

UNC Center for AIDS Research Newsletter

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



The mission of the UNC CFAR is to provide a multidisciplinary environment that promotes basic, clinical, behavioral and translational research in the prevention, detection and treatment of HIV infection.

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Out In The Field: The Importance of Research Assistants

The Center for AIDS Research (CFAR) at UNC is true to its name – we provide infrastructure to support investigation into the HIV/AIDS epidemic using clinical, behavioral, biological and interdisciplinary research approaches. Our research projects are spearheaded by some of the most talented and innovative investigators in the nation and the world. These principal investigators spawn new ideas and push the field of HIV/AIDS research forward. In order to bring their ideas and projects to fruition and benefit the public with accurate and in-depth findings, a wide variety of support staff and scientific assistance is required. The project managers, research associates, and research assistants who offer their time, energy, and commitment to these projects each day are essential to the operation and development of our center and all of our research endeavors. In this issue of our newsletter, we will highlight the importance of research staff members and share information about the experiences of these remarkable individuals “out in the field”.

Dr. David Wohl, Professor of Medicine in UNC’s Infectious Diseases department and Co-Director of HIV Services in the NC Department of Corrections, conducts research on HIV in correctional facilities and clinics around the state that requires research

“In our HIV prevention studies the research assistants are a vital part of the research team... They bring a broad range of expertise in reaching out to hard-to-reach populations, developing excellent rapport, and collecting high quality data despite the barriers to doing so in community settings.” – Carol Golin, MD

team members to travel and collect data. He explains, “Research Assistants really should be called Research Do-ers.” Dr. Wohl states, “In clinical research, they are the people who actually meet with and get to know each of those points on the graphs we present and publish. Meticulous and hard-working, they often take risks to accurately deliver the data that answers our questions and reduces our ignorance.”

Dr. Ron Strauss, UNC’s Executive Vice Provost and Director of the Office of Community Outreach, Dissemination and Education (CODE) at CFAR, has worked in HIV/AIDS research for nearly three decades and spearheads the UNC CFAR Community Advisory Board. His extensive experience has led him to believe that Research Assistants, Research Associates and Project Managers are “absolutely critical to the conduct of creative, high quality, externally-funded research at Carolina.” He explains that, so often, “good ideas depend upon exquisite attention to detail and implementation”. Strauss has seen firsthand the incredible commitment of these staff researchers as they “quietly make the work of research happen and their ideas and energy enhance the research process at every stage from inception through to publication.” Strauss shares, “our campus’s Research Assistants, Research Associates and Project Managers work on studies and experiments that assure that this University is helping to respond to the world’s biggest questions and issues. For all of this and more, we celebrate UNC’s Research Assistants, Research Associates and Project Managers and are pleased to see the CFAR Newsletter highlight their contributions to Carolina.”

Catherine Grodensky, Manager of the CFAR’s Social and Behavioral Science Research Core, oversees the day-to-day functioning of the Core and has a finger on the pulse of HIV/AIDS social research at UNC. She believes that “social and behavioral research wouldn’t be possible without research assistants, and the success or failure of our research depends heavily on the work that research assistants do in all stages of research.” Grodensky explains that, in social and behavioral research, “research assistants have to perform a real balancing act—when recruiting people for studies, they are responsible for making sure each potential enrollee understands often highly complex study procedures so they can make an informed decision about whether to participate, and also often for trying to enroll a sufficient sample size for the study.” Their responsibilities also can include “administering survey instruments and interviews in a neutral way that doesn’t bias participants’ answers, but while also maintaining positive rapport and making the experience enjoyable so that the participant will continue to be engaged in the study (or in future studies).” These research staff members are “the first line of defense against any problems with study data, and their close attention to study forms, computerized surveys, and participants’ understanding of survey questions is critical to ensure researchers are collecting rigorous data to answer their questions.”

We are deeply grateful for the efforts of these intelligent and energetic professionals and their commitment to the field of HIV/AIDS research. These essential members of our CFAR team make it all possible!



Spotlight on Lynn Tillery

Lynn Tillery is a Clinical Research Associate at the UNC Center for AIDS Research who works on Project ImPact with Dr. David Wohl and Dr. Carol Golin to investigate facilitators and barriers to HIV medical care and services for individuals after being released from incarceration. She works hard to ensure adherence to HIV medications once inmates are released, and travels all around the state to interact with and help research participants. This month, we were lucky enough to chat with her about what it's like for a blooming public-health researcher to be working out in the field.

"It is the research assistants' dedication that really stands out, their willingness to go above and beyond, and to always pitch in to help each other and to go that extra mile (or for some studies, literally several hundred miles) it takes to make our studies just that much better." – Carol Golin, MD

Lynn's job includes recruiting HIV positive incarcerated individuals in the NC correctional system to participate in Project ImPact. She visits these participants in prison and collects pertinent information about their lives, health, and future plans two weeks prior to their release. Within 24 hours of release, she again visits the participants and provides them with a cell phone and supplies like toiletries, condoms, and a clean shirt. She helps them count their HIV medications and prepares them for their medication regimen outside of prison. She makes 4 additional visits after this post-release check-in, traveling to participants'

hometowns and conducting a survey with each person about their physical, mental, and social health, access to healthcare, and adherence to their medication regimen. She draws blood at each of these visits to measure the participant's viral load and CD4 count, helping to track the progression of their HIV virus.

Lynn explained that "being in the field" is significantly different from looking at study participants on paper – it "brings a human aspect to everything". She has realized that "there is a big distinction between viewing a person in a database before release and actually seeing them on the day they get out of prison". Sometimes when her participants are released from prison, they "have nowhere to go and are down about life in general" – often, their "family has discarded them for one reason or another and they have no one to look to." She says, "In the field, you get the RAW version of everything. To some of these inmates you are the only positive role model in their lives". Lynn currently has five former-inmates who "call her for everything", including "looking for direction", making "decisions about jobs, housing and life", and calling to share that they have gotten a job interview. She says, "they just want someone to tell them they are doing a good job and are going in the right direction". Lynn acknowledges that she has "become an important part of their lives, because some of them have no one else that they trust to help them".

Lynn is completely committed to the health and wellbeing of the participants she enrolls in the study, and she is willing to make personal sacrifices in order to be there for them when they are in need. She has driven in a car for over three hours to be present for an inmate's release. She shared that once, a study participant was released from prison and the participant's family panicked when they could not locate him. She spoke to the former inmate's father and contacted people all over the state to identify where the inmate had been transferred and released, ultimately helping to reconnect the father and son safely.

Lynn says the most rewarding aspect of her job is when she gets a chance to positively affect the quality of life of study participants. She has "seen some people completely turn their lives around, going from a shelter with nothing but the clothes on their backs, to having their own place to live" and working to buy food and necessities for their children. She has seen study participants transition from having a viral load "in the millions" to "being undetectable and living a healthy life". Lynn is unsure where her career will lead her, but she is sure that it will include working with individuals living with and affected by HIV/AIDS.

The UNC CFAR is fortunate and grateful to have dedicated team members like Lynn Tillery and her colleagues. We look forward to highlighting their amazing efforts and work in the months to come.

NEW MEDIA NEWS



Join our facebook community to learn more about HIV-related news and events in the triangle:
<http://www.facebook.com/UNCCCFAR>

Free videos from the UNC campus-wide course on HIV/AIDS for you! Watch them at:
<http://vimeo.com/channels/unccfar>



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