

Year in Review 2023/24

Transforming our world. Our future. Ourselves.



University of
Pittsburgh

School of
Social Work

A message from the Dean



Dear Pitt Social Work Friends and Colleagues,

It is always wonderful to have a chance to sit back and think about all that we've done over the past year. And each year it seems to get more and more exciting! Our school, our faculty, staff, students, and alumni are engaged in so much important, impactful, and critical work — it's always hard to decide what to include in our brief review. And, this year we made our task even harder by shortening the Year in Review. With our newly designed website where we are focusing more clearly on "telling our story," weekly and monthly e-blasts and newsletters, Bridges Alumni Magazine, and the myriad ways that our collective activities and work are disseminated, it felt like time to condense the Year in Review. So, in this trifold, we focus on some outward-facing projects and initiatives that exemplify what we do and that might not be on others' radar.

In all of the typical ways, it's been a fantastic year. Our faculty have continued to outdo themselves and we've had a significant jump in externally funded projects with a wonderful portfolio of projects that address the wide range of issues confronting our communities, neighbors, and nation. On the academic side, we've continued to expand and deepen our JEDI-focused emphasis and curriculum and are moving towards welcoming our inaugural cohort of online MSW students in Fall 2025, as we expand equity and access beyond our campus. And, as you will see highlighted in this brief report, our faculty, staff, and students are fully immersed in and engaged with so many communities, systems, and organizations — impacting knowledge, policy, and practice in so many ways and places.

It is a real joy to bring all of this together in this Review. I hope that you will get a sense of what we've been doing and what we're poised to do. From the cover photo of our gerontology-focused faculty, the dramatic expansion and productivity of the Center on Race and Social Problems, our approaches to better support students, our efforts to influence and change policy and practice, and our commitment to centering lived experience in all aspects of what we do — it's been a truly wonderful year!

I hope that you will enjoy these brief highlights. And that you will explore our redesigned website for more information about our activities and foci — socialwork.pitt.edu. As we move through this year and into the future, we continue to focus on ways to prepare courageous leaders, develop and advance innovative knowledge and approaches, and build collaborative partnerships to promote social justice. In short, we are thriving as we continue to transform: our world, our future, ourselves.

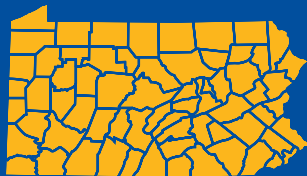
All the best,

Betsy Farmer
Dean

Pitt School of Social Work by the Numbers

#12

Ranked #12 in the nation by *US News and World Report*



Child Welfare Education and Training

programs support students and training across the state of PA, totaling **over \$30 million** in annual expenses.

215+

Pitt School of Social Work provided more than 215 paid appointments, totaling more than

\$3.2 million dollars

in direct student support

& 276

tuition scholarships at

\$3.1 million.

more than

44

externally funded research and training projects

totaling

\$4.9 million
in annual funding

New Faculty and Faculty Promotions



Kyaïen Conner joined the faculty as Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair, director of the Center on Race and Social Problems, associate dean for justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion, and professor



Quinton Cotton joined the faculty as an assistant professor



Jaime Booth was named associate dean for research



Leah Jacobs was promoted to associate professor



Nev Jones was promoted to associate professor



Travis Labrum was promoted to associate professor

Championing Racial Equity: RECI's Mission and Growing Impact

2024 has been a breakout year for the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (RECI), as it continues its mission to advance racial equity and anti-racism. Under the leadership of Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP) Associate Director Ron Idoko, RECI has built momentum since being founded in 2021 and has become a catalyst for change.

In January, RECI premiered its documentary *Illuminating the Vaccine for Racism* which explores personal and collective racial equity consciousness, sparking important discussions on how we can transform our society to be more just and inclusive for all. The premiere featured a panel with Idoko and changemakers from across the University, and a full documentary debut is planned for film festivals soon.

In March, RECI launched its inaugural podcast episode with Jessica Thomas, Personnel Manager, Pitt School of Health and Rehabilitation Sciences, who shared insights from her racial equity journey inspired by her participation in the program.

Additionally, RECI hosted its second Facilitators Academy, equipping participants with skills to lead RECI cohorts in their own communities. Recent participation in conferences



in South Africa and Switzerland has expanded RECI's global reach, and collaborations continue to increase, positioning the program for sustained impact in local communities and on a global scale.

A standout achievement for the year is a recent \$5 million grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to the Schools of Social Work and Medicine for a groundbreaking RECI study. The study will examine the effectiveness of RECI's training programs on systemic racism in healthcare, involving participants from 30 institutions. As Idoko states, "While it is recognized that racism is a public health crisis, most are unclear how to mitigate its impact. People are looking for solutions that work, and we believe RECI can be part of that solution."

Overall, this year has been marked by significant initiatives that underscore RECI's commitment to fostering understanding and action within academic and community settings. ■

School works to increase student supports

The world needs more social workers! And students who want to go into social work need supports so that they can become the next generation of leaders, change makers, innovators, and scholars that are so desperately needed. As the costs of higher education continue to climb and as the challenges in our society demand well-educated, critical thinkers, who are committed to creating better systems, policies, practice, and knowledge, we need to step up to better support students who are committed to becoming this next generation of transformers. We are focusing on this at Pitt — to figure out the ways that we can support students in their journey, and that includes better financial support as they get their degrees.



Tonya Slawinski, Director of Practicum Education, notes: "A paid internship is an ideal solution for students, who must pay their own bills for food, housing, and childcare while contributing to communities and learning vital skills."

Pitt School of Social has made student support a key priority with more than 215 paid appointments, totaling more than 3.2 million dollars in direct student support, and 276 tuition scholarships at 3.1 million.

One helpful approach has been the school's fellowship programs which offer a cohort-based, specialized experience for students in fields like behavioral health, child welfare, health, aging, and other critical areas of practice. This past



year, Pitt Social Work secured funding for 28 student stipends and 21 student tuition scholarships through the SEEKS SES (Supporting Expansion and Enhancement of K-12 School- Based Social, Emotional Supports) grant, partnering with the Allegheny Intermediate Unit.

Another new funding source is the school's participation in Survivor-Link AmeriCorps, a nationwide effort to increase training and awareness of gender-based violence. Professor Sara Goodkind is the faculty mentor and liaison for the program. Nine social work students received a stipend and scholarships to support their education and training by national experts.

Funding student practicums in social work education is an ongoing priority for the school and has been greatly increased by generous funders who recognize and support these initiatives. If you would like to give to support students at the school, please contact Katy Gallmeyer (kdw40@pitt.edu), Director of Development. ■

NASW Legislative Advocacy and Education Day in Harrisburg an uplifting experience for students and faculty

NASW Legislative Education and Advocacy Day (LEAD) 2024 brought dozens of Pitt Social Work students, staff, and faculty to the Pennsylvania state capitol in March. The group, led by Practicum Assistant Professor Alicia Melnick, offered the students a unique opportunity to meet with state representatives and advocates from across the state. The group marched with other advocates and listened to legislative aides and representatives speak about passing two bills on increasing minimum wage to \$15 and pushing for multi-state licensure.



“Social workers are tasked with advocating for vulnerable individuals, families, and communities” said Melnick. “Social work students must learn how the system works to advocate for policies that address people’s needs. Through LEAD students have the unique opportunity to interact with elected officials, learn about the policy process, and participate in organized advocacy efforts. I enjoyed watching students engage in the process from the grassroots level, creating signs and marching with fellow social workers to engaging in critical conversations with elected officials about bills impacting their future practice and the lives and well-being of people in Pennsylvania.”

Students had a variety of reasons for joining LEAD 2024, and overall found the experience to be very valuable for their personal and professional development. MSW student Sierra Strickland shared, “I attended LEAD because I wanted to have an experience where I could advocate for and use my voice towards policy, something that I had never done in this type of setting or capacity before. Meeting with a legislator and being able to directly voice support towards two bills was very exciting and inspired me towards future policy work.”

In addition to the march, rally, and meetings, a small group of students also attended dinner and a lecture at the Governor’s Residence, accompanied by Center on Race and Social Problems Director Kyaien Conner, where they viewed an exhibit by Pittsburgh photographer Teenie Harris. ■



Caring Connections for YOUth aims to address disparities in juvenile justice system

Caring Connections for YOUth (CC4Y) is an innovative community-led initiative aimed at reducing racial disproportionality in youth referrals to the juvenile legal system. The program provides young people and their families with critical resources and support, offering a pre-arrest diversion pathway that helps keep them out of the legal system.

With funding from the National Institute of Justice, a research team from the University of Pittsburgh, led by professors Sara Goodkind and Jeff Shook from the School of Social Work, Social Work PhD student Latrice Shannon, and Liz Miller from the School of Medicine, is partnering with Melissa Sickmund and the CC4Y staff to evaluate this promising initiative. The evaluation is designed to assess how well CC4Y is being implemented, its effectiveness in reducing legal system referrals overall, and its success in addressing racial disparities.

“The goal is to create a program that not only reduces system involvement for all youth but also specifically tackles the racial disproportionality that exists within the juvenile justice system,” said Jeff Shook.



The research team is engaging in several methods to evaluate CC4Y’s impact. They are observing CC4Y presentations in the community, conducting surveys and interviews with participating youth and their families, and analyzing data from both the program and the broader juvenile legal system. This evaluation will also document CC4Y’s development to help other jurisdictions replicate the program.

“This initiative builds on the long-term research and advocacy of the Black Girls Equity Alliance and has the potential to make a lasting difference in how we support young people of color in our community,” explained Sara Goodkind. “We hope it can be a model for reimagining youth justice in other areas as well.”

The evaluation results will be shared with policymakers, researchers, and communities as the project continues over the next two years. ■

Horizon Scholars Program focuses on youth aging out of foster care

Over 84% of foster youth are interested in attending college, but many face obstacles navigating the higher education system, logistics, finances, and ongoing supports. Unfortunately, few foster youth manage to overcome these obstacles to achieve their goal. At Pitt, faculty from Social Work have come together with a team of committed colleagues from Educational Outreach, the Office of the Provost, Public Health, and Admissions and Financial Aid to help remove as many of these barriers as possible.



Dr. Helen Cahalane, who directs the Child Welfare Education and Research Programs within the School of Social Work, says: “For years, our child welfare staff at county offices — and kudos to them — struggled to help youth who had experienced foster care enter and complete college by cobbling together a patchwork of resources that were not comprehensive or easily accessible.” She notes: “Traditionally, foster youth have faced extraordinary challenges; practical, financial, emotional, and social, in securing a college degree.”

Cahalane notes “I am delighted that we are now able to offer real solutions for foster youth who attend Pitt in the Horizon Scholars Program. This is a university-wide collaborative program that includes early outreach, academic and social supports, and innovative year-round housing and meal-plans that address one of the most intractable problems: the fact that dorms and universities close on holidays, often leaving many foster youth with nowhere to go.”

The Horizon Scholars Program at Pitt will track the program’s success over time. Cahalane is hopeful: “This program represents a huge improvement. I could not be prouder that MSW graduates Anika Jones and Rosie Hogan are in key roles, ensuring that evidence-based, trauma-informed approaches will support and empower foster youth in entering and completing college. I look forward to celebrating with our first cohort of graduates.” ■



Lived experiences centered in new research and speaker series

Research, advocacy, and teaching are all enriched when people bring their full selves, identities, and personal experiences to their work. Centering lived experiences is critical for developing knowledge, programs, and professionals that truly recognize and address the needs and complexities in our systems.

Associate Professor Nev Jones brings her work in disability justice and lived experience advocacy to fruition with grants funded by the National Institute of Mental Health, the Social Security Administration, and the New York Office of Mental Health, among others. Last year, Jones launched the Lived Experience Research Academy (LERA), was an 8-week virtual summer program for students in social work or psychology with lived experience in psychiatric disability. People with serious mental illnesses who are interested in pursuing higher education are significantly underrepresented in graduate programs and are therefore deprived of the lifelong benefits it can provide and academia is missing their potentially unique contributions. The goal was to provide LERA participants with mentoring and guidance through weekly lectures and workshops. Jones noted that: “This project attracted over 100 local and international applicants for 7 spots. I think it’s safe to say there is an enormous backlog of interest and need for support for aspiring students who have themselves experienced serious mental illness.”



Amplifying the school’s commitment to diverse voices is the newly endowed Florence Gibbs Momeyer Endowed Lecture Fund, made possible through the generosity of school of social work alum Alan G. Momeyer and

his brother Richard M. Momeyer, who established the lecture in 2021 to honor their mother, a social worker who fought to ensure that all children received a free quality education as promised in the Pennsylvania Constitution. Momeyer related how his mother was initially rebuffed by legislature who told her “We are not set up to educate special needs children.” Momeyer noted dryly that his mother’s response, which she argued all the way to the Supreme Court, was “Then get set up for it.” Not only was PA the first state to include special needs children in public schools, but 49 other states eventually followed the example. Speakers for the Momeyer Lecture have included disability rights lawyer Haben Girma, autism and animal behavior activist Temple Grandin, and most recently, Josie Badger who spoke about the crucial role of individuals with disabilities and allies in shaping policy and driving systemic change. ■