

EMPOWERING AT-RISK YOUTH

Social-work students support and advocate for teens and young adults with troubled pasts.

BY OLIVIA GRIDER

Young Americans who are transitioning to adulthood with a history of trauma, mental illness, substance abuse or violent behavior are falling through society's cracks, especially in states like Alabama, where 66 of the 67 counties are classified by the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration as mental-health-care-professional shortage areas.

A University of Alabama School of Social Work program is helping fill those gaps by producing master of social work graduates trained to support youth ages 16 to 25 who are experiencing behavioral problems or are at risk for them. As part of the Transitional-Age Youth University of Alabama project, students work with teens and young adults at a variety of agencies and organizations through a 500-hour, field-education placement.

"Many of the clients we serve have seen more pain than many of us see in a lifetime," says Cara Loy, an MSW student from Madison, Ala., who interned in the foster-care program at the Latin American Youth Center. "I want to empower these youths to see that their past shapes them, but it does not define who they choose to be and what they choose to do with their lives."

During her Spring 2017 internship, Loy took kids to doctors' appointments and supervised visits with their parents. She says they often opened up to her about issues they were struggling with. "I feel like everything I have learned in my classes about trauma and child development is being played out live-action in these kids," she says. "I am able to

see the signs of trauma, spot the triggers and respond patiently and appropriately."

Between 2015 and 2017, the TAY-UA program produced 32 master of social work graduates skilled in addressing issues faced by at-risk, transitional-age youth. During their training, UA students spent 16,000 hours working with teens and young adults and agencies serving them in Alabama,

Mississippi, Georgia and Washington, D.C. Internships were part of the SW 595 Field Education course and took place at mental-health clinics and hospitals, foster-care organizations, schools, veterans' facilities and substance-abuse programs.

Students attend a rigorous orientation on working with transitional-age youth and complete online coursework, which they review individually with a supervisor each week.



UA students learn skills for working with troubled children and their families.

"There are many youth in need of behavioral intervention due to substance abuse, depression and/or involvement with the justice department," says Dr. Carol Drolen, an associate professor of social work and project director for TAY-UA. "Our schools are not equipped to manage this need, and often these clients are not seen until their situation worsens."

She cites a study showing treatment spending for mental-health and substance-abuse disorders in the United States is projected to increase to \$280.5 billion in 2020, up from \$171.7 billion in 2009.

"The projections are very clear – the demand for services continues to grow," she says of the research, released by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Helping clients cope

Students employ crisis-intervention and motivational-interviewing techniques with both kids and their parents. Through crisis intervention, they help a client through crises and perceived crises by acknowledging the client's emotional state and helping him/her regain equilibrium. Motivational interviewing is a way to help an individual determine how he/she would like to change and develop a plan for making that change. The social worker then supports the individual in carrying out the plan.

Jasmine Triplett, an MSW student from Starkville, Miss., who interned with the Department of Human Services' Division of Family and Children Services and with Associates for Renewal in Education, says the TAY-UA program and field placement made her feel empowered and confident as a social worker. "One client was difficult in the beginning of my internship," she says. "She didn't like to see new faces. Throughout the semester, as different events unfolded, she saw that I was there for her and in her corner. Now every time she sees me, she hugs me."

Students also participate in interprofessional teams, collaborating with counselors, psychologists and primary-health providers, as part of their field-education experiences. "I love being able to work with other professionals to link our kids to services that can help them navigate their emotions and cope with what they've been through," Loy says.

Policy and advocacy

Students learn to work with legislators and government employees as well, in order to promote policies that will positively affect at-risk, transitional-age youth.

Drawing on knowledge acquired through courses such as SW 501 Advanced Social Welfare Policy Analysis, students meet with legislators and explain how current or prospective legislation will affect their clients.

Kristin Torres, an MSW student from Jackson, Miss.,

assisted with an advocacy campaign called Going Places that aims to change policies that make getting a driver's license difficult for transitional-age foster youth. Requirements for a legal parent or guardian to sign for permit/license tests and obtain vehicle insurance are inhibitive for foster youth.

"Foster youth are often forced to become self-sufficient at a much earlier age than their peers. Without a driver's license, these youth may not be able to get a job, maintain a job or drive to school for purposes of higher education," Torres says.

Taylor Pinckney, an MSW student from Bynum, Ala., who interned with the Child Welfare League of America, met with members of Congress to explain how transitional-age youth within their states would be harmed if programs such as Medicaid and the Social Services Block Grant were defunded. Without full support for these programs, at-risk teens and young adults will have more difficulty obtaining job skills and getting help for mental illness, Pinckney says.

Creating TAY social-work specialists

Drolen says a goal of the TAY-UA program is for graduates to build careers serving transitional-age youth, particularly in the Southeast. Many graduates and students are working or seeking employment in that field.

"What I learned the most through my experiences with the TAY-UA program is that I truly do like working with transitional-age youth," Pinckney says. "In fact, I am hoping to get hired on at an agency that specifically works with that population. The sad truth is many people believe these children are lost causes due to their age, and that is simply not true. This population needs more people to be empathetic and caring."

For more information about the TAY-UA program, contact Dr. Carol Drolen at cdrolen@sw.ua.edu or 205-348-3935.



Members of the 2017 class of TAY-UA students at the headquarters of the National Association of Social Workers in Washington, D.C.