

# UNC and NCAHEC collaborate to train state's mental health professionals

By Sherry Mergner

For more than two decades, UNC's School of Social Work has collaborated with the North Carolina Area Health Education Centers Program (NCAHEC) to meet the educational and career needs of the state's mental health professionals.

The late Dr. Eugene S. Mayer, director of the state's AHEC from 1978 to 1994, fiercely advocated for strong interdisciplinary programs and long saw the School as a resource for the mental health workforce. In 1987, the partnership became the first in the nation between an



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AHEC and a school of social work. It remains a "unique and important program," because UNC faculty provide "cutting-edge knowledge" to health professionals across North Carolina, said School Dean **Jack Richman**.

"This 21-year collaboration continues to bring researchers and practitioners together to reach our mutual goal of providing more effective service to the people of our state," he said.

From the beginning, UNC faculty have provided valuable leadership, said Thomas J. Bacon, current director of the NCAHEC. "I can't

say enough about the quality of their teaching, their responsiveness to requests for assistance and most of all, their commitment to improved services for people with mental illness in the state," Bacon said.

The partnership's backbone was established shortly after NCAHEC received funding to bring educational services, training programs and information services to state mental health facilities. Previously, the program had mainly formed alliances with health science schools, health care agencies and professional health care organizations to address the primary needs of the state.

In the early days, the late **Florence Soltys**, a professor and the first NCAHEC liaison for the School, fought to keep up with the exploding demand for centers-based mental health training. That demand expanded to requests for other services within the School of Social Work, strengthening the partnership. As a result, by 1990 UNC faculty were collaborating with NCAHEC to provide training and service programs in aging and in family and children's research. Many of these collaborations continue today, including through the Center for Aging Research and Educational Services (CARES), the Family and Children's Resource Program, the N.C. Clearinghouse on Family and Children Well-being and the Behavioral Healthcare Resource Program (BHRP)—all projects within the Jordan Institute for Families.

"I know of no better example of engaged scholarship than the AHEC program, whereby the School of Social Work faculty provide research-based training to professionals in the field and, in turn, hear ideas which inform their own research," said **Nancy Dickinson**, executive director of the Jordan Institute.

By taking the School's programs and expertise into communities, field professionals also get to take advantage of education and training opportunities that they might not otherwise have. For example, the advanced standing distance education program that existed in Fayetteville from 2000 to 2006 allowed participants to "live and work in their communities," said Karen Stallings, associate director for program activities at NCAHEC. Such opportunities make "all the difference for their families, their practices and their clients," Stallings said.

The continuing commitment of the School's faculty, adjunct faculty, field instructors and Ph.D. students to the NCAHECs is further illustrated by the 520 hours of continuing education programs in



mental health, substance abuse and developmental disabilities that were offered to more than 2,500 participants last year. A listing of the continuing education programs offered to the NCAHECs can be found on the School's Web site at <http://ssw.unc.edu/jif/ahec/>.

The School has also responded to those needing to fulfill the ethics requirement of the state's social work certification and licensing board. Last year, faculty and consultants teamed with NCAHEC to lead nearly 600 people attending 14 ethics workshops. NCAHEC has been instrumental in providing valuable forums to discuss ethical dilemmas, said **Kim Strom-Gottfried**, Smith B. Theimann Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Professional Practice. "It is an emotionally-loaded subject and there is great demand for these trainings," she said.

Additionally, NCAHEC has subsidized faculty honorarium and travel for the crisis intervention in behavioral health care curriculum and assisted in the development of the School's certificate program in substance abuse studies.

More recently, BHRP partnered with four of NCAHECs regional sites for a 26-session training series to prepare nearly 200 professionals seeking substance abuse licensure or state certification. Both are critically needed, especially for workers in rural areas, said **Cynthia "Syd" Wiford**, an assistant clinical professor and BHRP coordinator.

The faculty at UNC's School of Social Work are a "rich source of knowledge and expertise," and remain committed to addressing the health care and mental health needs of communities, said **Sherry Mergner**, a clinical assistant professor and the school's NCAHEC liaison for more than 10 years.

The school's outreach education has been "a wonderful service to the people of North Carolina," Stallings added.

"It is impressive that while faculty with the School of Social Work have gained national and international distinction for their research and scholarly successes, they have never wavered in their commitment to educate mental health professionals serving our North Carolina communities."

*Andy Berner, communications specialist with NCAHEC, contributed to this article.*