**Burmese and Bhutanese communities with SIRC's support organize around the Affordable Care Act**

Health literacy is one of the major barriers that refugee populations in Arizona face when accessing health services.

To address this issue, several agencies and two refugee communities are working together on a project called Aku Anyi Swastha, which is a mixture of Burmese and Nepali meaning Help for Health. The initial focus of the initiative is to build capacity in enrolling community members in health insurance programs offered through the Affordable Care Act (ACA). This health literacy demonstration project is partially funded by SIRC through its P20 grant awarded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities (NIMHD) of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

“Refugees face many barriers in their adopted countries,” says Dr. Crista Johnson-Agbakwu, SIRC clinical research affiliate and director of the Refugee Women’s Clinic, Maricopa Integrated Health System. “As you can imagine, lack of English proficiency is a huge challenge, as is lack of knowledge about local health resources. That’s why we are training bilingual community members to serve as Community Health Advisors.”

Dr. Johnson-Agbakwu is coordinating this effort within the Burmese and Bhutanese communities and also with ACA outreach grantees such as the Greater Phoenix Urban League, which offers the training that can eventually lead communities to become federally certified counselors and navigators. The effectiveness of the initiative will be measured in terms of the number of individuals newly enrolled into the ACA marketplace and the state Medicaid program, known as AHCCCS. In the future, Community Health Advisors want to address other health challenges faced by their communities.

“We’re very excited about this program,” says Johnson-Agbakwu. “In our initial four-day training held in December, we had 10 community participants—four more than for which we were able to provide stipends. That didn’t matter to the community members; they just want to serve their communities.”

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**Greetings from our director**

It is always enjoyable to have this opportunity to connect with all of you through a new issue of InFocus. Through these pages you will be able to see how SIRC’s research, community engagement and training initiatives continue to advance our mission of preventing, reducing and eventually eliminating health disparities. I just returned from Sevilla-Spain where as in previous years I taught an intervention research methods seminar. In addition to enjoying the warm hospitality of colleagues and students, I was very impressed by the growing interest and commitment I am witnessing around the world on culturally specific interventions. SIRC’s long trajectory in the area is seen as a resource nationally and internationally. I invite all of you to join me in identifying strategies through which we can effectively share our work and at the same time learn from our colleagues in other institutions. The needs and the opportunities are in front of us; let’s continue with our local, national and global engagement.

This issue of InFocus reviews some new initiatives emerging as a result of SIRC’s stronger focus on violence prevention and in global health research. We have recently submitted an R01 application to NIDA/NIH to broaden our work in Mexico while we continue to move forward with our research partnerships in Guatemala and Uruguay in the area of adolescent substance abuse prevention.

Much of the joy of working at ASU is getting to know so many wonderful and talented people. I am blessed to have had acquaintance with so many individuals who have made a difference in my life. I am sad to report that one such individual, Dr. Debra Friedman, former dean of the College of Public Programs, passed away on January 26, 2014, after a short illness. Debra was a great colleague and a strong advocate for SIRC. As ASU vice president of ASU’s Downtown Phoenix campus, she oversaw the establishment and growth of the campus which has helped revitalize downtown Phoenix. That will be one of her many legacies. She left us too soon and she will be greatly missed.

(Read more, page 2)
Health Equity Corner: Toward increasing U.S. life expectancy

The United States spends more money per person on health care than any other country in the world, and yet Americans live shorter lives and experience more injuries and illnesses than people in other high-income countries.

The common wisdom has attributed this health disadvantage to poorer health among racial or ethnic minorities and people living in poverty; however, research indicates that even high-income Americans are in worse health than their counterparts in other countries. What is going on?

A 2013 report, “U.S. Health in Perspective: Shorter Lives, Poorer Health,” authored by the National Research Council (NRC), closely examines the U.S. health disadvantage. Unlike other reviews, the expert panel commissioned by the NRC examined mortality across the life span to better understand life expectancy among Americans. The findings were striking.

When compared to other peer countries, Americans have the highest death rates before the age of 50 years. Indeed, deaths before the age of 50 are responsible for two-thirds of the difference in life expectancy between males in the U.S. and peer countries, and about one-third of the difference for females.

So, what is killing Americans before the age of 50? Compared to other high-income nations, Americans younger than 50 years old are more likely to die due to motor vehicle crashes, other unintentional injuries and homicide. Importantly, alcohol and drug-related deaths are also disproportionately high among Americans. It should be noted that alcohol and drugs also play a contributory role in the other death categories (motor vehicle crashes, injuries and violence).

Clearly, then, substance abuse, unintentional injuries and violence are overlapping, major factors in early mortality in this country. A key role for researchers is to continue to expand the evidence base for effective programming and policies in these areas, and community-based participatory research remains a key component in this work.

For its part, SIRC is continuing to conduct efficacy and effectiveness trials to intervene in adolescent substance abuse and to better understand related culturally mediated risk and protective factors, and we are working to expand the use of our existing evidence-based programs (e.g., keepin’ it REAL and Families Preventing the Next Generation, Living in 2 Worlds, and Parenting in 2 Worlds). Furthermore, Dr. Paul Smokowski, a nationally recognized leader in youth violence prevention, has recently joined SIRC and is expected to make significant research contributions in the area of violence prevention.

While improving the quality and quantity of life in this country requires action on many fronts and in many health and social arenas, we look forward to working with our many partners in the area of substance abuse prevention and violence prevention as key strategies in efforts to improve life expectancy in this country.

SIRC holds advocacy training series

On Thursday, February 13, 2014, SIRC initiated a six-workshop advocacy training series. Members of 17 different community agencies have registered and will be participating in the workshops, which are designed to equip community members with the knowledge and skills to conduct health policy advocacy. The six-session series, which was conceived by the Policy Subcommittee of the SIRC Community Advisory Board, is being facilitated by Dr. Cathy Eden, professor of practice with ASU’s School of Public Affairs and Mr. Tim Schmaltz, former CEO of Protecting Arizona’s Family Coalition. Session topics include Health Systems and Social Safety Net, Citizen and Coalition Advocacy, Messaging and Community Relations, and Issue-Oriented Campaigns and Election Participation.

Greetings from our director, cont.

I want to congratulate our dear friend and colleague, Dr. Mary Gillmore, former director of the School of Social Work, on her retirement. We owe a debt of gratitude to Mary for her support of SIRC while she was SSW director and for her leadership as the principal investigator of SIRC’s Research, Education and Training Core. We wish her the best in her retirement. Her dedicated mentorship of early career faculty and students has produced a long lasting research legacy of rigorous and use-inspired research projects. One of Mary’s former mentees is Dr. Cindy Sangalang, SIRC’s post-doctoral fellow for the past two years. I am happy to report that Cindy has been hired as an assistant professor in the ASU School of Social Work, Tucson component. So she will not be far, and we are looking forward to partnering with her in her new role.

This issue of InFocus will provide you with information about the findings and progress made by the many research studies and health literacy demonstration projects. The 12th Annual SIRC Research Conference will be an ideal opportunity to become more deeply acquainted with those research findings. I hope to be able to greet you in person at the conference on April 4. There is more information about the exciting conference program in this newsletter. All the contributions you make in your different roles make our work possible, thank you!

Good health,

Flavio F. Marsiglia, Ph.D., SIRC director
Distinguished Foundation Professor of Cultural Diversity and Health
School of Social Work, College of Public Programs

Ayers brings sociological perspective to SIRC

With a background in sociology, Dr. Stephanie Ayers says that as associate director of research for SIRC, she gets to put her sociologist lens to work in a very different way. “Sociologists critically analyze social connections and structures,” says Ayers. “Our work at SIRC builds upon this body of knowledge to create and test interventions focused on individual behaviors, such as substance abuse.”

Ayers oversees SIRC’s broad array of projects that look at the protective factors influencing adolescent risk behaviors and how culture can act as a protective barrier, particularly against substance use.

“Ayers states that community involvement is critically important in SIRC’s approach. “We don’t take the approach that we know best. Instead, we start with focus groups of parents, kids and key informants. They tell us what they think will protect their kids, what their kids need and then we go about building a curriculum around what the community tells us,” she explains.

Ayers’ expertise in the field spans back to her graduate-level work. She earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology then later went on to pursue a master’s in medical sociology. When she came to ASU to pursue a Ph.D., she started to look at how different racial and ethnic groups use alternative medicine. “My belief was that culture influences how you use medicine and which medicines you choose,” she says. This became the basis of her dissertation. “That really set the course for me,” she says. “I work in a very interdisciplinary setting that opens your eyes to different perspectives of the research, and enables me to work with community partners to implement these programs.”

Ayers says, “The big vision for SIRC is to reduce and eliminate minority health disparities. Though that may sound challenging and overwhelming, we firmly believe that what we do here has real impact in the real world, and it’s not just academic research. We will make a difference to kids and families, particularly minority families.”

Wolfersteig chairs the Arizona Substance Abuse Partnership’s Epi Work Group

Currently in its tenth year, the Arizona Substance Abuse Partnership’s Epidemiology Work Group meets monthly at the offices of the ASU Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC).

The Epi Work Group is chaired by Dr. Wendy Wolfersteig, director, SIRC Office of Evaluation and Partner Contracts. The Epi Work Group brings together management-level researchers from state agencies, academia and community-based organizations to discuss, share and disseminate data on substance abuse and related topics such as crime, vital statistics, and behavioral and mental health. The goal is to create a comprehensive picture of substance abuse in the state to inform communities, policymakers and local, state and tribal officials in programmatic and policy level decision-making related to substance abuse.

“It’s a great opportunity serving on this group,” says Wolfersteig, “and collaborating with colleagues to enhance data-driven decision-making in Arizona.”

The Epi Work Group serves as a resource to the Arizona Substance Abuse Partnership and member agencies. In addition to releasing comprehensive profiles of substance abuse in the state, training and technical assistance efforts around use of the Community Data Project help to develop the capacity of community coalitions, policy advisors, and other key stakeholders in the prevention, treatment, enforcement and recovery arenas.

“We think things like strong ethnic identity and grounding in culture is very protective,” she says. “So, even if you have peers that aren’t the best for you, the family can act as that buffer. Even if you live in a not so great neighborhood, the family can mediate the influences of the neighborhood,” she explains.

Southwest Interdisciplinary Research Center (SIRC)

ASU School of Social Work, College of Public Programs

Mission statement: To generate use-inspired knowledge and interventions on social and cultural determinants of health in partnership with communities of the Southwest to prevent, reduce and eliminate health disparities.

SIRC is funded by:
• The National Institute of Health on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the National Institutes of Health (NIMHD/NIH), award: P20MD002316
• The National Institute of Health on Minority Health and Health Disparities and the National Institutes of Health (NIMHD/NIH), award R01MD006110
• Arizona State University
• Evaluation contracts with community partners
Vega to keynote 2014 SIRC Conference

Dr. William Vega, Provost Professor, University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work, and executive director of the USC Edward R. Roybal Institute on Aging, will be giving the keynote presentation at SIRC’s 12th Annual Research Conference. Vega will be providing a stimulating research overview related to the conference theme of human mobility and its impact on health.

An elected member of the Institute of Medicine, Vega has conducted community and clinical research projects on health, mental health and substance abuse throughout the United States and Latin America. His specialty is multi-cultural epidemiologic and services research with adolescents and adults. He has published more than 170 articles and chapters, in addition to several books.

Prior to joining USC, Vega was director of the Luskin Center on Innovation at UCLA. In 2002, he received the Society for Prevention Research’s Community, Culture and Prevention Science Award and the National Hispanic Science Network on Drug Abuse’s National Award of Excellence for Mental Health Disparities by a Senior Scientist.

featured event

SIRC 12th Annual Research Conference
April 4, 2014, 8 a.m.-5 p.m.
Sheraton Downtown Hotel, Phoenix, Arizona

People on the Move: Journeys of Resilience towards Health Equity

In addition to Dr. William Vega’s keynote, invited conference speakers include Dr. Maria Teresa Cerqueira, Pan American Health Organization; Dr. Grant Marshall, RAND Corporation; Dr. Michael Hollifield, VA Long Beach Healthcare System, and Dr. Selina A. Smith, Medical College of Georgia.

For more information about the conference, contact Linda Madrid at 602-496-0700 or linda.madrid@asu.edu or visit the SIRC website.

SIRC publications


Exploring foodways as part of a cultural system of the Black barbershop, points to the ways in which community considers dietary behavior, ascribes meanings associated with food, constitutes the social structure and material culture affecting food, and instantiates the historical factors that contribute to the persistence or change in food behavior. By centering the role of foodways in the performativity of Black men’s food habits of acculturation, this paper illuminates cardiovascular screening as a health literacy intervention in Black barbershops. The role of health in the sustenance of Black men reveals unique dimensions of the intersections of food and performance.


This article examines changes in the drug resistance strategies used by urban American Indian (UAI) middle school students during a pilot test of a substance use prevention curriculum designed specifically for UAI youth, Living in Two Worlds (L2W). Data come from 57 UAI students (53% female; mean age=12.5 years) who participated in L2W during an academic enrichment class for native youth at two Phoenix schools. The L2W curriculum appears effective in teaching culturally relevant communication strategies that expand UAI youth’s repertoire of drug resistance skills.


This article investigates the impact of acculturation and familismo on life satisfaction and resilience among Mexican American adults living in the Southwest (N = 307), the majority of whom are immigrants. The findings indicate that bilingual individuals report significantly higher levels of life satisfaction and resilience than their Spanish-speaking counterparts. Speaking primarily English only predicted higher levels of resilience but not life satisfaction. Implications for social work practice are discussed.