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Clarkston Mental Health Alliance Receives $100k Grant from DeKalb County’s Super District 6 for Pilot Project to Address Mental Health Needs of Community

New Project Will Enable Early-Stage Mental Health Clinicians to Provide Culturally Competent & Trauma-Sensitive Care for Refugees, Immigrants & Migrant (RIM) Communities.

CLARKSTON, GA –

The Clarkston Mental Health Alliance, which is comprised of the CDC–funded Prevention Research Center at Georgia State University in collaboration with the Georgia State Department of Counseling and Psychological Services and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), received a $100,000 federal grant from DeKalb County Super District 6 Commissioner Ted Terry, approved by the DeKalb County Board of Commissioners, this week for an innovative new mental health pilot project that aims to improve refugee, immigrant and migrant (RIM) communities’ access to much-needed mental health support and services. The funding comes from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) which helps mitigate COVID related needs of DeKalb County residents.
“This investment from Commissioner Ted Terry will not only help address the COVID-related mental health challenges for Clarkston residents, but will also provide the opportunity for recent Georgia State graduates to obtain invaluable clinical experience while making a real difference in the community,” said Dr. Michael Eriksen, Regents’ Professor in the School of Public Health and principal investigator of the Prevention Research Center at Georgia State University.

DeKalb County Super District 6 Commissioner Ted Terry, a Clarkston resident himself and a large supporter of the Clarkston Mental Health Alliance and the International Rescue Committee (IRC), believes that investing in mental health resources is paramount, especially for the county’s refugee communities since access and resources are limited. Commissioner Terry approached the organization and encouraged them to apply for this grant.

“ARP Grants are a crucial way that we as a Board of Commissioners can ensure the county is investing in improved quality of life for all our citizens,” Terry said. “This money will be used to directly impact patients’ lives and demonstrates a true investment in economic growth, community and health and well-being. Breaking down barriers and making mental health treatment more accessible is one of my top priorities in office, and I will expand that effort at every opportunity. This collaboration not only expands this access, it also minimizes language and cultural barriers that prevent many from seeking the help they need.”

The COVID-19 pandemic shined a spotlight on the financial and resource insecurity of many residents and local nonprofits. For many populations of color, barriers to mental health care include its cost, prior experiences with systemic racism/discrimination, mistrust of mental healthcare providers, and cultural stigma related to mental illness. Refugee, immigrant and migrant (RIM) communities – such as those who reside in Clarkston – face additional challenges, including those related to a lack of access to transportation, limited English proficiency/health literacy, and lack of availability of culturally-appropriate care.

Prior to leaving their home countries, many RIM individuals are exposed to traumatic life events (e.g., loss of loved ones, combat, torture); the prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder in refugee populations is as high as 86% (compared to 7-8% in the general population). A survey conducted at the start of the COVID pandemic by the Georgia State PRC found that 61% of RIM community members in Clarkston reported feeling scared, anxious, and worried in the past 7 days. This dire situation is not insurmountable, however. Data collected during a one-year grant from the Atlanta Women’s Foundation to the IRC showed that, among the 80% of RIM women who were identified as needing mental health screening, 100% of the women referred to services
after screening consented to accept mental health services with partner agencies. Members of our Clarkston community need – and want – the help, yet resources are woefully inadequate.

“As we know, there is no community that has a sufficient level of mental health services available. In circumstances when service delivery is limited, we often see communities in which additional cultural and language barriers result in residents gaining access to even fewer of those supportive services,” says Justin Howell, Executive Director of the International Rescue Committee (IRC) in Atlanta. “This partnership will allow experts and recent graduates to “push in” to a refugee resettlement agency and work alongside caseworkers, social workers, teachers, and after-school counselors to help normalize mental health services. It will allow for early intervention and the chance to provide appropriate and evidence-based support services rather than waiting to intervene with services once a situation becomes an acute crisis. We at the IRC look forward to working with our partners from Georgia State to ensure these critical services reach community members in a responsible, holistic, and empowering way.”

The Clarkston Mental Health Alliance will launch with 5 Masters-level, post-graduate clinicians based at the IRC Atlanta headquarters. These supervised clinicians will be part of a collaborative care team working alongside IRC caseworkers to screen for, identify and immediately address mental health problems among IRC-affiliated clients.

Dr. Jonathan Orr, a licensed counseling supervisor and counselor educator at Georgia State specializing in trauma-related therapies, will supervise the clinicians. “This is an exciting opportunity for graduates of Georgia State University’s master’s program in Clinical Mental Health Counseling (CMHC) to engage in meaningful community work while building their own careers as licensed professional counselors.”

By investing in early-stage career clinicians, the Clarkston Mental Health Alliance will be able to invest in a sustainable mental health workforce for the Clarkston community and be well-positioned to provide culturally competent and trauma-sensitive continued care in the future.

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About Prevention Research Center

The CDC-funded Prevention Research Center at Georgia State University is headquartered on the Perimeter College Clarkston Campus. The PRC works with community organizations, state and local government, residents and other partners in Clarkston, Ga., to develop, implement and evaluate culturally and linguistically appropriate interventions to address the disparities and determinants of health for migrants and refugees and to disseminate this work at the community, states and national levels.

For more information please visit https://prc.gsu.edu
The American Rescue Plan (ARP) provides $5 billion nationwide to assist individuals or households who are homeless, at risk of homelessness, and other vulnerable populations, by providing housing, rental assistance, supportive services, and non-congregate shelter, to reduce homelessness and increase housing stability across the country. Dekalb County received a $3.98 million share of federal American Rescue Plan Act funding. Under ARP guidelines, all the money has to be obligated by December 31, 2024, and completely expended by the end of 2026. In addition to the county’s allocation, the school district and the municipalities are getting their own share of ARP funding.