Mass DMH

Center of Excellence
for Psychosocial and Systemic Research

Mass General Brigham

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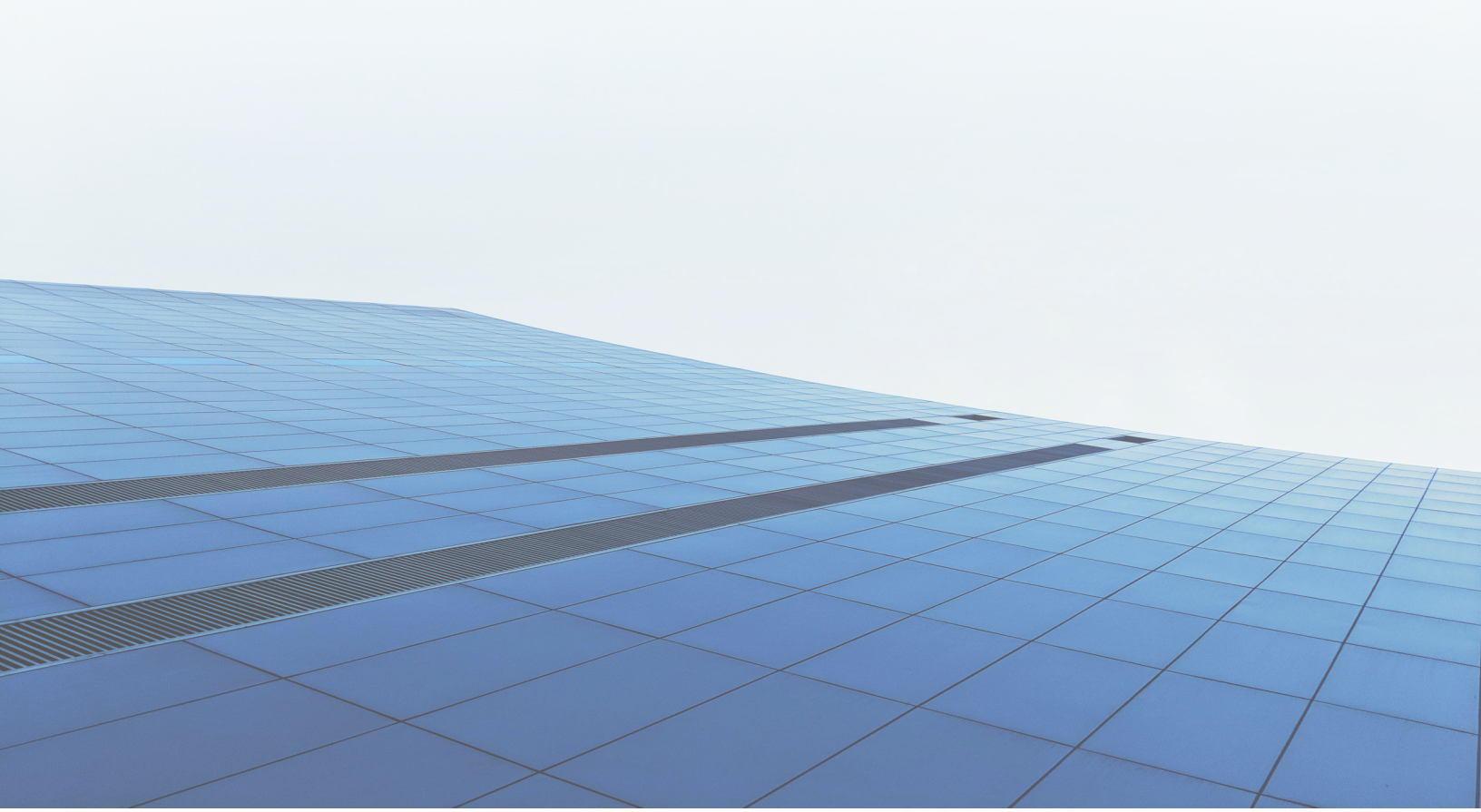
The MGH Center of Excellence for Psychosocial and Systemic Research

DMH Annual Report



Executive Summary

Overview

The MGH Center of Excellence for Psychosocial and Systemic Research (COE), funded by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health (DMH), serves as a statewide resource for advancing evidence-based mental health care, promoting health equity, and supporting systems transformation.

In Year 7, the COE led initiatives that directly addressed policy and clinical priorities, including improving access to effective treatments, managing aggression in state hospitals, expanding culturally responsive care, supporting justice-involved populations, and strengthening youth mental health systems through research, training, and collaboration.

Strategic Systems-Level Initiatives

Improving Access to Long-Acting Injectable Antipsychotics (LAIs)

The COE launched a statewide initiative to address the underutilization of LAIs for psychotic disorders. This effort, led by Dr. Cheryl Foo, convened DMH, MassHealth, Massachusetts Behavioral Health Partnership, community behavioral health centers, and academic partners to develop a statewide strategic plan for improving access and use of LAIs in community settings through a community-engaged landscape analysis and implementation planning process that includes the perspectives of people with lived experience. With this initiative, we will create a centralized LAI administration site directory for the state. This initiative has produced a new curriculum module for psychiatry residents, provider training materials, and a novel shared decision making tool. These practical resources are designed to directly support clinical decision-making as well as patient and family understanding of the potential benefits of offering LAI medication early in the course of treatment for a psychotic disorder. The strategic framework and comprehensive educational and clinical toolkit to be developed and implemented through this multi-year initiative has the potential to significantly improve LAI access and quality of life for individuals with psychotic disorders in the state.

Identifying, Treating and Managing Aggression in State Hospitals

Informed by the comprehensive listening sessions conducted across three state hospitals in Year 6, the COE, in collaboration with DMH's Office of Inpatient Management and UMASS Implementation Science and Practice Advances Research Center (iSPARC), developed a strategic improvement plan to improve the prevention and management of aggression. This model includes educational lectures and in-person case consultations led by Dr. Oliver Freudenreich, Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, Co-Director of the MGH Psychosis Clinical and Research Program, and a member of the COE senior leadership. Clinicians participating in this initiative gained access to psychopharmacology consultation, evidence-based de-escalation strategies, and structured support for managing high-risk patients. This initiative provides a scalable model for workforce training and clinical consultation designed to improve the inpatient care experience for both patients and staff in state hospitals.

Consultation to DMH: Office of Behavioral Health Promotion and Prevention (OBHPP)

The COE provided expert consultation to inform DMH OBHPP's statewide landscape analysis on youth behavioral health and substance use prevention. The COE contributed data and summaries of relevant initiatives across seven key areas: early identification with psychosis screening; cannabis use trends in psychiatrically vulnerable populations; family engagement in early psychosis care; resilience training programs; school-based mental health supports; restorative discipline models for substance use infractions in schools; and vaping cessation. The priorities and evidence base represented by these projects equipped OBHPP to shape a notice of intent for large-scale grants that will advance statewide prevention and early intervention capabilities in schools, pediatric settings, and youth-focused programs.

Advancing Equity Through Community Partnerships

The COE's work is grounded in equitable partnerships with community-based organizations to improve care access and outcomes for historically marginalized and underserved populations. Key collaborations in Year 7 included:

- The Cory Johnson Program for Post-Traumatic Healing (CJP), which demonstrated improvements in post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms and quality of life.
- Bridge Over Troubled Waters, where we identified effective substance use interventions and predictors of successful housing outcomes for youth experiencing homelessness.
- The Living in Families with Emotions (LIFE) program, which expanded to five new sites and improved accessibility through Spanish-language materials and asynchronous training. LIFE trainees are community-based, lay providers (e.g., teachers, after school program staff) who have received training in culturally responsive care and resilience-promoting interventions, with ongoing supervision and fidelity monitoring to support implementation.

Supporting Justice-Involved Populations

Dr. Faith Scanlon is leading a pilot implementation of the brief, manualized Changing Lives Changing Outcomes (CLCO-9) intervention designed to reduce recidivism and improve mental health outcomes for individuals with serious mental illness and criminal legal involvement at Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital and South Bay House of Correction. Clinicians at Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital have been trained to deliver the intervention and will receive ongoing consultation and supervision. This innovative project addresses a critical gap in care for this underserved population, providing an approach for integrating evidence-based mental health care within correctional and forensic settings.

Improving Family Engagement in Early Psychosis Care

Dr. Cheryl Foo led a mixed-methods study across 9 first-episode psychosis coordinated specialty care (CSC) programs in Massachusetts to identify program-level factors that influence patient retention and family engagement. The study provided critical insights that higher fidelity and quality CSC services are linked to better patient retention and family engagement rates. The study also found strategies that were associated with better engagement and provided practical recommendations that programs can implement. Additionally, Dr. Foo developed a provider attitude and training needs assessment tool and raised awareness of the promise of integrating family peer support in CSC programs. These findings have enormous potential for informing statewide training and quality improvement efforts, with direct relevance for clinicians working in early psychosis programs.

MGH COE leadership (Drs. Mueser and Cather) continue to work alongside DMH, Massachusetts Psychosis Network for

Early Treatment (MAPNET), other NAVIGATE trainers, and several community providers to provide statewide training, supervision, and consultation in NAVIGATE, an evidence-based model of CSC. This year, we were especially fortunate to collaborate on this with Dr. Julia Browne, a former MGH COE post-doctoral psychologist. Dr. Browne was certified as a NAVIGATE trainer during her fellowship, and is now providing training while also working in the first episode program at Boston Medical Center. Over the past year, NAVIGATE training has been provided to staff of 10 first-episode psychosis services, including Cambridge Health Alliance, Community Healthlink, Corrigan Mental Health Center, PREP-West, Eliot Community Human Service, Edinburg Health and Human Services, Massachusetts General Hospital, McLean-OnTrack, and Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center (BIDMC) Aspire Clinic. Longitudinal data are being routinely collected from these programs and are used as part of measurement-based care in quality improvement initiatives.

MGH–iSPARC Collaboration: Annual DMH Conference

In collaboration with the UMass iSPARC, MGH co-presented the 6th annual DMH conference, with the theme "Promoting Youth Mental and Behavioral Health." The event featured 5 presentations— 3 led by MGH researchers, spotlighting priority areas in youth mental and behavioral health, including cannabis-related psychiatric presentations, capacity building of resilience-promoting interventions, and results from a groundbreaking vaping cessation trial. The conference emphasized practical applications for clinicians and received overwhelmingly positive feedback, with 100% of Continuing Medical Education (CME) credit and Continuing Education Unit (CEU) respondents indicating plans to apply the findings in practice.

Peer-Led Systems Change

The COE's eight-person peer consultant team, led by Dr. Anne Whitman, our senior peer consultant, independently pursued several important community-based initiatives to improve and integrate the peer workforce across Massachusetts' behavioral health system. The team provides ongoing consultation on peer integration best practices at Cambridge Health Alliance Malden and Cambridge Community Behavioral Health Centers (CBHCs). Another key focus of the peer team's work in Y7 has been the continued development of a learning collaborative for peer supporter and allies—the Heart-to-Heart virtual video and discussion series. These sessions resulted from a project which aimed to learn about the successes and challenges of working as a Certified Peer Specialist in Massachusetts healthcare settings. To date, there have been three Heart-to-Heart sessions on the following topics: sharing lived experience, compassion fatigue, and how to measure the impact of peer support. Another key focus of the peer team's work in Year 7 has been continued work on the implementation of improvement plans for the Southeast Recovery Learning Center (SERLC), designed to increase the representation of individuals from minoritized groups in the Recovery Community Centers (RCC) and to ensure relevant and accessible services. Additionally, our peer team has also become integral to the core curriculum of educating the next generation of healthcare providers to be more equipped to deliver recovery-oriented, patient-centered care.

Update on Junior Faculty and Psychology Trainee Activities

Dr. Faith Scanlon, PhD, will be starting her third year with the COE as faculty. She is collaborating with Worcester Recovery Center and Hospital (WRCH) to provide Changing Lives Changing Outcomes-9 (CLCO-9), a manualized, time-limited intervention designed to improve mental health and lower recidivism among individuals with serious mental illness who also have criminal legal involvement. This project holds promise for improving both clinical and functional outcomes for a highly vulnerable population.

Dr. Merranda McLaughlin, PhD, was hired last year in our first cohort of public and community psychology trainees through the DMH psychology training contract and will be staying on as junior faculty. She will be providing care at the MGH Charlestown Community Health Center (CCHC) and in the First Episode and Early Psychosis Program (FEPP). At the CCHC, Dr. McLaughlin will be supporting group programming for individuals with serious mental illness and assist in the launch of a new, low barrier, integrated behavioral health walk-in service. At the MGH FEPP, Dr. McLaughlin will continue to support families and individuals with psychosis using the NAVIGATE treatment model, and will continue to support community-based projects that aim to integrate spirituality and cultural practices designed to improve care access and acceptability.

Dr. Maya Wong, PhD, completed her tenure with us as a pre-doctoral psychology intern and will continue to use her expertise in the assessment and treatment of clinical high risk and first episode psychosis in her new role as a post-doctoral clinical research fellow in the Palo Alto VA Medical Center.

Research and Policy-Relevant Findings

Research topics included:

- Early psychosis screening and intervention.
- Family engagement and retention in CSC.
- Climate anxiety among individuals with serious mental illness.
- Firearm safety and documentation in psychiatric care.
- Care transitions following psychiatric hospitalization.

Y8 by the numbers

In Y8 the COE had:

- 5 New Research Projects/QI Projects
- 14 Research/Quality Improvement (QI) Projects in Process
- $4,433,466 Awarded Grant Funds
- $12,318,576 Total Budget for Grants Under Review
- 57 Published Manuscripts, Books, Edited Books, and Book Chapters
- 70 Presentations, Abstracts, and Posters Delivered
    - 8 of 70 Delivered by COE Peer Consultants

Recognition and Awards

- **Dr. Oliver Freudenreich** was promoted to Professor of Clinical Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School; also, Dr. Freudenreich was appointed as affiliated faculty with the Center for Climate, Health, and the Global Environment (C-CHANGE) at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.
- **Dr. Daphne Holt** was promoted to Professor of Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School.
- **Jacquie Martinez** began a new position as a DMH Peer Specialist Lead for the Metro Boston Area transitional shelters at The Lindemann Inn and The Fenwood Inn.
- **Dr. Cori Cather** was awarded the 2025 Excellence in Teaching and Mentorship, Public and Community Psychology Track, Psychology Internship Class of 2024-2025 MGH HMS; also, as of July 1, 2025 she was promoted to Chief of the Division of Public and Community Psychiatry of the Department of Psychiatry of Mass General Brigham Academic Medical Centers and named the Michele and Howard J. Kessler Chair in Public and Community Psychiatry.

Looking Ahead

Year 7 COE initiatives generated innovative research and community impact, while building partnerships and laying the groundwork for sustained systems change. Our work continues to demonstrate how effective academic-community partnerships, implementation-focused and translational research, training and workforce development, and lived experience integration can transform policy and practice across Massachusetts' behavioral health system. Building on these achievements, Year 8 priorities include:

- Expanding LAI and clozapine implementation efforts statewide
- Scaling the LIFE program to additional Spanish-speaking communities
- Continuing peer-led training, integration, and support initiatives
- Advancing research on early psychosis, climate resilience, and justice-involved populations

These strategic directions position the COE to continue addressing the most pressing challenges in mental health care access, delivery, and quality through evidence-based innovation and community partnership.