

Advancing Health Equity through Improving Access to Behavioral Health Care

Michelle Levy, AM & Jason Matejkowski, PhD
University of Kansas School of Social Welfare



Issue

Social determinants, health behaviors, access and availability of care are all contributors to disparities in health.

Increasing the supply of behavioral health professionals and improving the distribution of the workforce in high need, high demand areas will increase access to behavioral health services.

However, to improve health equity, we must go beyond focusing on individual behavior and be attuned to the social context.

Social work's "person in environment" perspective highlights the importance of understanding individuals within their unique context. In addition, the profession's code of ethics call for social workers to "strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty and other forms of social injustice"

In addition, research suggests that when patients or clients and clinicians share similar backgrounds (including residing in similar communities), individuals are likely to attend more sessions, less likely to drop out of treatment, more satisfied, and they have better outcomes.

As behavioral health specialists with a systems focus, social workers are uniquely positioned to address mental health, substance use and socio-environmental factors that impact health, well-being and equity.



Health is the byproduct of justice

-Norman Daniels, philosopher & bioethicist

Project

The purpose of the **Integrated Health Scholars Program** is to increase the supply of master's level social work (MSW) professionals prepared to provide high-quality integrated behavioral health services in rural and other high need communities in Kansas and western Missouri.

Scholars participate in monthly "value-added" training (beyond coursework) to develop knowledge and skills for interprofessional clinical practice and leadership in integrated health care. Content that specifically related to advancing health equity includes:

- Starting with **person-centered, trauma-informed care** that incorporates an interactive session on identifying and addressing **implicit bias** in health care practice and features individuals with **lived experience**
- SPENT, an online decision making game focused on **poverty** & health playspent.org
- Walk a Mile in our Patient's Shoes involves riding the bus and walking to community service providers to experience **social determinants of health** and resources available for support
- Visiting a **rural** Federally Qualified Health Center to learn about the provision of affirming services for **underserved communities**
- Patient simulation with pharmacy students to better understand and practice addressing **chronic conditions, pharmaceutical treatment**, and intersections with substance use, mental health and social determinants
- Interactive lectures on **telehealth access** and **digital literacy** with underserved individuals, **legal and ethical issues** with telehealth

A Capstone project brings together learning and allows students to **lead a change initiative** at their practicum aimed at promoting equity and responsiveness within their organization. Projects are shared in professional poster format at an event with community partners providing an additional opportunities to raise awareness of disparities and promote equity.

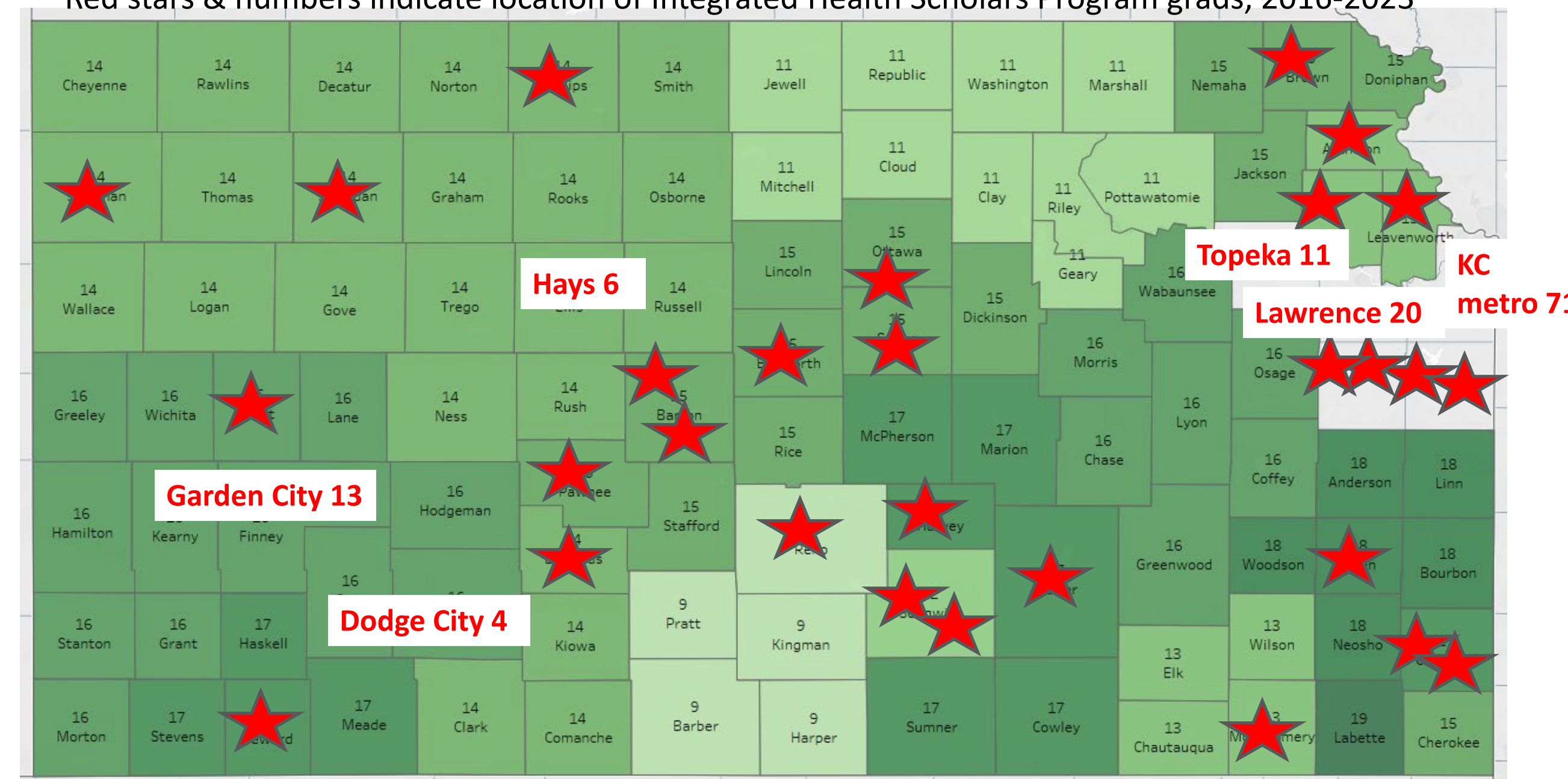
Results

For the 2023-24 academic year, there are 30 clinical MSW students participating in the Integrated Health Scholars Program. Between 2016-2023, the Scholars program has graduated 8 cohorts of students totaling 246 new MSWs.

- ❖ To date, the program has provided **\$2.8 million in scholarship** support
- ❖ Scholar grads include **95 persons of color** and **44 bilingual students** (primarily Spanish/English as well as English and Hmong, K'iche and ASL)
- ❖ Around **62% had a rural background** (lived in a rural area at some time)
- ❖ A survey of pre-graduation survey conducted with 2023 graduates found that **65% intend to practice in a rural or medically underserved area**. All were **licensed** or intended to get licensed in social work and nearly a third planned to pursue a dual license in addictions counseling.
- ❖ The majority of graduates are **employed in Kansas** (or the Kansas City metro area) with around a third **working in rural communities**
- ❖ Scholar program graduates are employed by Federally Qualified Health Centers, Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics/Community Mental Health Centers, schools, rural hospital/health systems, child development services, and substance use treatment facilities among other organizations.

Figure 1: Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) for Mental Health map In Kansas, 100 of 105 counties are considered HPSA for Mental Health. Larger numbers/darker green indicates great need.

Red stars & numbers indicate location of Integrated Health Scholars Program grads, 2016-2023



7 in Missouri (outside KCMO), 27 work in other states, 7 not working, 1 Peace Corp, 1 retired, 2 left social work

HPSA map created by KDHE Office of Primary Care and Rural Health

Lessons Learned

- ❖ **Educational Support Impacts Equity**
Providing financial support and value-added education is an effective way to recruit and prepare masters level students to bring clinical and advocacy skills in working with underserved communities where they are most needed.
- ❖ **Engaging with Rural & Other High Need Communities**
Listening to and learning from and with rural and other community partners brings the lens of underserved populations to social work/behavioral health education, student support and workforce development
- ❖ **Cultivating Relationships with Like-Missioned Organizations & Programs**
Partnerships offer opportunities for leveraging resources and connections to meet shared goals for health professional preparation, workforce development and, ultimately, health equity

Organization Information

University of Kansas School of Social Welfare

www.socwel.ku.edu

The Integrated Health Scholars Program is supported by the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training for Professionals and Paraprofessionals award G02HP27982 and award MO1HP313600100. This information and conclusions are those of the authors and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by HRSA, HHS, or the U.S. Government.

Contact

Michelle Levy mlevy@ku.edu

Jason Matejkowski jmate@ku.edu

socwel.ku.edu/integrated-health-scholars-program