



2023 Annual Report

Copper Shores Community Health Foundation Endowed Professorship

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Student support

To date, a portion of these funds supported travel for a junior researcher on my team to the annual meeting of the American Public Health Association (APHA, Nov 2023). This meeting is one of the largest meetings of public health researchers and professionals globally; in 2023 more than 12,000 individuals attended the meeting. At this meeting, a member of my research team presented our findings on our Vision Health Study about the barriers and motivators to vision care among older adults in Houghton, Keweenaw, Baraga, and Ontonagon Counties. The research associate who presented the data is a local (Ontonagon) graduate of Michigan Tech (Department of Mathematical Sciences), and she shared the results with an international audience including high level officials at CDC.

This position has provided me with the opportunity to explore different ways to offer our students learning experiences with local organizations that impact community health. I have been involved in discussions with faculty and staff at MTU and with Kevin Store at CSCHF and Robin Meneguzzo at Keweenaw Community Foundation about ideas to connect our students and local community organizations through internships or other directed-learning opportunities. This is a long-term goal, and we are at the very beginning stages of developing ideas. Our efforts have been complicated by the departure of several key individuals at MTU involved in these discussions, but I look forward to continuing to move forward in this area. Not only does this allow our students to expand their knowledge of how their field of study integrates with community health, but it also provides our local organizations with workers who can accomplish tasks or projects they may have limited capacity to address.

Professional development

I also used these funds to attend the 2023 APHA Annual Meeting and network with public health professionals working in rural areas, federal funding agencies, and other health researchers in my areas of research. Because nearly all U.S. universities with graduate programs in public health attend the Expo at this conference, attending provided me with the opportunity to collect information about different programs to facilitate advising students on potential public health graduate programs. Each semester I have at least 5-10 students that approach me to explore public health or

rural health as a career option. This opportunity for professional development and networking can benefit our region by helping to create an educational pipeline for improving our rural health workforce.

Research

During the first year of the position there was uncertainty about when the award would be distributed and the amount of the yearly distribution. Thus, I have not yet conducted any research activities with these funds. I am currently creating a plan to develop and test a place-based intervention to improve exclusive breastfeeding among mothers in our communities. Exclusive breastfeeding rates decline rapidly from birth, with only a quarter of infants in the U.S. being exclusively breastfed at 6 months. My previous research indicated that support and information from non-medical sources was associated with longer duration of exclusive breastfeeding in a sample from the U.P. Given our region's lack of access to common resources for breastfeeding services such as lactation support and post-partum doulas, there is an opportunity to test different delivery systems for effectiveness to increase maternal confidence around breastfeeding, interest in increasing breastfeeding duration, and the number of infants who are exclusively breastfed at 6 months. Community-based research, such as this, is implemented more effectively when the impacted community is involved in decisions about the research. Therefore, although I have ideas of different systems that could be tested in our region, before I develop and initiate testing any protocols, I will first collect data on the experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of women in this region who are pregnant, have young children, or are planning to become pregnant. These funds will help support this preliminary work and contribute to pilot testing the intervention in our local region. My planned initiation for this work is spring 2024.

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