation, and Empowerment (SOLVE)

Sandy Magaña, PhD, MSW, Cynthia Franklin, PhD, Larissa Miner, Caroline Lewin, Jeeyeon Hong, Amy Yu, Ryan Wang

Community Partner: Greenleaf Neurodiversity Community Center (Greenleaf NCC) of Easterseals Lonestar

Overview

SOLVE is a project designed to improve mental health support for autistic young adults through an adapted Solution-Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) intervention. The project focused on refining the SOLVE therapeutic protocol based on pilot study feedback developing and implementing a therapist training program, and evaluating the intervention with autistic participants. This pilot study was also supported by Projects for Societal Impact 2024. The study emphasized collaboration with autistic self-advocates and community advisors to ensure the intervention was responsive to the needs and experiences of autistic individuals.

Aims

1. Update and improve the SOLVE intervention protocol.
2. Develop a Train-the-Trainer program for therapists.
3. Implement that training with practicing social workers.

Findings

The project successfully recruited 18 autistic participants, of whom 14 completed the intervention, resulting in a strong retention rate of 78%. Six therapists were trained to provide Solution-Focused Brief Therapy to autistic young adults, and 14 participants received therapy through the study. The advisory committee, composed of autistic individuals and family members, provided valuable feedback that strengthened the intervention. A significant challenge involved participant recruitment, as hundreds of initial responses were found to be fraudulent, requiring extensive screening efforts and a shift toward recruitment through trusted community organizations and events. Despite these challenges, the project achieved its recruitment goals and generated sufficient data for outcome evaluation.

Next Steps

The research team plans to complete analysis of the pre- and post-intervention data and prepare manuscripts for publication. Building on the success of this pilot effort, the team secured funding from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board to conduct a randomized controlled trial, allowing them to test the intervention on a larger scale and generate stronger evidence of its effectiveness. Future work will continue refining and evaluating the SOLVE model while expanding access to evidence-based mental health support for autistic young adults.

Texas Initiative to Enhance Rural Social Work Solutions (TIES)

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Community Partner: El Progreso Memorial Library

Overview

The Texas Initiative to Enhance Rural Social Work Solutions (TIES) was created to strengthen behavioral health services, workforce capacity, and community coordination in Uvalde following the Robb Elementary School shooting. Through partnerships among community organizations, schools, libraries, and The University of Texas at Austin, the project focused on addressing long-term mental health needs, improving access to social work and behavioral health services, and understanding how rural communities respond to mass violence when resources and workforce capacity are limited. The project combined workforce development, community engagement, service coordination, and research to support healing and sustainable system-building in Uvalde. A central benefit of the project was that the work remained rooted in, shaped by, and accountable to the Uvalde community, with relationships of trust serving as a foundation for collaboration with community partners.

Aims

1. Establish a dedicated social work point of contact to connect community resources.
2. Increase coordination of social work activities, in particular to address ongoing mental health needs following a traumatic school shooting.
3. Implement a “team-of-teams” approach that brought together key organizations to strengthen collaboration and service delivery.
4. Build knowledge about effective responses to mass tragedy in rural communities.

Findings

The project found that strong partnerships and relationship-based collaboration are critical to sustaining behavioral health services in rural communities after mass violence. TIES strengthened organizational capacity among community partners, increased visibility of rural workforce opportunities, and identified key challenges including workforce shortages, provider burnout, vicarious trauma, leadership turnover, limited behavioral health infrastructure, and difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified professionals. The project also demonstrated that effective rural mental health responses require more than recruitment alone; they depend on long-term investments in supervision, training, educational pipelines, organizational support, and interagency coordination. These findings reinforced existing research while providing practical lessons about supporting rural communities facing prolonged recovery after tragedy.

Next Steps

The project will continue through August 2026 with activities including a Community Mental Health Awareness Day, a second Uvalde Mental Health Career Fair, professional training opportunities, family outreach efforts, and ongoing scholarly publications. The team is seeking additional funding to establish a rural social work education unit that would create structured field placement opportunities for students while strengthening local agency capacity and supervision. Longer-term plans include developing specialized rural social work training and workforce development initiatives at The University of Texas at Austin and translating lessons learned in Uvalde into scalable educational models, practice partnerships, and policy strategies that can strengthen rural behavioral health systems across Texas and beyond.



Thank You

Thank you to our PSI grantees for their dedication to advancing meaningful social impact, and to the Moritz family for their generous support. To learn more about the Moritz Center and its initiatives, visit moritzcenter.utexas.edu.



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