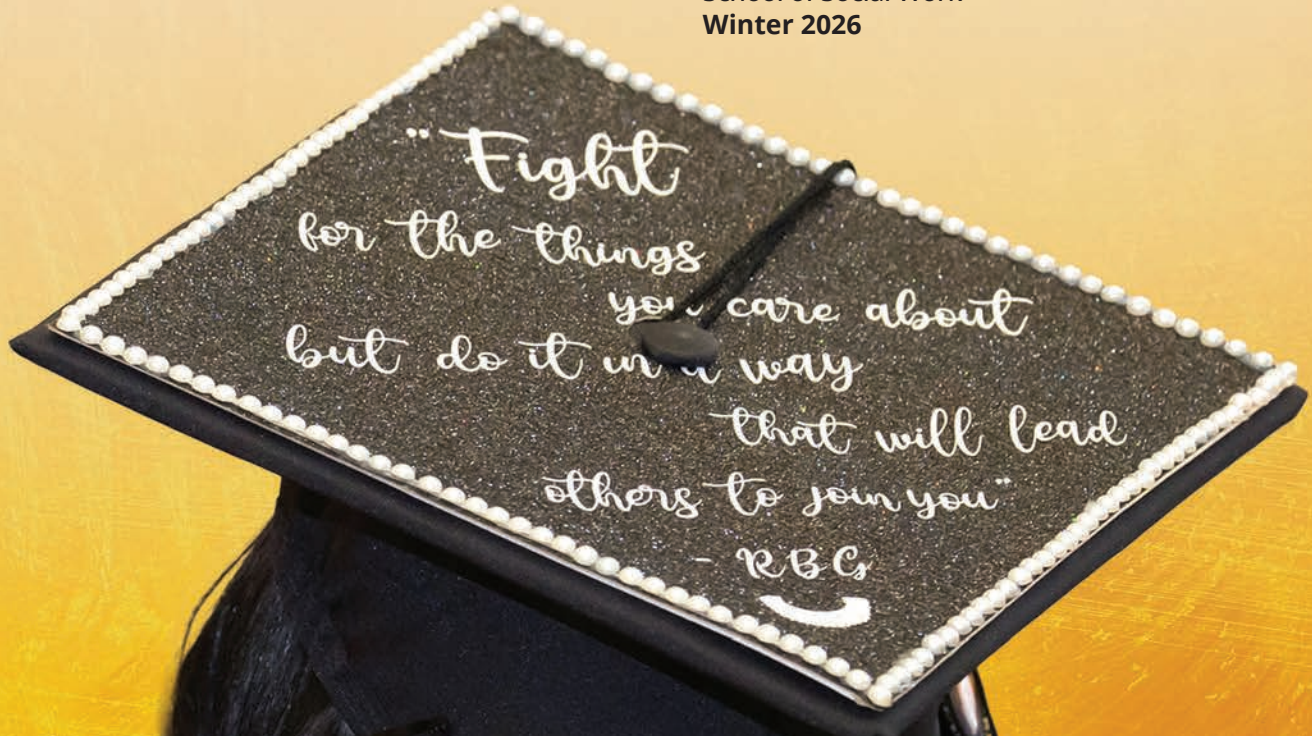


Bridges

University of Pittsburgh
School of Social Work
Winter 2026



Filling the Gap, Fueling the Future:

PITT'S PATHWAY TO WORKFORCE READINESS

Bridges

Bridges is the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work alumni magazine. We selected the name *Bridges* largely because of its symbolism. The term provides an important metaphor for both our profession and our school. Social work is a profession that has, as part of its mission, the goal of building and sustaining bridges among individuals, families, groups, neighborhoods, and communities, and we felt that the title *Bridges* captured this part of our professional mission. At the same time, the city of Pittsburgh has more than 450 bridges, and Allegheny County has almost 2,000, suggesting an uncompromising desire of the city's inhabitants to remain connected with one another. In keeping with this heritage, it is the school's goal to sustain and build bridges among those needing social work services; our students, alumni, faculty, and staff; the community; and corporate and governmental partners. We believe that the information in this magazine is an important way to achieve this goal.

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Bridges magazine is published annually and is sent to alumni of the University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work.

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Dear alumni, colleagues, and friends:

It has been a busy and challenging year! One in which it has been truly wonderful to be surrounded by social work colleagues, collaborators, and professionals! People who know our nation's (and our world's) complex history, who exemplify social work values, and who have the skills, passion, knowledge, and courage to work together to find our way forward. I hope that this issue of *Bridges* helps you to feel connected, supported, and inspired by what we can accomplish when we center service, community, human dignity, social justice, integrity, and competence!

Our cover story focuses on the workforce — our efforts to meet the expanding needs and gaps by preparing our students for complex, interprofessional, ever-changing contexts, and our ways of attuning our educational approaches and options to support social work professionals throughout their careers. We highlight our expanded focus on new options for learning (such as our online MSW), increased supports across the life course (through continuing education), celebration of intergenerational connections (as alumni mentor students, who become colleagues, who mentor students...), and enhanced supports for students to pursue their goals and find their purpose (via fellowships, paid practica, and scholarships).

Please enjoy the following pages — as a walk down memory lane; a chance to learn about and reconnect with people, places, and programs that exemplify the best of what social work can be; and a collection of stories and snapshots that bring a smile to your face and a sense of hope in a world that desperately needs joy, community, and a better tomorrow.

There are multiple opportunities throughout the magazine to interact with us — to reconnect with the school, to share ideas, to nominate friends



and colleagues for recognition, and to be part of our school's vision to Transform: Our World, Our Future, Ourselves. Please stay in touch and keep making a difference, and remember that we are stronger, more powerful, and braver than the challenges around us!

Finally, many of you likely know that I have decided to step down as dean this coming summer. I am infinitely grateful for everything that I have been able to do in this role, everyone I've had the delight of meeting and working with, and the ways we've been able to grow, adapt, advance, and build on the school's long-standing excellence and potential over the past eight years. The search for my successor has begun, and I am confident this process will bring exceptional leadership to guide our school into an exciting future.

Take care,

Elizabeth M.Z. "Betsy" Farmer
Dean, School of Social Work
University of Pittsburgh

Ranked **#12** in the nation by
US News & World Report

290+
scholarships offered

\$3.7 million
provided in student
financial support

44+ externally funded research
and training projects totaling
\$33.5 million in annual funding

11,000+ alumni worldwide

509
total students

Retirements

Ray Engel retired after 37 years with Pitt Social Work as faculty.

Laurie Mejia retired after 40 years of Pitt service, 8 years with Pitt Social Work as grants manager.

Karen Womack retired after 2 years with Pitt Social Work as an administrative assistant.

Faculty Promotions and Appointments

Dr. Yodit Betru was promoted to Clinical Associate Professor.



Dr. Stevara Haley Clark was hired as Director of Online Programs and Distance Education and Associate Professor.

Dr. Sara Goodkind was named Philip Hallen Endowed Chair in Community Health and Social Justice.



Dr. Catherine (Katie) Greeno was promoted to Professor.

Dr. Deborah Moon was promoted to Associate Professor.



Dr. Suzanne Pritzker was hired as Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Professor.

Faculty and Staff Awards, Honors, and Achievements



Sara Goodkind and her community partner MSW alumna **Dr. Kathi Elliott**, Director of Gwen's Girls, were the inaugural recipients of the Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) Community-Research Partnership Award.



Mary Rauktis won the Chancellor's Distinguished Public Service Award.



Nev Jones won the Chancellor's Distinguished Research Award.

Nev Jones was presented with the annual Academic Award by the NGO Students with Psychosis, was elected to the National Academy of Social Insurance (NASI), and was confirmed by Allegheny County Council as a member of the Allegheny County Mental Health & Intellectual Disabilities Board.

Ray Engel won the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Southwestern Pennsylvania Partnership for Aging (SWPPA).

Kyaïen Conner, along with Pernille Røge from the Department of History, was funded via a Fulbright-Hays Award to the University of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Conner also was named one of the *New Pittsburgh Courier's* 2025 Women of Excellence.

Kyaïen Conner, Ron Idoko, Aliya Durham, Daniel Abusuampek, and Milencia Saintus were awarded the Steven D. Manners Research Development Award from the University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR).

Deborah Moon was selected to participate in the National Institution of Health (NIH) Loan Repayment Program (LRP) through the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) for the 2024–2026 cycle.

Jaime Booth was selected for Pitt's Community Engaged Scholarship Project Development Cohort.



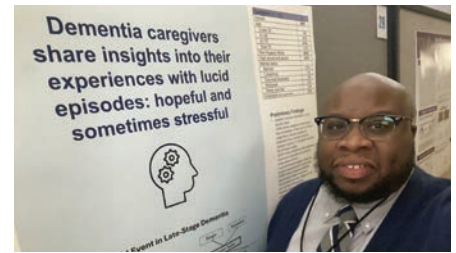
Toya Jones, Yodit Betru, and Jaime Booth (not pictured) won the 2024 Provost's Award for Diversity in the Curriculum.

Allegheny County DHS honored **Yodit Betru** for Black History Month.

James Huguley was part of Pitt's first signing day for startups for researcher-entrepreneurs. And, for his dedication to achieving societal benefit through commercial translation, Huguley and Parent Heart Inc. were selected as the Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship's Startup of the Year for 2025.

Aliya Durham was selected for the 2025 Practitioner-Scholar Community (PSC) educational development program offered by the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) in partnership with Texas A&M University.

Toya Jones was named one of Pittsburgh's Professional Women's Network's 2025 Ladies Who Lead awardees.



Quinton Cotton was named by the National Alzheimer's Coordinating Center (NACC) and the Alzheimer's Association as a recipient of the 2025 New Investigator Award Program and received the Rising Star Award from the Pitt Alzheimer's Disease Research Center (ADRC) at the NACC Fall ADRC Meeting.

Leah Jacobs was appointed to the Allegheny County Safety and Justice Advisory Committee.

Henry Cantu, Director of Recruitment and Admissions, was elected to the National Deans and Directors of Social Work Admissions (NDDSWA) Board of Directors for 2024–2026.

Congratulations to Mechanicsburg Child Welfare Training Program staff for celebrating 20 years at Pitt: **Christina M. Fatzinger, Jamie James, Maryann Fox Marchi, and Jody L. Price.**

On July 25, 2025, **Toya Jones** was invited by the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania and the Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts to serve as the plenary speaker at the Pennsylvania Conference of State Trial Judges Annual Meeting.

Mary Rauktis and **Dr. Riju Sharma** edited a new book *Creating Successful Community and Academic Partnerships in Service-Learning: Case Studies from India and South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central and Latin America.*

On August 17, 2025, Mayor Ed Gainey, with the authority of the Great Seal of the City of Pittsburgh, officially proclaimed the date as "**Dr. Alexis P. Brown Day**" This special honor recognizes Dr. Brown of CRSP for her contributions as a researcher, community member, and business owner, celebrating her dedication to advancing knowledge, supporting local communities, and fostering entrepreneurship in the city.

Student News and Awards

PhD student **Alex Fixler** was awarded a Provost's Dissertation Completion Fellowship for the Summer 2025 term.

Bradford MSW student **Taylor Samuelson** and MSW alumna **Denise Valvo** won the 2024 Achievement Award from the National Association of Counties.

PhD student **Sommer Blair** was selected for the Community Engaged Scholarship Project Development Cohort. Blair was also selected for the 2025 Practitioner-Scholar Community (PSC) educational development program offered by the International Association for Research on Service-Learning and Community Engagement (IARSLCE) in partnership with Texas A&M University.

PhD student **Daniel Abusuampek** secured a grant funded by Pitt's Year of Discourse and Dialogue: "Mental Health, Tribalism and Dialogue: Building Resilience through Understanding and Discourse."

PhD student **Sitao Chen** was selected to participate in the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (NDACAN) Summer Research Institute

Two MSW Home and School Visitor/School Social Worker (HSV/SSW) certificate students, **Abigail McLaughlin** and **Sofia Taipina**, had their PA had their PA Mental Health Education Learning Program in Schools (PA HELPS) applications approved by the state.

PhD student **Jenn Lee** was selected for the Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA) Mentorship Program for the 2024–2025 cohort.



Sommer Blair



Daniel Abusuampek



Sitao Chen

PhD student **Christian Porter** was accepted to the Professional Development Training Series on Poverty and Economic Mobility Research with the University of Wisconsin–Madison for 2025–2026 year.

PhD student **Jenn Lee** presented her research at the 2025 Human Development and Capability Association (HDCA) Conference and was awarded the 2025 HDCA Scholarship in Bradford, UK.

The winner of the 2024–2025 Joseph and Helen Eaton Award for best single-authored work written by a first- or second-year doctoral student was **Shannon Pagdon**, for a paper entitled "Madness and Media: Exploring the Shifting Discourse of Madness Network News."

PhD student **Jenn Lee** was elected as a Student Liaison for the Oral Health Section of the American Public Health Association (APHA).

MSW students **Sydney Mahmood** (1st place team) and **Lorin Harris** (3rd place team) placed in the 2025 Allegheny County Local Government Case Competition.

MSW student **Aniah Brewer** won the Phi Alpha Honor Society's Patty Gibbs-Wahlberg Scholarship Award.

New Staff



Kim Jacoby joined our team as the new Research Manager.



Amanda Paul is the new Development Associate for the School of Social Work.



Dr. Alexis Brown joined the Center on Race and Social Problems as Senior Social Scientist.



Child Welfare Education and Research Programs Update

The Child Welfare Education and Research Programs (CWERP) had a productive year filled with education, training, and innovation.

A total of 61 fully funded child welfare undergraduate and graduate students were enrolled in the CWEB and CWEL programs at Pitt in the 2024–2025 academic year. Over the 30-year lifetime of these nationally recognized professional education programs, 675 child welfare students have graduated from Pitt. Statewide, a total of 3,228 students have completed degree studies through the social work education programs administered by CWERP. The Pennsylvania Child Welfare Resource Center continued to offer a free, online three-hour course, Recognizing and Reporting Child Abuse. More than 394,000 participants completed the course during the year. Feedback continues to be overwhelmingly positive, with almost 90% reporting they feel more confident in their skills and that they will be able to use what they learned in the course.

The Resource Center continued its long-standing commitment to improve the retention of Pennsylvania's child welfare professionals. Conducting the Pennsylvania Annual Workforce Survey (PAWS) with child welfare professionals across the state has provided insight into factors impacting the retention of a strong and stable workforce. The PAWS is based on the Comprehensive Organizational Health Assessment developed by the Butler Institute for Families at the University of Denver and is designed to measure organizational functioning by asking questions about topics such as organizational culture and climate, leadership, supervision, physical work environment, job safety, stress, and job satisfaction.



In 2024, a total of 1,290 staff from 32 county child welfare agencies participated in the PAWS. With 2,171 staff receiving surveys, this resulted in a 59% response rate.

Survey responses from all participating counties were analyzed to identify strengths and areas for improvement. Strengths included positive organizational climate, supportive supervisors, and staff who are practicing self-care strategies and activities. Areas for improvement centered around the impact of stress on staff. This includes job stress, work-related burnout, and secondary traumatic stress experienced when carrying out job responsibilities. Significantly, 58% of respondents indicated they had looked for another job within the previous year. Staff also shared that the primary reasons they have chosen to remain in child welfare work are to make a difference, partner with their coworkers, receive the benefits provided, and balance personal time with work scheduling. These findings are being used to prioritize resources and develop solutions to common areas of need identified by members of the child welfare workforce.

Additionally, in August, CWERP hosted the annual Older Youth Retreat, a week-long experience for youth, between the ages of 16 and 20, who are currently in, or were formerly in, foster care.

The Older Youth Retreat is held at the University of Pittsburgh, Johnstown campus (UPJ) and planned by a steering committee comprised of both youth and staff from across the state, who dedicate their time and effort to select activities, events, and keynote speakers to ensure that a good time is had by all. Youth are encouraged to participate in planned activities, which allows them to learn new things and meet new people. The retreat is a fun, enlightening, and very busy week! A diverse group of 89 youth, representing 28 counties across Pennsylvania, participated in the event. The theme for the week was *Reach for the S.T.A.R.S.* (Self-Control, Trustworthiness, Accountability, Respect, and Success).

Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP) Year in Review

The Center on Race and Social Problems (CRSP) marked an extraordinary year of growth, innovation, and impact, advancing equity-driven scholarship and strengthening partnerships that bridge the University of Pittsburgh with communities near and far.

Dr. Kyaïen Conner, CRSP Director, was awarded a Fulbright-Hays Award to co-lead a month-long seminar project in Senegal this past summer with Dr. Pernille Røge from the Department of History. The seminar engaged faculty and doctoral students from across Pitt in deepening African cultural literacy and developing research partnerships on the continent, an achievement that reflects CRSP's expanding global reach. Pitt Social Work PhD student Daniel Abusuampek plans to debut a feature-length documentary film capturing the Senegal seminar project early next year.



CRSP also secured major funding to support applied racial equity work. The Center entered a \$532,000 contract with the Pennsylvania Office of Health Equity to evaluate the state's Racial Equity Strategic Plan and create an interactive online learning platform for public agencies, including a robust magazine-style website platform called the *RECI Media Hub*. This project is currently underway and will strengthen statewide capacity to reduce health disparities and embed racial equity across systems.

In partnership with the Black Political Empowerment Project, CRSP launched the Black Pittsburgh Satisfaction and Retention Survey, drawing responses from more than 1,700 participants. This large-scale study aims to help city and community leaders better understand the lived experiences of Black residents and

guide data-informed action to make Pittsburgh a more inclusive place to live and thrive.

The Community and Racial Equity Learning (CREL) Fellowship, developed and led by Dr. Aliya Durham, debuted this past year as an innovative field placement model that connects graduate students with community organizations. Fellows contributed over 2,160 hours of community-based practice through placements in Homewood, paired with seminars on topics such as trauma-informed self-care, social determinants of health, and racial healing. The CREL Fellowship recently started its second cohort this fall, marking the start of a promising new year of growth and learning for the fellows.

The Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (RECI) continued to grow as a national model for advancing equity learning and practice. This year, RECI held its signature fall and spring learning cohorts, in addition to the launch of the RECI Practitioners Certificate Program, the newest learning cohort opportunity. A 150-plus-page RECI guidebook and a new RECI website are nearing completion and set to debut in early 2026, further expanding RECI's accessibility and educational resources. RECI also achieved a notable milestone this past year when the Schools of Medicine and Social Work were selected for a \$5 million grant. This grant was positioned to support the work and

test the effectiveness of RECI through an innovative research study. While the grant was not activated, the recognition underscores RECI's pioneering vision and the institution's commitment to dismantling systemic racism.

The Just Discipline Project (JDP) has begun rebuilding after the dismantling of federal grant mechanisms that supported its recent expansion. Three new grants from the Jefferson Regional Foundation (\$150,000), the Heinz Endowments (\$200,000), and the Grable Foundation (\$20,000) will support JDP's continued work in local under-resourced school districts, focusing on fiscal sustainability, trauma-responsive programming, and a teacher wellness pilot with Awaken Pittsburgh. "The support from Heinz and Grable couldn't come at a more urgent time," notes PI James Huguley. "The shifting politics were a rude awakening for those doing racial justice and anti-oppressive work, and we're fighting back with our school and philanthropic partners to continue building relationally well-equipped and culturally grounded school communities."

The Parenting While Black (PWB) Program, also led by Dr. Huguley, continues to grow, including new partnerships with the Small SEEDS program in the Hill District and facilitator training programs with Macedonia FACE and the Homewood Children's Village. Curricular expansion has also been underway, including





mindfulness and education-focused programs in partnership with Awaken Pittsburgh as well as interracial efforts around parenting for racial justice in partnership with the Parenting for Racial Equity Project (Sommer Blair) and the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute (Ron Idoko). Dr. Huguley's parenting programming organization, Parent Heart Inc., won the Startup of the Year award from the Pitt Office of Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

CRSP also shined as a convener of dialogue and innovation through more than 20 events drawing over 1,000 attendees. Notable highlights included the National Day of Racial Healing (195 attendees), Building a Beloved Community (100+ attendees), and the Human Flourishing Symposium, a collaborative event with Pitt Social Work's Human Flourishing Collaborative, which attracted nearly 200 registrants. The Envisioning a Just Pittsburgh Exhibition and Reception at the August Wilson African American Cultural Center welcomed over 300 guests and 50 artists, celebrating creativity and justice through art.

CRSP's scholarly influence also continued to grow through the journal *Race and Social Problems*, which achieved an impact factor of 2.8, a five-year impact factor of 3.2, and 124,000 article downloads this year alone. With 35 articles published since January 2024 and a forthcoming special issue on race-informed diversity and inclusion programs, the journal remains a cornerstone of national and international scholarship on race.

From major grants and global partnerships to groundbreaking programs and community collaborations, CRSP's past year exemplified progress in action, showcasing how research, education, and engagement can shape a more just and equitable world.

External Grants

Kyaïen Conner is co-investigator on two separate grants from the National Institutes of Health (NIH). One grant is to stimulate dementia research and train professionals in Alzheimer's disease, and the other focuses on the Brain and Cognitive Health Equity Campaign for Allegheny County, which seeks to encourage early evaluation and intervention for dementia.

Dr. Conner and **Ron Idoko** are co-investigators for an NIH grant on Promoting Inclusive Excellence [Race, Awareness, Consciousness, Equity (RACE)] to build knowledge of evidence-based interventions that dismantle systemic racism.

A grant from the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania put **Ron Idoko** in the lead to evaluate the Pennsylvania Interagency Health Equity Team's (PIHET) Racial Equity Strategic Plan and the development of an online learning platform for PIHET members and Pennsylvania state agencies.

Jaime Booth is the principal investigator on a \$2.3 million grant from the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to launch the Youth Behavioral Health Workforce Fellowship, an experiential educational program aimed at increasing the MSW workforce equipped to address the behavioral health needs of children, adolescents, and transitional-aged youth in high-need and high-demand areas.

James Huguley received grants from Jefferson Regional Foundation, the Grable Foundation, and the Heinz Endowments to expand his Just Discipline Project research efforts supporting schools in replacing punitive school discipline with restorative practices, creating safer, more equitable, and supportive learning environments for all students.

Nev Jones is a co-investigator on a grant from the NIH to implement a two-state learning healthcare system focused on early psychosis, with a special focus on studying and developing interventions around client disengagement. Dr. Jones is also a co-investigator on a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF), where she will refine and evaluate an AI tool used by behavioral health providers.

Quinton Cotton received a grant from the Alzheimer's Association and the the National Alzheimer's Coordinating Center to focus on advancing intergenerational networks for dementia care in Black communities.

Internal Grants

Several faculty received Year of Discourse and Dialogue grants from Pitt's Office of the Provost. The **Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Committee** used their grant to share practices for facilitating difficult dialogues. **Deborah Moon** used her grant to help fund the school's Human Flourishing Symposium. **Milencia Saintus** received two grants to fund monthly dialogues for the Racial Equity Consciousness Institute and a dialogue around incarceration.

Mary Rauktis received a grant from the European Studies Center for teaching and research in Germany around global perspectives on youth residential care.

Due to the generosity of a doctoral alumna, the Florence Stier Research Development Award provides a research award to faculty. This year's recipient was **Rachel Gartner** for her research relating to understanding trans and gender-diverse student resource networks to promote health.

Q&A with Suzanne Pritzker, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs

In January 2025, Pitt Social Work welcomed Dr. Suzanne Pritzker as the new Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. We got the chance to ask Suzanne about her background and how she ended up joining the Pitt community.



Q: How did you get to where you are? What was your path to Pitt? Did you know it would always be social work?

A: I grew up outside of Washington, D.C., where you can't help but think about political engagement. My father worked for the federal government, so from an early age I was interested in policy, how we could shift policy, and what it looked like to think about policy from a more social-justice-oriented lens.

While doing policy work in Virginia after undergrad, I noticed a disconnect between who was making policy and the experiences of the people that policy was being made to impact. The more I was present for these conversations, the more it frustrated me.

I discussed this disconnect at lunch with a coworker, who happened to be social worker doing policy work. He asked if I had considered going into social work and recommended that I speak to one of his professors. The conversation with this policy professor opened my eyes. I didn't know people were having these conversations. Thinking about how we connect people's lived experiences and bring them to the policy world, and how we bridge that. Suddenly it hit me — there's this field that does this!

As I spent more time in social work, what I realized is, there's a whole space, not only social work, but this concept of civic engagement. How do we think about people being engaged in speaking up, being part of the decision-making in their lives around them.

I began my faculty career at the University of Houston, where I devoted a lot of my focus to expanding social work students' understanding of and sense of self as political actors. I ran a legislative internship program there. During that time, I also coauthored the first textbook, on political social work.

If I was going to ever leave the University of Houston, where I'd built this space and infrastructure around political social work, it would have to be for a place that really took macro social work seriously. My work is grounded in people's voices in community, so the place had to take community engagement seriously and be thoughtful about issues connected to people whose voices are not heard, and driven to want to change that.

When considering what schools held space for this commitment, Pitt was number one on my list at every turn. At Pitt, there was an opportunity to continue some of the work that I had been doing around leadership in social work education and to continue the deep national legacy of macro social. It was the perfect combination.

Q: For social workers interested in impacting policy (just beginning to get involved in the political sphere), what suggestions do you have for them?

A: What we need is to think about where, from our position, we can contribute. So, if you're in direct practice, and you are working in services for those who are unhoused, and you see the same issues coming up repeatedly, how do you take those issues and say, "We see what solution is needed. We know what kind of policy change is needed. We know what folks need."

For example, during COVID I had a student, and she was working with clients who often received service X, but in order to receive the service, they had to complete form Y, but they couldn't get form Y because it was during COVID and the office was closed.

This student brought this issue to agency leadership, and then leadership took it to the agency board, and then the agency board advocated for changes, and she gave them the information. She said, "This is what we're seeing in practice. This is the issue. If we could get around this, this is what we need." She was putting that together from experience, but it was getting it in the hands of the board. Getting it to those situated in a way that they could make the case.

I think we sometimes see it as if I'm not doing all of it; I'm doing none of it, as opposed to: How do we each bring what we can in the spaces that we can? We are in a time where we can feel that if I'm not at the front lines of the protest, then I'm doing nothing. But I think if we come back to what we do in our practice, identify our expertise, and engage with our clients and the communities we're in, we can figure out some paths forward. And then we can ask how we can amplify these ways forward.

Q: How do you foresee engaging with alumni, and what role do they play in your vision for Pitt Social Work?

A: I see opportunities to grow what has been happening and has existed at Pitt, but I also want to recognize the school's long legacy of macro-oriented work and being a leader in that. What can I bring along with others who are here to help advance that legacy?

We have a strong macro legacy, but we have room to grow the policy change piece of things, the political piece of things. I want to complement the legacy, but also strengthen the navigating political systems lens in our work. There is such strength to build from connecting with alums in policy/political spaces to learn what their experiences were.

I was very proud to grow the legislative internship program during my time at Houston. It was a small and focused program that mentored about 100 students over my time. That was truly such a serious training ground where those students, because they had this intensive political training experience, some of them are now in major policy positions in the federal government. Some of them are chiefs of staff in legislative offices in Texas. Some have run for office. One of them is Chief of Staff in a D.C. office. We can't replicate that in a classroom. It was a hands-on, immersive experience, and I would love to figure out what a Pennsylvania version of that would look like. How can we make sure that our students have a program with serious political training? What is the alumni angle here? Alumni who are engaged in these areas, please step forward. Alumni can play a huge role in creating such an experience — by sharing their experiences and/or by offering to host one of our students.

Q: Given your experience, can you speak about the ways you have seen social workers grow and expand in the policy sphere and in political influence?

A: A lot of times in social work when we talk about advocacy, it is from the outside, and that's important. But there's also an importance for being in positions where you are making policy decisions, where you're at the table and trying to influence what the people at the table are doing. In those situations, we should not shy away from calling ourselves social workers. I hear and have even seen people who have introduced themselves as: "I was a social worker, and now I do this work."

It is social work to be part of policy decision-making. That is not a non-traditional path. We are bringing our core values, our core skills into the policy arena, and so our presence in policymaking is important to state and note.

What does it look like to make sure people in our communities are fed? What does it look like to make sure that we are a place that can once again, in the future, be welcoming to immigrants? These are critical conversations, and I'd rather see us at those tables, informing the discussion, than only having us be on the outside. Part of what I will bring to the school is asking how we can help develop and support social workers to have the skills to be part of those conversations, policymaking, policy influence, and all of that in the future.

Q: What does a day outside the office look like for you?

A: My perfect day... A nice breakfast and coffee with my kids and my husband. Then we would go for a hike in the mountains. I'm really enjoying having all the seasons. I have not had them in a long time. We would just spend the day hiking, have a picnic near some running water somewhere. I'm simple. I just want to be outside in nature with my family and not in a rush. Nowhere to be, except outside. ■

Grounded in Community:

Pitt Social Work Research Impacts in Pittsburgh

This map highlights the many ways Pitt Social Work researchers collaborate with organizations across the Pittsburgh community. Each partnership represents meaningful, on-the-ground work that advances equity, strengthens neighborhoods, and informs impactful research. We welcome alumni to connect with us and explore opportunities to collaborate on research that drives real community impact.



Dr. Sara Goodkind

Black Girls Equity Alliance Juvenile Justice Action Team

CC Gwen's Girls

The Black Girls Equity Alliance Juvenile Justice Action Team coordinates community-led research and advocacy to keep young people out of the legal systems. This work led to the development of Caring Connections for YOUth, a pre-arrest diversion initiative run by Gwen's Girls, and includes a National Institute of Justice-funded evaluation of this initiative.

● Northside

● Moving soon to newly renovated building in Wilksburg

Using Human-Centered Design to Address Pet Food Security: A Case Study of Ellie's Pet Food Pantry

CC Ellie's Pet Food Pantry

Ellie's Pet Food Pantry at HARP, provides pet food to low-income residents, older adults, people with disabilities, and unhoused pet owners across Allegheny County. This year, the pantry was redesigned using a human-centered, One Health approach — work that was recently published to highlight how this model reduces food anxiety and improves efficiency.

● Central Northside

● Homewood



Dr. Mary Rauktis

Black Pittsburgh Satisfaction and Retention Survey

CC The Black Political Empowerment Project (B-PEP)

The Black Pittsburgh Satisfaction and Retention Survey gathered comprehensive data on the experiences and aspirations of Black/African American residents, providing valuable insights into the factors influencing their choices. This information will inform targeted strategies to enhance economic opportunities and support services, ultimately aiming to retain and attract Black talent in the region.

● Hill District



Center on Race and Social Problems

CC = Community Collaborator



Dr. Yodit Betru



Dr. Jaime Booth



Dr. Aliya Durham

Partnering with Black Mental Health Providers to Support Assessment and Evaluation of Practice

CC Vitamin C Healing and HandinHand Counseling Services (Sharise Nance)

This project used human-centered design as an innovative approach to engage Black mental health professionals in the Pittsburgh area to understand their needs related to assessment and evaluation in their practice. Through this participatory process, providers identified priorities, shared experiences, and collaborated to generate potential solutions while building community.

● Homewood



Parenting While Black (PWB): Growing and Healing Together

CC Parenting While Black (PWB): Growing and Healing Together

Parenting While Black (PWB) is an interactive program and curriculum that provides primary caregivers with tools to simultaneously support their children's healthy development and their own wellness. The program includes eight group-based sessions that use a combination of presentations, activities, and discussions to promote successful parenting in four key areas: 1) Promoting positive racial identity, 2) Helping children cope with experiences of discrimination, 3) School and home-based educational involvement as Black parents, and 4) Intergenerational mental wellness and racial stress coping.

● Homewood



Dr. James Huguley



Dr. Mary Ohmer

ReCAST (Resiliency in Communities after Stress and Trauma)

CC Hazelwood Initiative and Brashear Center

The ReCAST Collective Efficacy Intervention collaborates with community partners and residents to train youth and adults to prevent violence and foster collective efficacy, which happens when residents trust one another, share norms and values, and work together to intervene to address issues such as crime, violence, safety, and supporting young people. Research shows that collective efficacy is associated with less crime and violence and improved health, mental health, and community well-being.

● Hazelwood ● Mt. Oliver, Arlington, Arlington Heights, and St. Clair

Leveraging AI to Support Peer Providers in Safety Net Behavioral Health Settings



Associate Professor **Dr. Nev Jones** is co-PI on a \$700,000 NSF-funded project to refine and evaluate PeerCoPilot, an AI tool designed to help front-line peer providers in behavioral health organizations. The project is a collaborative effort with co-PIs Hong Shen and Fei Fang from Carnegie Mellon University and Peggy Swarbrick from the Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey. PeerCoPilot helps providers deliver personalized wellness plans, AI-driven community resource navigation, and follow-up support, making it easier to connect people with the supports they need without replacing the human relationships central to peer work. Early testing showed that the tool is easy to use and perceived as helpful by peer providers, and the next phase will develop a peer provider training program, expand implementation across New Jersey, and explore PeerCoPilot adaptation for organizations and communities across the US.



Filling the Gap, Fueling the Future:

PITT'S PATHWAY TO WORKFORCE READINESS

By: B. Denise Hawkins

THE FIELD OF SOCIAL WORK AND THE WORK OF HELPING ARE UNDERGOING PROFOUND CHANGE.

There is a huge demand for social workers who fill healthcare gaps, bring relief to communities, help children and families thrive, serve as powerful advocates and leaders, connect people with resources, coordinate services, make hospital discharge plans, and more. Citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics figures, the National Association of Social Workers projects the profession will grow 6% by 2034, faster than the average for all occupations. Driving this national growth is an aging population in need of services and safety nets, especially in gerontology; the increasing awareness of and reduced stigma around mental health issues; and the growing need for healthcare and child welfare and family services.

The result: High demand for social workers with MSW and LCSW degrees and licensure – and an estimated 74,000 positions to fill. At Pitt, the work of meeting these workforce needs in Pittsburgh and across the nation is happening every day – online, in the classroom, and through teaching, research, practicum placements, and fellowships.

“Whether it’s meeting workforce demands in these critical need areas – geriatrics, aging, mental health, child welfare, and healthcare – or responding to a world in turmoil, as a school, we are innovating, creating collaborative partnerships, and embracing our social work values,” says Dean Betsy Farmer. “We have not shied away from these challenges.”

“As a school, we are innovating, creating collaborative partnerships, and embracing our social work values.”

Preparing qualified and courageous social work leaders ready to step into these high-needs areas and confront challenges, Farmer says, is part of that mission — and represents an opportunity.

The United States is facing a public health crisis in addressing the behavioral health needs of children, adolescents, and transition-aged youth. About one in five young people has a diagnosed mental or behavioral health condition, yet more than half of them with a treatable mental health disorder do not receive treatment. The Pittsburgh region is like other communities across the country, facing this crisis with insufficient human resources to treat this ongoing problem.

Social workers are the largest providers of behavioral health services in the US. But there aren't enough of them in the workforce. That's why Pitt is building a pipeline of social workers who can help fill this high-need workforce gap and be available to deliver those critical services.

Pitt Social Work has long offered certificates in mental health and integrated health care (IHC) and fellowships that focus on health and the ways that physical health and mental health treatment and services need to be approached in an integrated and holistic way. Over the years, the Cannon, Baker, Roth, COAL, and other

federally funded fellowship programs have given students extensive and in-depth experiences in mental health and healthcare settings.

Building on the school's strong history of federal funding to support behavioral health-focused social workers, Assistant Professor of Social Work Rachel Gartner hopes the new Youth Behavioral Health Workforce (YBHW) Fellowship will incentivize Pitt students to choose careers that support the most vulnerable children and youth. In October 2025, the school received a \$2.3 million grant from the federal Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) to launch the four-year fellowship program, which is one of several initiatives to address the local mental health workforce crisis.

During each of the next four years, 14 second-year/advanced standing MSW students in the YBHW fellowship will receive \$25,000 annual stipends and participate in seminars and other specialized training they'll need to serve in high-need and underserved communities, says Gartner.

The first cohort of YBHW fellows began in fall 2025. They are already gaining hands-on experience through practicums at sites such as UPMC Center for Children and Families, UPMC Children's Hospital, WPIC Inpatient, the Beacon, UpStreet, the University of Pittsburgh HEART program, and a host of other sites.

Over the next four years, the Pitt program will support 56 MSW students, expand practicum partnerships across the region, and provide professional development for those already working with youth.

For MSW Program Director Yodit Betru, meeting today's workforce challenges means staying focused on the curriculum and practice.

That perspective is what helps to give Betru "a strong sense of the educational component and what students are going to do, and what we're preparing them to do." Despite the current context of extraordinary social, political, and economic challenges, in many ways, the social work landscape looks much the same as it ever has, with social workers "responding to the needs of vulnerable people and systems" adds Betru.

Betru is also tracking the overwhelming demand for professionals who have the skill set, approaches, and orientation to help, often in the healthcare sector. Compounding the situation are environments where resources are stretched thin and the demand for patient services is mounting. It's a recipe for social work burnout, says Betru. This is why the school prepares students to recognize complexity, to anticipate strain, to build skills for navigating challenging systems, and to know when and how to mobilize resources for themselves and others so they can sustain and thrive in the profession.

A confident Betru says Pitt students are up for today's workforce challenges. They are well trained professionals who are equipped to respond to challenges with intention, support, and strategy.



Accessibility and Opportunity

Preparing social work students to step into their dream job after graduation, to work in high-needs service areas, or lead their own practice, is multilayered and begins when they enter Pitt, says Michele Gordon who directs Career Services and Continuing Education.

“Our efforts to support students are a part of a continuum that tracks to graduation and beyond,” adds Gordon, who is creating new and tailor-made tools, materials, and programs to bolster those efforts. The Pitt alum says she is also excited to engage other social work graduates in the process. So far, offerings include a kind of “masterclass” that allows for more intimate sharing and conversations between alumni and students. Another is a new mentoring program for alumni and students that rolled out last fall and is available to all

“Our efforts to support students are a part of a continuum that tracks to graduation and beyond.”

students, including those in the new online cohort, says Gordon.

When she assesses the evolving demands in the profession and the social work workforce, Gordon says “it’s important for social workers to prepare to work in an interdisciplinary setting” and with collaborative teams. Pitt-trained social workers will be stepping into workplaces where systems are complex, needs are multifaceted, and interprofessional education and interdisciplinary practice have become the norm in many settings and sectors.

The good news: “We’re definitely moving in the right direction in terms of our offerings for students,” adds Gordon, referring to the career-focused opportunities her team makes available, such as licensure exam prep, career fairs, and a social work mentorship program. Beginning this spring, the Van Kirk Career Center’s workforce development initiatives will focus on providing co-curricular experiences and events that will support students in enhancing career readiness competencies and in cultivating social work leadership

skills. At the same time, Gordon wants to more fully engage alumni in the process of honing skills and preparing students for their place in the field.

“As we plan and develop these programs and tools, we are thinking about the richness and expertise in our social work alumni, and how do we bring them to the table.”

Launched in fall 2025, Pitt’s part-time, online MSW option offers a new degree opportunity to help more people earn their MSW and prepare for careers in the field.

To start, this option opens the door for students who want an MSW experience with the flexibility to learn, reflect, and lead from wherever they are,” says Stevara Haley Clark, EdD, MSW, the school’s Director of Online Programs and Distance Education. It’s part of her pitch.

But practically speaking, says Clark, who made her own online journey as a graduate student, choosing Pitt’s online MSW degree option “is about making sure that a parent balancing kids’ activities and needs is a full-time professional, or someone living across the country can still get a Pitt Social Work education.”

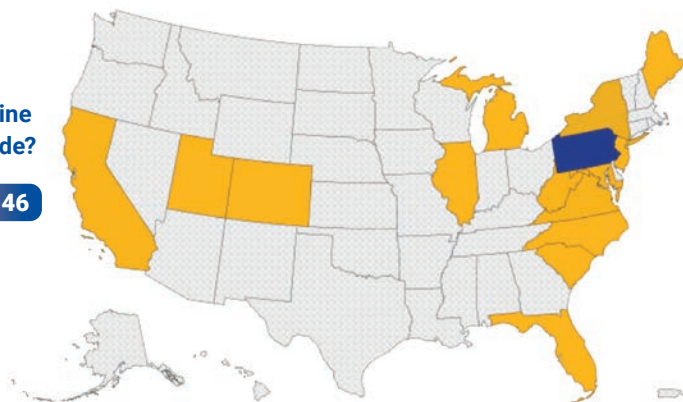
As a doctoral candidate and working mother, those things mattered to Clark when she enrolled in an asynchronous degree program for her doctorate. The degree option and ability to study and learn without having to travel to a campus, she adds, represented accessibility and opportunity — what she wants to offer Pitt MSW students.



Where do online students reside?

1

46



Pitt's top-ranked MSW degree program recently enrolled a 67-member, inaugural, online cohort. Its students reside in 15 states, with about half of the online students living in Pennsylvania. "Our online cohort brings a remarkable blend of passion, purpose, and lived experience. They're eager to engage, build community, and support one another – creating a dynamic, deeply human learning space that inspires all of us," says Clark.

Clark is focused on creating opportunities for online students to "collaborate with each other and be engaged with Pitt, no matter where they live and work in the world." She can still recall the urging of a professor who addressed the members of her doctoral cohort when they began their academic journey: "work together" and "find your people" so that "no one falls behind." And that was a revelation.

"We found ways to collaborate and stay connected and motivated virtually," Clark says. For example, they formed study groups and made time to "hop on a spontaneous Zoom call" with cohort members in search of support or who needed to huddle.

"I want to instill that spirit of collaboration for our Pitt online social work students," adds Clark, who plans to borrow the *Bridges* name and the connection theme it represents for monthly, student-centered webinars, lunch and learns, and other "engagement events" to help build community. "These opportunities will be optional, but I want students to see

"I want to instill that spirit of collaboration for our Pitt online social work students..."



that as a program and as a school, we care about them collectively and encourage them to engage with each other online and off."

In his *Social Work Practice with Diverse Populations* course, Assistant Professor Victor Figueroa could move about the room and maybe dance as his students presented and played songs that inspired them or held special meaning. It was fun. Aspects of that course, in-person, could stoke the senses and was designed to be highly interactive and engaging. It is his teaching style, Figueroa says. Now that he's teaching online, he's had to pivot – and roll "with the challenges and rewards" of adapting small-group discussions, or an asynchronous environment," for example.

But it's working, adds Figueroa, who is also concerned about building community with his students online. Likewise, he is urging them to create communities of their own. Their efforts are taking shape.

Figueroa is using music, which he calls "a powerful connector," to build community. Through the *Music as Life Project*, he invites his online students to upload and share audio files of their favorite song and a video of themselves. Outside of the students' digital classroom, community building has begun over shared musical interest, says an excited Figueroa. "As a result, they have invited each other to concerts and planned meetups offline."

Clark has been tracking the "dramatic 'tech shift'" in higher education and online learning. "It once meant putting up lecture slides and calling it a day," offers Clark, who developed and directed the MSW and BSW degree programs at Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Social Work before coming to Pitt in June 2025.

"Students expect a community, not just a course – and the technology has finally caught up to make that possible."

In the School of Social Work, "we're creating dynamic learning spaces – discussion boards that spark real debate, breakout rooms that feel like miniclassrooms, and multimedia tools that let students show off their creativity," Clark says. "Students expect a community, not just a course – and the technology has finally caught up to make that possible."

Learning and Doing

Cait Sanders

"Where I Belong"

With an undergraduate degree that included concentrations in Spanish, French, and anthropology, and a master's in library science, Cait Sanders spent nearly a decade working in her local public library in Oklahoma City.

She was that librarian who fashioned enticing book displays and developed creative programs. Sanders was also the resident "tech person" for library staff and visitors. With some trepidation, older adults flocked to Sanders' weekly drop-in tech support sessions. They came bearing the tablets, cellphones, and other devices they wrestled with more than they used. Many entered wearing a look of defeat or called themselves "tech illiterate or stupid." But an empathetic Sanders met each one of them with a smile and praise for "coming in and still trying to learn something new."

Today, when Sanders, now a second-year MSW student and former librarian, considers what helped put her on a path to a career in social work, she easily points to two things. First, the time spent with older adults who sought her out at the tech help desk. She says, "Those encounters helped me to grow my compassion and interest in working with older adults." The second was *Whole Person Librarianship: A Social Work Approach to Patron Services*, the game-changing book she discovered while at a national library conference. After meeting the book's coauthors there, one a social worker, "I knew this [social work] was it for me," says Sanders of her epiphany.

When Sanders graduates this year, she will also receive a certificate in gerontology, one of the specialized curricula planning templates Pitt offers students who want to serve the fast-growing population of older adults. By 2040, about one in five Americans will be age 65 or older,

up from about one in eight in 2000, according to Census Bureau data. These are Sanders' "people."

For more than four decades, meeting the human services needs of an aging population is what the School of Social Work has been preparing students like Sanders to tackle head-on with paid, tailored practicum experiences; sought-after fellowships; and research opportunities. Since the early 1980s, a certificate in gerontology has been an anchor in the school's specialized training, says Beth Mulvaney, a gerontology scholar and the Direct Practice Chair and Clinical Assistant Professor.

In 2005, with funding from the Hartford Foundation, the School of Social Work established the two-year Hartford Partnership Program for Aging Education. It supports a paid fellowship that provides both BASW and MSW students with a foundation for working with a diverse older adult population. The program includes coursework, competencies, and a focused practicum experience, adds Mulvaney, who oversees the fellowship.

Sanders is a Hartford Fellow. She is doing her paid practicum at UPMC's Palliative Care Clinic in Monroeville, PA, where she has a Pitt alum for a supervisor. When asked about the kind of experience her practicum has offered recently, Sanders talks about joining patient rounds in the hospital, learning how to talk to families gripped by a loved one's chronic illness, and recently witnessing the act of gratitude a terminal patient showed his healthcare team.

Then Sanders shares what she knows for sure since training at the UPMC clinic: "I'm where I belong." That's on a path to work in palliative and hospice care, where, according to NASW, there is a critical shortage of social workers. In geriatrics, Sanders says, "I have found my people."

In a typical practicum week at the hospital, Sanders will likely "sit with a patient in their last days or hours



on Earth." Sometimes she just holds their hand. It's an act that comes naturally. Sanders comes from a family of "helping types" and finds "terminal illnesses and end-of-life issues" compelling, not daunting — all things that she says make her "well-suited for this work." And Pitt is helping her gain the experience with opportunities like this one to "learn while doing" in a well-matched practicum. It's the "signature pedagogy" and, for many students, "the pathway to employment," says Practicum Assistant Professor Amy DeGurian (MSW '94), who has been a full-time member of the practicum education department since 2013. Practicums are "what make social work great."

Camille LaRock

"Her People"

Camille LaRock, a BASW student from Connecticut, is also a Hartford Fellow. Like Sanders, a practicum helped LaRock find "her people" and social work focus. Since interning at a paid practicum site, Community LIFE, a Pittsburgh organization that empowers older adults to remain at home as they age, "I've solidified my interest in working with older adults," especially those with intellectual and other disabilities, says LaRock. The calling to work in geriatrics is personal for LaRock, who grew up surrounded by close relatives who lived to be 100 or more.

Through her Hartford Fellowship, LaRock is excited to also explore social work through gerontology research. She finds herself in the community and in the lab as a member



of Assistant Professor Quinton Cotton's research team that is working on "Advancing Intergenerational Networks for Dementia Care in Black Communities."

"I welcomed the opportunity to learn about this side of the field and to think like a researcher," says LaRock, who is also interning at Pittsburgh's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center, where she shadows and learns from an interdisciplinary team of healthcare providers.

Linda E. Lese

"Leading by Example"

Linda E. Lese (MSW '84) remembers it well — waiting several years after graduation and practicing in the field before applying to be a practicum instructor.

"I was eager to give back," says Lese, who accepted a social work student the first year she was eligible. That was more than three decades ago. Today, the long-time practicum instructor and veteran social worker continues to do the same at UPMC Presbyterian hospital, where she is a rehabilitation expert discharge plan manager.

Ryan Hylton (BASW '95) was an undergrad and Lese's first practicum student. After many years the pair reconnected. Hylton still knew where to turn for the sound social work wisdom and guidance that Lese is known for sharing with her Pitt students and hospital colleagues. In their two-hour call, Hylton received what he needed, and shared laughter too.

"It was so much fun catching up with Ryan. It was like a reunion," says Lese, who can still remember nearly

all of her students. She has befriended some of her former Pitt students-turned-professionals when they reach out to her on social media. These days, Lese calls Ashley Angiolelli (MSW '24), her most recent graduated practicum student, a colleague. Within months of graduating, Angiolelli started a job at UPMC Presbyterian, where she is a neuro trauma discharge planner, a social work position that she credits Lese and her hospital practicum experience for helping her land.

"Linda set me up for success, thoroughly teaching and always leading by example," offers Angiolelli.

At UPMC Presbyterian, Lese insists on sharing her office each year with a Pitt intern. She considers it as much of a training ground and classroom as the busy hospital spaces they must learn to navigate. She enjoys the ease and teaching moments that come from sitting face-to-face with a student and responding in real time to their questions. For Lese, teaching and togetherness are her hallmark practicum style.

During challenging days and when she has pressing questions, Angiolelli admits she still makes her way back to Lese's office.

Lese involves her interns "in every aspect of patient care." It's something they do together, nearly all the time. But when she thinks her students "have grown" and are ready to practice with confidence what they are learning from her — like how to communicate effectively with physicians or work with a multidisciplinary healthcare team — Lese "lets them branch off."

Over the years and with one Pitt student at a time, Lese says her aim has been to make each practicum experience impactful, not hours filled with busywork and tasks to complete. As a leader, mentor, and practitioner, Lese says it's important to keep a pulse on social work best practices and trends and stay in the know about what Pitt students are learning. "That way, I can work on bringing classroom

lessons to life and knowledge from the field full circle" for students.

At this year's annual Alumni Awards, Lese was recognized with one of the school's Alumni Service Awards for her service through teaching and training the next generation of social workers.

Through fellowships that provide hands-on experience and specialized training, mentorship, and a new online MSW degree program option, the Pitt School of Social Work prepares and develops students who are ready to enter the workforce and practice and lead in today's high-need areas — child welfare, gerontology, mental health, healthcare, community organizing, policy, and beyond.

Paid fellowships are sought-after and are pivotal to preparation and training. As faculty like Gartner know, fellowships can provide a powerful incentive for students to ultimately pursue critical areas of social work practice. By offering financial support and structured training, paid fellowships not only help to reduce barriers to entry; they also create rich opportunities for students to gain specialization in fields where the need is greatest.

Mentorship offers guidance and support, fostering confidence and long-term career growth.

Online education expands access to advanced learning, enabling flexibility for working professionals and reaching diverse communities.

Together, these strategies create a pipeline of skilled, committed social workers ready to serve where they are needed most.





Alumni can play a vital role in building this workforce:

■ Provide Mentorship

Sign up to be a part of the school's fall or spring mentorship programs.

■ Become Practicum Advisors

As the online MSW degree program develops, we would especially value leads on possible practicum placements in the areas where online students are concentrated.

■ Promote Job and Training Opportunities

Share job announcements, fellowships, and other professional training activities with the school's career center that supports both students and alumni.

■ Consider Philanthropic Support

Give to support paid practicums, fellowships, and/or scholarships that support Pitt Social Work students.

■ Gain Continuing Education

Need to earn CE credits? Turn to Pitt. You can also share ideas for new CE offerings or even lead a course.

The School of Social Work is constantly exploring innovative and impactful ways to prepare the next generation of social workers to meet urgent needs. Join us by sharing your ideas for strengthening this pipeline. **We are eager to hear from you. Contact Amanda Paul at amp521@pitt.edu.**

Keep us updated!

From our newsletters and continuing education opportunities to this magazine and more, we have many incredible updates to share from the School of Social Work. Do you have a new job? A new mailing address? Let us know so we can keep our systems updated and can reach you with exciting announcements.



Scan the QR code to update your personal or professional information.



Why I Give to Pitt Social Work



When Pam Zedick (MBA '85) decided to make a gift to Pitt, she knew she wanted to honor her parents and the social workers who played such a critical role for them, and for her, during some of the family's most difficult moments.

Illness touched Pam's family twice. Through both experiences, she remembered how social workers had compassionately counseled and supported her family as they navigated end-of-life care. More specifically, Pam was struck by how the social workers empowered her parents during this time of their lives.

To honor her parents, and the profession that helped them live their final chapters with dignity and care, Pam established the **Michael and Edna Mae Zedick Memorial Fund Supporting Women's Care in Pitt Social Work**. This fund will provide support to students in practicum placements focused on women's empowerment issues, palliative care, or hospice care.

Through her generosity, Pam ensures that the next generation of social workers will continue to bring comfort, guidance, and hope to families facing illness and hardship.

“This gift is my way of giving back to the university that shaped me and influenced my life's direction. And I hope this contribution helps future students find the same sense of purpose and opportunity. Supporting palliative care and similar programs offered by the School of Social Work is deeply personal to me — it's about helping others find peace and dignity in difficult times and ensuring that more women have the opportunity to do this profoundly important work.”

The Impact of Social Work's Endowed Chairs

Together, these four scholars exemplify how endowed chairs are catalysts for discovery and transformation, turning resources into impact and reaffirming Pitt Social Work's role as a national leader in research that advances equity, well-being, and social justice.

DR. KYAIEN CONNER

Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair

Holding the Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair, named for Pitt's first Black provost and a visionary advocate for equity, Dr. Kyaïen Conner sees her role as both a continuation of a legacy and an investment in the next generation of scholars.

Through this chair, Conner has expanded research opportunities that align with Dr. Henderson's values of inclusion and community engagement. One of her initiatives is the CRSP RISE Mental Health Pilot Grant Program, a partnership with Dr. Shaun Eack that funds innovative research at the intersection of race and mental health.

Her investment in the journal *Race and Social Problems* has been equally impactful. Under her leadership, the journal has expanded to include cross-disciplinary collaboration through a new co-editor from Africana Studies and an editorial manager, broadening its reach as one of the nation's leading publications on race. Conner also plans to develop a podcast that will translate academic findings into accessible insights for the community.

"Holding the Donald M. Henderson Chair is an honor, but also, it's a responsibility to carry forward a legacy of equity, inclusion, and community-partnered scholarship. I see this role as both a bridge to the past and a pathway for the next generation of changemakers."



L-R: Endowed chairs Kyaïen Conner, Shaun Eack, Sara Goodkind, and John Wallace.

DR. SHAUN EACK

James and Noel Browne Endowed Chair

For Dr. Shaun Eack, the James and Noel Browne Endowed Chair fuels a mission close to his heart: closing the gap between mental health research and the realities of community care.

Eack's work focuses on cognitive enhancement therapy (CET) for individuals with schizophrenia and autism. With support from the Browne Chair, he has transformed CET from an intensive 18-month protocol into a streamlined 12-session workbook designed for everyday clinical use. This year, his team began the first statewide implementation of scalable CET across Pennsylvania, from Haven House and Salisbury Behavioral Health in Allentown to UPMC and Magellan Health in Pittsburgh, helping providers deliver effective care to more patients.

The chair also enables Eack to seed high-risk, high-reward research. It has funded pilot studies, including one that integrates mental health support within Black churches to address stigma and accessibility. These pilots are generating data critical for future large-scale NIH and PCORI submissions focused on implementing evidence-based therapies in real-world settings.

"The Browne Chair is my heart job. It's what allows me to take science that works under ideal conditions and figure out how to make it work for people who need it most."

2025 Endowed Lectures

DR. SARA GOODKIND

Philip Hallen Endowed Chair

Appointed in June as the first woman to hold the Philip Hallen Endowed Chair, Dr. Sara Goodkind is building on the chair's tradition of linking health, justice, and community. Her appointment is particularly meaningful, as the chair alternates between public health and social work, reflecting her interdisciplinary career.

"It is an honor to hold this chair that recognizes the visionary leadership of Philip Hallen in promoting health equity in Pittsburgh and aims to support work that continues this legacy."

Goodkind's leadership in the Black Girls Equity Alliance (BGEA) continues to guide her focus. As co-convenor of BGEA's Juvenile Justice Action Team, she facilitates collective work to eradicate systemic inequities affecting Black girls in Allegheny County, including collaborative efforts aimed at creating community and systemic change to keep our young people out of legal systems. Dr. Goodkind is also co-principal investigator of the Pittsburgh Wage Study, a community-based, longitudinal, mixed-methods project assessing the impact of unionization and resulting wage increases on the health and well-being of low-wage hospital workers.

Through the Hallen Chair, Goodkind plans to further these collaborative models and integration of community-driven research into the classroom, ensuring that Pitt's social work students engage directly in projects that advance equity and systemic change.

DR. JOHN WALLACE

David E. Epperson Endowed Chair

As holder of the David E. Epperson Endowed Chair, Dr. John Wallace exemplifies community-engaged scholarship in action. His current research, the CHURCH (Congregations as Healers Uniting to Restore Community Health) project, builds on the historic strengths of Black faith communities to address mental health disparities.

Funded in part by RISE Mental Health, the CHURCH project partners with local pastors, clinicians, and musicians to merge cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) with scripture and music, offering faith-based, culturally responsive support. The project also trains clergy to serve as informal mental health advocates, expanding the reach of care through trusted community institutions.

Wallace's chair support sustains this interdisciplinary collaboration, uniting faculty from Social Work, Psychiatry, and Community Ministries. His ongoing mentorship of junior faculty and students ensures that the next generation of social work scholars continues to build on Epperson's legacy of research rooted in service.

"I am honored to build on Dean Epperson's legacy by connecting Pitt's School of Social Work to the community to improve lives and promote flourishing."

Raymond R. Webb Jr. Endowed Lecture — At the Crossroads: Building Stronger Coordination for Lasting Impact on Dual-System Youth

In March, Pitt Social Work was thrilled to welcome two Pitt Social Work alumnae, Macon Stewart (MSW '02) and Karen Kolivoski (MSW '06; PhD '12), back to campus to lead a lecture focused on the challenges faced by youth who are served in both the child welfare and juvenile justice systems.



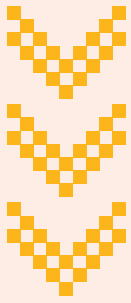
Florence Gibbs Momeyer Endowed Lecture

In October, the School of Social Work and the Center on Race and Social Problems hosted the annual Florence Gibbs Momeyer Endowed Lecture, featuring Dr. Andre Perry, Senior Fellow and Director of the Center for Community Uplift at the Brookings Institution. Perry, a native of Pittsburgh, focuses his research on race and structural inequality, education, and economic inclusion. Perry's recent scholarship at Brookings examines well-being across racial groups and regions in America, focusing on how investments in critical assets can lead to thriving.



Alumni are invited to attend these lectures, in-person or virtually.

We hope to see you at the 2026 lectures! If you have any speaker recommendations, please email Amanda Paul at amp521@pitt.edu.



2025 Alumni Awards

Each year the School of Social Work honors alumni who have made significant contributions to their community. In November, alumni, faculty, staff, and friends came together to celebrate the newest cohort of Alumni Awards recipients.

Congratulations again to our 2025 Alumni Award recipients!



Left to right: Molly Updegrove, Linda E. Lese, LeeAnn Guido, Anitra J. Green, Aerion Abney, Jonathan B. Singer, and David C. Droppa

Distinguished Alumni Award

- **DAVID C. DROPPA (MSW '67)**
Professor of Social Work & Director, Social Work Program, Seton Hill University, Greensburg, PA
- **JONATHAN B. SINGER (PHD '09)**
Professor of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago

Advancing Excellence Award

- **AERION ABNEY (MSW '12)**
Pennsylvania State Representative, 19th District
- **ANITRA J. GREEN (MSW '99)**
Founder and Owner, Taylormade Behavioral Health Solutions

School of Social Work Service Award

- **LEEANN GUIDO (MSW '03)**
School Social Worker, Shaler Area School District
- **LINDA E. LESE (MSW '84)**
Rehabilitation Expert/Discharge Plan Manager, UPMC Rehabilitation Institute

Rising Star Award

- **MOLLY UPDEGROVE (MSW '21)**
Director of Operations/
Deputy Director of Programs, ReImagine Appalachia

Do you know a Pitt Social Work alum who is making an impact in the field at a local, regional, national, or international level? Scan the QR code to learn more about categories and nominate an alum for the 2026 awards.





INTO THE ARCHIVES: What Was It Really Like?

By: Edward W. Sites, PhD, Professor Emeritus

Wouldn't you like to know what it was like to attend the School of Social work during the Great Depression, during World War II, or during the civil rights movement days of the 1960s and 1970s? How did World War II affect the student body and curriculum? Who were some of the favorite professors, and what were their classes like? What were field placements like? Wouldn't you like to talk to some of the students from those days?

Well, a treasure trove of tape recordings of students from those eras has just surfaced. These recordings were collected by Vincent Day, a former Director of Development. Vincent went around the country, visiting former graduates and tape-recording interviews with them about their experiences and their careers. Some of them became quite well-known such as Gisela Konopka (MSW '43), Elaine Brody (MSW '44), Clare Lustman (MSW '41), and Ruby Pernel (MSW '44).

Unfortunately, because of privacy laws, these wonderful resources will not be available publicly online for those interested in digging into the informative and intriguing interviews further. However, they are available to those visiting the Archives & Special Collections in person at 7500 Thomas Boulevard, Pittsburgh. You may listen to the tapes and read the transcripts of the tapes that have been transcribed.

In all likelihood, the teasers above have aroused your curiosity. To help satisfy that in the limited space available, some of the more interesting observations from the interview with Irwin H. Gold (1919–2001), MS in Social Administration '43, will be summarized.

Gold was from Cleveland but passed over Western Reserve University (now Case Western Reserve) because of Pitt's national reputation and because his brother, Bertram, was a Pitt School of Applied Social Sciences faculty member in group work. Gold expounds at some length about the national figures on the faculty at the time and the school's prominence in all three major study areas — casework, group work, and community organization. The dean at the time was Wilbur I. Newstetter, also a prominent national figure, especially in the fields of group work and community organization. Gold mentions particularly faculty members Gertrude Wilson and Gladys Ryland and their national standard textbook *Social Group Work Practice*. He also speaks of his fellow students who became well known national figures, such as Gisela Konopka, Paul Simon, Bernie Shiffman, and others. He spoke of how World War II affected the school. The classes were smaller; the students were older; and there were many women students "because men weren't available." Gold's wife, Beverly, graduated four years after he did.

Perhaps the most compelling narrative of the interview is Gold's vivid description of the racial problems and racial segregation in Pittsburgh at the time. He says, "We had only a few Black students, who had a terrible time in Pittsburgh ... they were outstanding people, and we felt for them. There

was only one good restaurant in Oakland ... and no Blacks were admitted. We went together to force the issue. This was in 1941. ... In 1942 we forced it again. They wouldn't serve us. The waitress would come over to some of us [and say] 'I have to tell you this, but we can't serve you; you know why; we are restricted to whites,' and it wasn't against the law. We said, 'We won't move; you are going to have to serve us. They wouldn't serve us, [so] we picketed the place.'" Gold remarks, "This was social action ... and it was another way of unifying us." This was virtually two full decades before the February to July 1960 Woolworth lunch counter sit-ins by Black students in Greensboro, NC, which has attracted so much attention.

As you can imagine, these tapes are very exciting for scholars, researchers, and curious alums. I write this article to share some of this history and to remind you of our Pitt Social Work Archive. I also ask that you consider writing an autobiographical description of your Pitt Social Work experience, your classmates, your faculty, your field placements, the current events taking place then and how they influenced your experience, and the like. Let's add more of these stories to our collection. You could become part of the schools archives and history.

If you'd like to share a story for the archive, please reach out to Amanda Paul at amp521@pitt.edu.

News and Notes

1980s

DAVE FEEHAN (MSW '81) was appointed to the Montgomery County, Maryland Community Reinvestment and Repair Fund Commission, which was founded with the purpose to provide funds to community-based organizations that serve communities determined by the Office of Social Equity, in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General, to have been the most impacted by disproportionate enforcement of the cannabis prohibition before July 1, 2022.

2000s

STEPHANIE LUTZ (BASW '01) was named 2025 City & State 40 In Their Forties.

MICHAEL LINDSEY (PhD '02), Dean of the New York University Silver School of Social Work, was named by City & State New York as a Trailblazer in Health Care.

KATHI ELLIOTT (MSW '08), a psychiatric nurse practitioner and CEO of Gwen's Girls, a nonprofit serving girls in the region who face racism, poverty, and violence, was appointed to the Allegheny County's new Juvenile Detention Advisory Board.



Michael Lindsey



Aerion Abney



Dave Newman



Priya Gupta



2025 Social Worker Appreciation of Greatness Award (S.W.A.G. Awards) honored alumnae:

JANIECE ANDERSON (MSW '09)
VANESSA BECK (MSW '10)
DETRIA DIXON (MSW '13)
DANA WARREN (MSW '05)
MICHELLE MCMURRAY (MSW '07)
KHAVAH MURRAY (MSW '08)
SHEILA GILLESPIE ROTH (BASW '83; MSW '84)
ROSALIE SMILEY (BASW '79; MSW '80; PhD '99)
LATOYA HAMM WILSON (MSW '16)

2010s

Two School of Social Work alumna were named to *Pittsburgh Magazine's* 2025 40 Under 40 list: **JESSICA GURLEY** (BASW '10; MSW '12) and **RHONDA STROZIER** (BASW '17; MSW '19).

JASMINE WILSON-BRYANT (MSW '11) was nominated by her coworkers and won Social Worker of the Year 2025 for the Washington, DC Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

Democratic Allegheny County lawmakers chose Pittsburgh House member **AERION ABNEY** (MSW '12) to chair their delegation at the Capitol.

MARK RUFFALO (MSW '12), Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Central Florida, published a review paper in the journal *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, marking 50 years since John Gunderson's critical paper on borderline personality disorder.

DAVID NEWMAN (MSW '13), Assistant Professor of Creative and Professional Writing at Pitt-Greensburg, was awarded a Pushcart Prize for his story "The Last Thing That Happened Before I Became a Med Tech."

2020s

PRIYA GUPTA (BASW '24) was nominated and selected by faculty and students for the Solomon O. Lichter Memorial Prize at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy, and Practice. This award is given to graduating master's degree students for high scholarship and professional leadership.

Email sswalums@pitt.edu to share your accomplishments!

In Memoriam

Dr. Charlotte Dunmore

Former MSW program director Dr. Charlotte Dunmore passed away this year. In addition to her role at Pitt, she served the profession by sitting on many Council on Social Work Education reaffirmation teams and helped to facilitate the accreditation of many BASW and MSW programs across the country.

She was recognized as a poverty scholar and an advocate for women and children and was well-respected for her knowledge.

Dr. Dunmore's legacy is reflected in the students she mentored and the lives she touched. She will greatly be missed.

Dr. Kenneth Jaros

Dr. Kenneth Jaros played a pivotal role in shaping and advancing the joint MSW/MPH program, creating opportunities for social work students to gain interdisciplinary expertise that empowers them to address complex public health and social work challenges. His contributions live on through graduates whose work improves the well-being of countless communities.

James P. McDonald

Jim McDonald was a Pittsburgh icon whose passion and commitment to nonprofit work left an indelible mark on our community. We are grateful that Pitt Social Work was among his many passions. For decades, Jim served on the School of Social Work Board of Visitors, offering guidance to two deans and helping to shape the future of Pitt Social Work. His legacy of leadership and service will continue to guide and inspire generations to come.

1960s

Joseph P. Miller, Jr. (BASW '61; MSW '74)
Linda M. Hagerty (MSW '64)
Bernice A. Parlak (MSW '66)
Paul D. Cronin (MSW '67)
Charles S. Hobgood (MSW '68)
Marvin A. Batten (MSW '69)

1970s

Evaleen Johnson (MSW '71)
Linda L. Miller (MSW '71)
Melanie J. Russell (MSW '72)
Edmund F. Sliman, Jr. (MSW '72)
Michael A. Brubaker (MSW '73)
Kenneth J. Jaros, (MSW '73; PhD '85)
Kathleen M. Connolly (MSW '74)
The Honorable Raymond A. Novak (MSW '74)
Cynthia L. Goodman (MSW '75)
Cynthia W. Melamed (MSW '75)
Lisa Stamper-Poton (MSW '76)
Ruth S. Zober (MSW '76)
Marsha H. Grahame (BASW '77; MSW '79)
Lucille M. Kases (BASW '78)
Pamela A. Blackwood (MSW '79)

1980s

Judy C. Joyce (BASW '80; MSW '81)
Linda Broker (MSW '82)
James P. McDonald (MSW '82)
Deborah G. West (PhD '82)
Mary R. Randal (BASW '84)
Mary C. Saunders (BASW '84)
Gary R. Lounsberry (PhD '85)
Judy K. Spahr (MSW '85)
Joan F. Humphrey (MSW '86)
Robert J. Kinzler (MSW '86)
Kieran F. Stenson, III (MSW '88)

1990s

Patricia R. Lehnhardt (MSW '93)
Suzanne Kowalczyk (MSW '94)
Laurie A. King (MSW '96)
Regina H. Nicosia (MSW '98)

2000s

Megan Glessner Evans (MSW '00)
Courtney P. Caudill (BASW '03)
Jerry B. Daniel (PhD '03)
Vicki L. Nesta (BASW '01; MSW '03)
Gayle K. Clark (MSW '05)
Robert L. Filipovich, Sr. (MSW '07)

2010s

Keely L. Thompson (BASW '11)



School of Social Work

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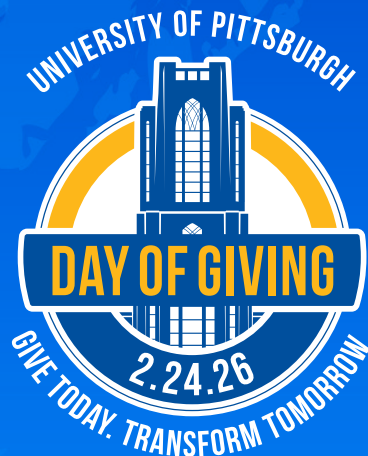
It's better when we're together.

When you join in on February 24 for the 10th annual Pitt Day of Giving (PDoG), you create amazing possibilities for our students, faculty and programs at the School of Social Work. And your gift can even help us unlock challenge funds available only on PDoG.

Starting on February 10, go to pitt.gift/pdog26sw to:

- make your gift,
- play the PDoG video game (back and leveled up in its second year), and
- get details on challenges and more.

With you on our side, we're unstoppable.



#PittDayofGiving #PDoG26