

THE TRIBUNE

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Advancing Rural Health TRI, UAMS Regional Clinics Help Lead National Research Initiative



Jacqueline Childs, M.D., visits with a patient at the UAMS Family Medical Center in El Dorado. (Photo by Preston Tolliver)

UAMS family medicine physicians Jacqueline Childs, M.D., in El Dorado and Jordan Weaver, M.D., in Batesville bring a crucial rural perspective to a national research effort aimed at reducing health disparities. The initiative, recently funded by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and coordinated by the UAMS Translational Research Institute (TRI), integrates research into primary care settings to improve outcomes in rural, underserved communities.

The Communities Advancing Research Equity (CARE) for Health initiative supports innovative research networks such as HEART NET (Health Equity through Access and Research in Transformative Networks), a collaborative hub that brings together UAMS, the University of Alabama at Birmingham, and the University of Mississippi.

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Dear Colleagues,

I am pleased to share exciting news in this month's TRIBUNE about the Communities Advancing Research Equity (CARE) for Health initiative, a groundbreaking effort in which our UAMS family medicine physicians are playing key roles.

This project represents a commitment at UAMS to address persistent health disparities in rural communities, one of the most pressing challenges in Arkansas today.

CARE's innovative approach, which integrates research into primary care settings, aligns with TRI's mission to improve health statewide for all Arkansans, especially those in rural areas. By fostering collaborations among institutions such as UAMS, the University of Alabama, Birmingham, and the University of Mississippi, this initiative will generate evidence-based solutions that improve patient care and promote health equity.

I am inspired by the dedication of our co-investigators, including Shashank Kraleti, M.D., the Garnett Chair of Family and Preventive Medicine, Jacqueline Childs, M.D., and Jordan Weaver, M.D., who are translating research into real-world impact. Their work demonstrates how strategic collaborations can lead to new approaches that benefit rural populations.

I encourage you to learn more about the CARE initiative and consider how your own work might intersect with this important effort. Together, we can advance the health of every community in Arkansas.

Sincerely,

Laura James, M.D.
Director, TRI
Associate Vice Chancellor for Clinical and Translational Research, UAMS

Advancing Rural Health (continued from page 1)

This \$30 million national effort embeds research into primary care clinics, aiming to address persistent health disparities in rural communities.

For Childs and Weaver, participating in CARE represents an opportunity to make real, sustainable changes in their patients' health outcomes.

"As a rural physician, I've seen how limited access to resources can shape health outcomes," said Weaver, an assistant professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine. "CARE for Health allows us to explore innovative solutions that directly address these challenges in our community."



Jordan Weaver, M.D.

The first CARE project is the iREACH study, an innovative 24-week digital weight-loss program designed specifically for rural populations. By combining accessible technology with personalized coaching, iREACH aims to tackle obesity, a condition that disproportionately affects rural communities and often exacerbates chronic illnesses that Childs and Weaver address in their clinic daily.

"A smaller percentage of our clinic population has access to digital weight-loss programs through their insurance, so participation in this study may be their first opportunity to engage in a high-intensity, more personalized weight-reduction intervention," said Childs, an associate professor in the Department of Family and Preventive Medicine.

Tackling a Persistent Challenge

The iREACH study, supported by UAMS' \$506,739 share of the CARE grant, is designed to improve obesity outcomes by incorporating features like facilitated group video sessions, counselor feedback, and individual coaching into a 24-week digital program. By recruiting participants from UAMS' rural family medicine clinics, researchers hope to provide an accessible and effective intervention tailored to the unique needs of rural residents.

Obesity is a key driver of chronic diseases such as diabetes, hypertension and heart disease, which Childs and Weaver see regularly in their clinics. The iREACH study not only addresses obesity but aligns with their clinic's commitment to preventive medicine and community health.

"In our clinic, we value preventive medicine and the health of our local community, alongside addressing patients' acute and chronic illnesses," Childs said. "Participating in the CARE initiative helps us broaden the lifestyle interventions we can offer."

Looking Ahead

While the iREACH study, led by the University of South Carolina in collaboration with the University of Virginia, is the first major project for UAMS under CARE, Childs is already envisioning future research opportunities.

"I would like to see a CARE for Health network research project focusing on pregnant or childbearing-age women and infants to improve equity and reduce the high maternal and infant mortality rate in rural Arkansas," she said.

Participating in the initiative is more than just research, Childs said, it's about being part of a broader movement to improve health care in the communities that need it most.

A Broader Impact

Led at UAMS by TRI Director Laura James, M.D., and Shashank Kraleti, M.D., the Garnett Chair of Family and Preventive Medicine, CARE is designed to ensure that academic medical centers like UAMS collaborate with community-based providers to tackle health inequities.

Pearl McElfish, PhD, MBA, leads the community engagement initiatives for HEART NET. Voices of community members will be essential in the development of future trials conducted through the CARE initiative, said McElfish, who directs the UAMS Institute for Community Health Innovation. Plans are in development for the first community engagement meeting, to be held this spring.

For Childs, CARE represents the best of what UAMS stands for: bridging academic research with community impact.

As UAMS expands its leadership in rural health research, collaborative initiatives like CARE and iREACH showcase the power of partnership.

"There's a great collaborative spirit on this team, and we're laying the groundwork for innovative, evidence based approaches that will improve health in the communities that need it most," James said.

Other academic institutions funded through Care include Oregon Health and Science University, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, West Virginia University, University of Oklahoma and University of New Mexico.



Register Now for TRI Research Day 2025, April 10-11

We're thrilled to invite all UAMS-affiliated faculty and staff to join us for two inspiring days celebrating innovation in translational research!

Location: Winthrop P. Rockefeller Cancer Institute Conference Center, 10th floor.

This year's expanded TRI Research Day will feature:

- Dynamic keynote speakers
- Oral presentations from TRI-supported investigators
- A poster session highlighting research from TRI's funding and training programs
- Community-engaged programming
- Great opportunities for networking!

The themes for this year's expanded TRI Research Day are:

Day 1: Integrating Data to Further Translational Science

Day 2: Community Health Impact Day: Advancing Health through Translational Research

Meet Our Keynote Speakers



Elizabeth A. Shenkman, Ph.D.
University of Florida

Presentation: *Translating Discoveries to Practice Using Real World Data and Clinical Settings*



Sharla Smith, Ph.D., MPH
University of Kansas Medical Center

Presentation: *Achieving Birth Equity: Addressing Systemic Barriers in Black Maternal Health*

Please use the QR code to register.

Contact: Christi Madden,
cmadden2@uams.edu.



TRI Research Mentorship Workshop April 1 - Register Now

TRI is excited to offer a nationally recognized mentorship training opportunity for UAMS faculty. Led by certified facilitators at UAMS, this workshop is based on the Center for the Improvement of Mentored Experiences in Research (CIMER) "Entering Mentoring" program developed by the University of Wisconsin.

The training is designed for faculty at all levels of mentoring experience and will cover key topics such as:

- Building trust
- Effective communication strategies
- Goal setting and progress monitoring
- Navigating challenges in the mentoring process

Workshop Details

Date: Tuesday, April 1

Time: 9 a.m. - 3 p.m.

Location: UAMS Reynolds Institute on Aging Building, Room 1160

The UAMS certified facilitators will be **Antiño Allen, Ph.D., Jennifer Vincenzo, Ph.D., MPH, PT, Corey Hayes, Pharm.D., Ph.D., MPH, Ellen van der Plas, Ph.D., and Tuhin Virmani, M.D., Ph.D.**

Reserve Your Spot

Please use the QR code to register.

Lunch and snacks will be provided.



Meet TRI's Community Engagement Team!

TRI is home to a team dedicated to bridging the gap between researchers and the communities they serve. The Community Engagement (CE) Core fosters meaningful partnerships to ensure research is informed by the lived experiences of those it impacts.

Meet the team making it happen:

Tiffany Haynes, Ph.D. – Director.

She leads the CE Core, overseeing programs that bring researchers and communities together. Her favorite part of the job is working alongside her team and community partners. A self-care advocate, Haynes prioritizes wellness and inspires others to do the same. Fun fact: She shares a birthday with her sister, exactly 10 years apart, and sings in her church choir.

Nakita Lovelady, Ph.D., MPH –

Associate Director. She leads the Community Partners Educated as Research Leaders (CPEARL) Program and helps researchers and communities collaborate effectively. Known for her upbeat personality and occasional bursts of song and dance, she enjoys spending time outside of work with loved ones and occasionally puts her photography skills to use.

Melissa Zielinski, Ph.D. – Associate Director. She is focused on building a national, community-partnered research network to advance health for those impacted by the criminal justice system. Originally from New Jersey, she has called Arkansas home for 13 years. A dog lover, she fostered 18 dogs before her son was born.

Nicola “Nicki” Spencer, MHA – Research Program Manager. She connects researchers and communities, ensuring their voices are heard in the research process. She educates both groups about the importance of collaboration. An avid reader, she can finish a book in a day and loves to travel.

Sarah Fountain, MPH – Research Program Manager. She connects researchers and community members to ensure research benefits those it impacts most. She started college at 16 and dreams of owning a small farm. A cooking enthusiast, she has a passion for fostering collaboration and community involvement.

Jinger Morgan – Research Program Manager. She keeps the CE Core running smoothly by managing TRI's equipment library, supporting team activities, and facilitating payments to community participants. In her downtime, Jinger enjoys playing games with family and honing her skills in Words with Friends and Solitaire.

The CE team's innovative work includes training community health workers in partnership with **Pearl McElfish, Ph.D., MBA**, director of the Institute for Community Health Innovation at the UAMS Northwest Regional Campus.



The CE team: (front l-r) Melissa Zielinski, Nicki Spencer and Jinger Morgan; (back) Nakita Lovelady, Sara Fountain and Tiffany Haynes.