Listening to Those without Voices
Students earn trust of homeless to discover and document what works, what’s needed

In 2005, public service providers in Orange County, N.C., started working on a “Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness.” To assist them, leaders there asked Dr. Geni Eng, co-director of the Action-Oriented Community Diagnosis (AOCD) class at the UNC School of Public Health, for help from master’s students in this course. Eng is also a professor of health behavior and health education at the School.

“We had partnered with other nearby communities in the past to conduct an AOCD of persons who are homeless,” says course co-director Kate Shirah, “so I think we are a familiar and trusted resource to service providers and clients in Chapel Hill.

Five first-year master’s students worked on this project throughout the 2005-2006 academic year as part of their AOCD class. Stan Holt of Triangle United Way provided guidance for the students throughout the process. As documented in their report, homelessness represents a pressing public health problem for millions of people. Many within this population suffer from mental illness, alcoholism and malnutrition along with such chronic diseases as diabetes, heart disease and asthma.

In Orange County, students found that many of the homeless are scattered throughout the county, camping in the woods or in the backyards of family and friends. “This was a challenging assignment because we were only able to reach those who had some affiliation with the system—that is, people who were staying at the shelters. But this approach left out a considerable portion of those dealing with homelessness and probably some essential information in understanding the concerns of the community,” says Rebecca Davis, one of the students who worked on this project.

Over time, the students were able to gain the trust of members of the homeless community and explore some of the major hurdles preventing them from obtaining stable housing. Topping the list was a need for affordable housing, combined with livable wages. As one community member cited in the AOCD report put it, “The wage around here is low, and then the rent’s high. If you get a job, it’s either pay your rent or buy food.” People also had a pressing need for resources such as telephones with voicemail so that potential employers could contact them, a public transportation system that would serve employees doing shift work, and job training.

Despite the formidable challenges to ending homelessness in Orange County, the students also reported major ongoing efforts to address this problem. “Getting to know some amazing people dealing with homelessness was probably the most rewarding aspect of working on this project,” says Rebecca Davis. “In fact, the number of services offered for the homeless in this area, and the time and effort the county has put into addressing this issue, are already impressive. Many service providers show true concern and want to reach out.”

The steering committee for the “Ending Homelessness” project has continued to rely on the AOCD report as it develops workgroups to address issues the students brought to light.

“I came away from this project with a deepened respect for the ways in which communities, when given the chance, will utilize their resources to lessen or eliminate disparities in a way that makes sense to them,” Davis says.

Individuals gather to register for a community forum on homelessness in Orange County, N.C., in spring 2006. The event—attended by city council members, UNC students and faculty, community members and members of the homeless community—was the culmination of a project coordinated by UNC School of Public Health students for an Action-Oriented Community Diagnosis class in which students assisted the county in developing a “Ten-Year Plan to End Homelessness.”

NEW CENTER PROMOTES
Healthy Mothers and Children

Dr. Miriam Labbok, professor of the practice of public health and director of the Center for Infant and Young Child Feeding and Care, fills the room with vibrancy and passion for the work she has come here to do.

“Research shows that nature had it right—mothers and babies are healthier when breastfeeding happens,” she says. “It is the single most effective intervention for improving the lives of infants and toddlers in developed countries and saving children’s lives around the world.”

It was “serendipity, or maybe a blessed confluence” that brought Labbok to the School’s Department of Maternal and Child Health, she says. With a Doctor of Medicine and a Master of Public Health from Tulane University, Labbok had worked with the U.S. Agency for International Development and had been on the faculty at Johns Hopkins and Georgetown universities. She was working in mother and child health at UNICEF just as the Center was being formed. Funded through a generous gift from a North Carolina family (who wanted to remain anonymous), the new Center is focused on three primary goals:

- Compiling the evidence for good infant and child feeding and care through translational and epidemiological research;
- Using that evidence in social and political arenas to support policies and programs that benefit mothers and children; and
- Training future maternal and child health leaders.

Already, the Center is addressing these goals. It was a collaborator in developing the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services report, “Promoting, Protecting and Supporting Breastfeeding: A North Carolina Blueprint for Action,” online at www.nutritionnc.com/breastfeeding/breast-feeding-scActionPlan.htm. The Center also presented its first annual scholarship award in April 2006 to master’s student Sheryl Wallin Abrahams, who spent the summer in Washington, D.C., creating a sustainability assessment plan for an infant feeding program in Bolivia.

Labbok would like to see a true breastfeeding “norm” developed in North Carolina and around the world—something that will happen naturally, she believes, “when, as a society, we ensure that families are enabled to make educated, unbiased choices about the feeding and care of their young children and when we can institute the healthcare, workplace and social support necessary for giving our children the best possible start on life.”

By Linda Kastleman

She praises several colleagues for their vision and support, including Dr. Herbert Peterson, chair of the Department of Maternal and Child Health; Mary Rose Tully, director of lactation services at Women’s and Children’s Hospitals at UNC; and Marcia Roth, director of planning and development in the School’s Department of Maternal and Child Health.

“It is such an honor to be associated with this effort,” Labbok says. “My colleagues are extraordinary. The members of the donor family lend insights and energy to our efforts here. There is no better location than the UNC School of Public Health, which is already widely recognized for its service and advocacy.”

From left: Marcia Roth, Dr. Miriam Labbok and Dr. Herbert Peterson discuss the upcoming activities of the School’s new Center for Infant and Young Child Feeding and Care.

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