



University of Colorado School of Medicine Grant Will Enhance Early Childhood Mental Health

AURORA, COLO. (July 12, 2011) Infants and small children in Colorado and New Mexico—particularly those in underserved and at-risk demographics—will benefit from better access to care, service delivery, integration, provider training and public awareness of early childhood mental health, thanks to a major grant to the Harris Healthy Infant Program (HHIP) at the University of Colorado School of Medicine.

The two-year, \$398,821 grant from the Michigan-based W.K. Kellogg Foundation began July 1. The Harris program operates out of the Department of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus.

Examples of Harris program initiatives and services to be launched or expanded include:

- **On-site instant access to infant mental health counselors at pediatric primary-care clinics**—overcoming the need for families to make separate appointments to see different providers at separate times and locations.
- **Training for pediatric health providers to help them identify potential developmental barriers in very young children**, enabling early diagnosis and mitigation of issues before they negatively impact childhood mental health and well-being.
- **Education and outreach on factors that improve early childhood mental health**, particularly the psychological and nutritional benefits of breastfeeding and improved mother/infant bonding.
- **Future workforce development**, with postdoctoral fellowships that cultivate national health leaders who recognize the critical role of mental health in early childhood development.

HHIP personnel hope to help 1,500 families annually through pediatric primary care and prenatal services, integrate mental health care into 2,000 well-child visits, and provide related education to 100 health care and early providers, among other measurable program goals.

These initiatives address several major barriers to early childhood mental health care. Parents—especially low-income and rural parents—rarely can access or afford specialized mental health services for small children, and often cannot recognize or fully identify mental health components to their infant or toddler’s developmental challenges. Pediatric providers are often too time-pressed, or lack sufficient confidence or experience, to address mental health issues



during primary care appointments. And health services on many fronts have been squeezed by Colorado's distinctive budget pressures and the economic recession and—as of 2009, the number of Colorado children under 5 living in poverty had nearly doubled since 2000.

Yet this Harris grant comes on the heels of increased national recognition of the importance of early childhood preventive measures in maximizing lifetime health and wellness. For example, the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services in May announced \$100 million in grants toward five priority preventive areas, one of which prominently features early-childhood mental health projects. This increased focus is due in part to evidence-based scientific discoveries made within the last few decades.

“When I got into this field many years ago, my interest in early childhood mental health was based mainly on anecdote and intuition: that the earlier you got involved, the better it would be. But now, there's research on a brain and neuronal level that indicates that by addressing these problems early, you can make a more positive impact,” says Associate Professor Karen Frankel, PhD, director of the program. “When a child veers off a healthy pathway, Harris Healthy Infant Program initiatives can help catch them just a few inches off that path, before they get miles away.”

The CU School of Medicine program is one of just 12 U.S. university members of the Harris Professional Development Network, a landmark international network of early childhood mental health programs established by gifts from the Irving B. Harris Foundation.

The [W.K. Kellogg Foundation](#), established in 1930, supports children, families and communities as they strengthen and create conditions that propel vulnerable children to achieve success as individuals and as contributors to the larger community and society. Grants are concentrated in the United States, Latin America and the Caribbean, and southern Africa.

Faculty at the University of Colorado's [School of Medicine](#) work to advance science and improve care. These faculty members include physicians, educators and scientists at University of Colorado Hospital, Children's Hospital Colorado, Denver Health, National Jewish Health, and the Denver Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Degrees offered by the University of Colorado School of Medicine include doctor of medicine, doctor of physical therapy, and masters of physician assistant studies. The School is located on the University of Colorado's Anschutz Medical Campus, one of four campuses in the University of Colorado system. For additional news and information, please visit the [University of Colorado Denver newsroom](#) online.

This grant is among more than 200,000 gifts and grants received by the University of Colorado since the 2006 outset of [Creating Futures](#)—an unprecedented \$1.5 billion fundraising campaign to support teaching, research, outreach and health programs on CU's four campuses. The program continues to seek private support; for more information on this program, visit www.medschool.ucdenver.edu/psychiatry/harrisprogram.

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