

THE TRIBUNE

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Rural Breakthrough Regional Campuses Jump-start COVID-19 Antibody Study



UAMS Rural Research Director Veronica Smith, MBA, (top left) leads a recent meeting on the collection of remnant blood samples with UAMS Regional Programs leadership and campus representatives.

Remnant blood samples began arriving in August from UAMS Family Medical Centers in Fayetteville, Fort Smith and Pine Bluff to support the UAMS-led Arkansas Coronavirus Antibodies Seroprevalence Survey.

By the end of September, nearly 1,100 had been delivered to UAMS and Arkansas Children's Research Institute in Little Rock, with coordination support from the new UAMS Rural Research Network. The samples are augmenting collections from UAMS clinics in Little Rock.

TRI Director Laura James, M.D., credits the UAMS Regional Programs' campuses with providing key support at a critical time period in the study.

"We're seeing a lot of great collaboration and cooperation, and I am extremely proud of everyone involved," James said.

As the research team was ramping up participant recruitment through

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Rural Research Network Key to UAMS Mission

Dear Colleagues,

TRI's mission is to "develop new knowledge and novel approaches that will measurably address the complex challenges of rural and underrepresented populations." Over the last year, the UAMS Rural Research Network was launched to allow us to meet our mission. This initiative, supported by TRI, the Office of the

Provost, UAMS Northwest, and the Cancer Institute, provides a platform to expand research participation opportunities to rural residents who frequently represent underrepresented populations. Building upon the existing clinical and educational framework of UAMS Regional Programs, the Rural Research Network currently has research staff in three of the eight UAMS regional program sites, with plans to expand to all eight sites.

Since January of 2020, the network has launched one

Patient-Centered Outcomes Research Institute-funded clinical trial addressing diabetes education (page 3) and contributed to the Arkansas Coronavirus Antibodies Seroprevalence Survey. Beginning this fall, it will support a new National Institutes of Health-funded study testing a food delivery model to address diabetes in rural areas. In addition, the network recently completed a COVID-19 survey that will support future grant applications.

In the coming months and years, we will work with Regional Programs to help the network bring an array of impactful health research to rural and underrepresented Arkansans.

Sincerely,

Laura James, M.D.
Director, TRI

Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical and Translational Research, UAMS

Rural Breakthrough

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the College of Public Health supported call center, she said, the study's leaders also recognized the enormous potential of the UAMS Regional Programs Family Medical Centers to expand blood sample collections.

"We were fortunate that the Rural Research Network was up and running, which allowed us to create a protocol and the mechanisms for supplying remnant blood samples," James said. "It's also worth noting that the network is helping us address the health needs of rural Arkansans, which is a core part of our mission as a national Clinical and Translational Sciences Award Program site."

The UAMS Rural Research Network comprises UAMS' eight regional campuses across the state. In addition to Regional Programs, the network's partners include TRI, the Office of Community Health & Research at the UAMS Northwest



Regional Campus and Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute.

Veronica Smith, MBA, became director of Rural Research in December 2019 and has spearheaded the network's development, providing administrative support and clinical coordination.

Based at TRI, Smith has built strong relationships with the regional campuses through frequent trips for in-person meetings (pre-COVID-19) and numerous virtual meetings.

"It's great partnering with the regional campuses to contribute to such important studies that will impact so many Arkansans and help fulfill the joint vision of the network," Smith said.

The network started with funding from a Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) award, which is supporting a diabetes education study led by Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., MBA, vice chancellor for the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus.

The existing collaborations helped pave the way for the regional campuses' enthusiastic participation in the seroprevalence study.

"We're glad we can be a part of this research network and that we can contribute as a member of the team," said Ronald Brimberry, M.D., a family medicine physician at the UAMS Northwest Family Medical Center.

Brimberry's comments came at a twice-monthly Zoom meeting with the regional sites taking part in the seroprevalence study.

Also during the meeting, Josh Kennedy, M.D., who initiated development of UAMS' antibody test and has spearheaded blood sample collection efforts, praised the regional campuses for their strong collaboration.

"You guys have been amazing, coming together in such a short amount of time to gather so many samples," said Kennedy, associate professor in the College of Medicine Department of Pediatrics and a 2015 graduate of the TRI KL2 Mentored Research Career Development program. "We are making great headway with regard to seroprevalence in Arkansas because of your work."

UAMS-affiliated investigators interested in conducting research with UAMS Regional Programs campuses can request a consultation through the TRI Services portal at TRI.uams.edu.

Lab Tech: 'Let's Rock and Roll'



Terry Hall, med tech, ASCP, in her lab at the UAMS Northwest Family Medical Center.



Larry Mann, MLT, at UAMS West Family Medical Center, packages remnant samples for shipping to UAMS in Little Rock.

Mindful of COVID-19's death toll, Terry Hall, med tech, ASCP, at UAMS Northwest Family Medical Center, jumped at the opportunity to participate in the Arkansas seroprevalence study.

"It's such a crazy time right now," said Hall, the lab's supervisor and a 27-year employee at UAMS Regional Programs. "If we can do anything to prevent a family from going through what those other 200,000-plus families have gone through, well hey, let's rock and roll - let's go."

As one of three participating regional sites, the lab precisely catalogues and packages all of the remnant blood samples from its clinical patients. Hall said it is not too time consuming because the process has been streamlined by UAMS Rural Research Director Veronica Smith, MBA.

"Veronica and Amy Bowen (research associate) are our contacts, and they are easy to reach when we have questions," she said. "I could not ask for a better team to guide us."

Twice a week, Hall and her lab partner, Virginia Breshears, send the packages via courier to the UAMS Little Rock campus.

Smith's office provides shipping boxes and other materials and has arranged for deliveries to UAMS.

"We're trying to make it as easy as possible so they can use existing personnel without taxing their time too much," Smith said.

PCORI Funds Telehealth for Diabetes Study



Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., MBA

COVID-19 hit as Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., and her research team were embarking on a major study comparing diabetes education interventions with diverse populations.

The five-year, \$3.73 million Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI) award was to support in-person type 2 diabetes prevention education in rural UAMS Regional Programs Family Medical Centers. Given social distancing restrictions due to the coronavirus, McElfish, vice chancellor for the UAMS Northwest Campus, applied for and recently received a \$400,000 enhancement that will allow the study to continue using interactive video.

With TRI pilot grants and other support, McElfish and her team developed and tested Diabetes Self-Management Education (DSME) models for individuals and families.

The PCORI-funded study involves 600 people with type-2 diabetes and 600 family members. It will address important gaps in knowledge by comparing the family-based model to an individual-focused DSME.

The enhanced funding will support the purchase of an iPad for each participant. "This will allow the study to begin and remain consistent throughout the project period," McElfish said. "The aims, intervention content, randomization, and protocol will be the same. The delivery mechanism is the only thing that will change."

The PCORI project is also supporting the new UAMS Rural Research Network, an intra-institutional partnership that includes UAMS Regional Programs and its eight campuses across Arkansas.

COVID-19 TRI Study of the Month

- **UAMS Principal Investigator:** Nikhil Meena, M.D., FCCP, Associate Professor, Department of Internal Medicine, College of Medicine; Director, Medical Intensive Care Unit, Pulmonary and Critical Care Medicine, UAMS.
- **Summary:** A clinical trial evaluating the efficacy and safety of otilimab IV in patients with severe pulmonary COVID-19 related disease.
- **Significance:** The investigational antibody may block granulocyte-macrophage colony-stimulating factor (GM-CSF), which is involved in inflammation in critically ill COVID-19 patients. It could potentially improve chances for survival by reducing the need for oxygen support.
- **TRI Services:** Medicare coverage analysis, study budget development, IRB submission and regulatory startup, training for study staff/investigators, oversight of enrollment startup, and research nurse coordinator services.
- **Sponsor:** GlaxoSmithKline



Amanda Stapleton, B.S.N., RN, a TRI clinical research coordinator, is assisting Nikhil Meena, M.D., with the COVID-19 investigational drug trial.

TRIBUTES

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WEBSITE:
TRI.uams.edu

EMAIL:
TRI@uams.edu

TRI MAIN NUMBER:
(501) 614-2287

Editor
David Robinson

Designer
Leslie Norris

TRI Director
Laura James, M.D.