From Practicum to Career Position, Colorado MPH Graduate Leads Effort to Reduce Poverty

By Colorado School of Public Health Communications

Recent Colorado School of Public Health (ColoradoSPH) graduate Jessica Austin, 41, is leading an effort to pull families out of poverty. She says her work is a direct outgrowth of her student practicum and capstone project she completed for an innovative Boulder social service agency.

“When I started in public health, I didn’t necessarily think I would focus on poverty,” said Austin, who now works as program coordinator at Boulder County Circles Campaign (Circles). “But we talked a lot about the social determinants of health in class, and poverty kept coming up. I realized that if I could work directly in the field of poverty reduction, I could make health better.”

Circles is the local arm of an innovative, national, research-based program that helps poor families build long-term empowerment and self-sufficiency. Rather than giving families material support, the program builds their social capital through trainings and classes, weekly dinner meetings and pairing clients with middle- or upper-class “allies.” The program’s results are impressive: participants on average increase their income and assets substantially while reducing dependence on public benefits, in just 18 months.

Above: Colorado School of Public Health MPH alumna, Jess Austin, now works as a program coordinator at the Boulder County Circles Campaign, helping families out of poverty.
Austin, who after a career in educational services graduated from ColoradoSPH with an MPH in community and behavioral health in December 2013, learned of the poverty reduction program via an article in the Daily Camera. The idea of working for Circles clicked when she took a course on the social determinants of health.

“I realized, when studying health, I wanted to go directly to the source,” said Austin. “The source is poverty.”

First, Austin spent her practicum helping Circles compile a community resource guide and develop a curriculum for its weekly dinner meetings. She also co-facilitated a presentation on advocacy. Next, Austin’s capstone project focused on the “cliff effect,” or what happens when a small increase in income triggers a disproportionate loss of public support. Through Circles, she found key informants to interview. Then Austin volunteered as an ally. Shortly thereafter, she was hired as a full-time program coordinator, one of only three staffers.

She now chairs a team that examines community barriers that inadvertently sustain poverty, and she just recently convened a community forum on the cliff effect to build momentum for policy change.

Said former Circles agency director Janet Heimer, who hired Austin: “All of us were really impressed with Jessica and what she brings in terms of knowledge and a research base.”

For Austin, though, Circles is a simple extension of why she chose a career in public health.

“I feel so lucky to be able to feel like I make a difference, every single day,” she said. “It’s simple and very interesting.”

“The goal of our practice-based learning program is to move students forward in their search for a public health passion, gain skills and ultimately gain a new career or boost an existing one,” said Olivia Jolly, faculty director of practice-based learning for ColoradoSPH. “Jessica’s experience is a great example of why it’s important to be thoughtful about the population, topic and skills you have an interest in pursuing after graduation, even while you are completing your MPH coursework. It’s never too early to start planning your career in public health.”

The ColoradoSPH practice-based learning program supports students in their MPH Practicum experience (120 hours in the field of public health) and in developing their Capstone project, an independent project that is reflective of the competencies acquired throughout the MPH program. Learn more about practice-based learning at Colorado School of Public Health.