Irving Harris Program
in Child Development and Infant Mental Health

Impact Report

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus

2018
“Since the founding of the University of Colorado Irving Harris Program in Child Development and Infant Mental Health in 1996, we have felt immense joy about the work we are doing.”

— Karen Frankel, PhD and Ayelet Talmi, PhD
Since the founding of the University of Colorado Irving Harris Program in Child Development and Infant Mental Health in 1996, we have felt immense joy about the work we are doing. The enduring passion for expanding our reach continues. With the Irving Harris Foundation’s vision and partnership, our program is touching countless lives in profound and transformative ways.

Through innovative program development, the postdoctoral fellowship training experience, workshops, educational events and consultation, we are bringing diversity-informed mental health care to more providers and the families they serve. We are working hard to remove barriers to care by integrating mental health services into the communities where families live and work.

In this report, we highlight stories of Irving Harris Fellows who have gone on to lead accomplished careers in the field, and we outline the growth and development of the CU Irving Harris Program since its inception. We hope the Irving Harris Foundation shares our tremendous pride in all that we have achieved together for infants, children and families across Colorado and beyond.

As we celebrate two decades of philanthropic partnership with the Irving Harris Foundation, it is a fitting time to recognize all that you have made possible and to look ahead to the meaningful impact that your continued support will make in the years and decades ahead.

What you have built with us is truly remarkable, and we are honored that the Irving Harris Foundation legacy will be carried forward through fellows trained and lives changed.

With immeasurable gratitude,

Karen Frankel, PhD | Director
Ayelet Talmi, PhD | Co-Director

University of Colorado Irving Harris Program
“Your philanthropic leadership has helped countless infant and mental health professionals positively impact the lives of infants, their families and caretakers.”

Our Legacy

Over 30 years ago, the concept for infant mental health training in Colorado flourished from a friendship developed from a fortunate alphabetical seating arrangement. During ZERO TO THREE board members’ meetings, Robert J. Harmon, MD, a child psychiatrist, happened to sit next to Irving Harris, retired businessman and founder of the Irving Harris Foundation. At first, Bob could not imagine what brought Irving to ZERO TO THREE, an organization that pioneered the field of infant mental health. Irving was neither a child psychiatrist, psychologist nor developmentalist.

The more Bob got to know Irving, the more he was impressed with his passion for and awareness of young children and their developmental needs. Years later, Irving asked Bob about creating an infant mental health program in Colorado. This conversation led to the establishment of the Irving Harris Program in Child Development and Infant Mental Health.

Since its founding in 1996 and the transition to Karen Frankel, PhD as the director in 2006, our program has expanded tremendously. Working alongside Bob, Karen helped lay the groundwork for our program. The team envisioned a full-time, intensive program for postdoctoral fellows to train at university-based sites.

A “community-based” training track was later added to allow professionals from community agencies to receive focused training and supervision while in their current positions. By the program’s eighth year, a total of 18 postdocs and 9 community postdoc fellows completed training.

Since its inception, our program has flourished. Taught through seminars, group and individual supervision of clinical cases, and hands-on experience conducting assessments and treatment, fellows learn to effectively provide diagnosis and intervention for infants and toddlers. To date, more than 60 postdocs and 30 community fellows have participated in the fellowship.

As our program grew, so did its reach into the community. Clinical settings now include traditional outpatient services, pediatric primary care centers and other medical clinics, early care and education centers, and home-based services.

Your philanthropic leadership has helped countless infant mental health professionals positively impact the lives of infants, their families and caretakers. We are grateful for your investment in our fellows and commitment to promoting healthy beginnings for some of our youngest minds.
Jordana Ash
LCSW, IMH-E © (IV-C)

Director of Early Childhood Mental Health, Colorado Department of Human Services

Fellow Graduate Year: 2009
“Being an Irving Harris Fellow prepared me to take a big leap in my career because I spent significant time during the fellowship thinking about the systems that touch the lives of very young children, their families and caregivers.

I was able to use this experience to develop an effective early childhood mental health system for Colorado.”

— Jordana Ash, LCSW, IMH-E® (IV-C)

Improving infant mental health in Colorado

Jordana Ash is the director of Early Childhood Mental Health for the state of Colorado. She works with her team to make sure that information about childhood mental health and social emotional development is available for everyone who interacts with young children. Additionally, she and her team explore ways to finance early childhood mental health programs and services to ensure care reaches families early to prevent mental health problems from worsening.

Jordana’s career accelerated when she developed an early childhood mental health strategic plan for Colorado, which she created in collaboration with stakeholders including the directors of the Irving Harris Program. This plan, which informs and guides investments, programs and resources, helps ensure all children and their families are healthy and thriving.
Giovanni Billings, 
PsyD, IMH-E © (IV-C)

Assistant Professor of Clinical Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Vanderbilt University Medical Center

Fellow Graduate Year: 2010

“My training through the Irving Harris Program enabled me to achieve my professional identity and become a voice on behalf of infants and young children.”

— Giovanni Billings, PsyD, IMH-E © (IV-C)
A voice on behalf of infants and young children

Dr. Giovanni Billings’ desire to serve young children and their families developed in graduate school, when he recognized the critical importance of early childhood intervention and the value of building relationships in clinical care. The Irving Harris Program played an integral role in helping Giovanni translate those values into action. Through his clinical field placements, Giovanni honed his ability to relate to young children and families through empathizing, playing, listening and wondering together. These experiences, along with reflective supervision, shaped Giovanni into an exceptional advocate for infants and young children.

Today, Giovanni represents infants and young children through his roles in Tennessee, where infant mental health is a growing field. As an assistant professor of clinical psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Vanderbilt University Medical Center, Giovanni provides clinical consultation and services for children and families involved in the child welfare system. He has also had opportunities to train the workforce, lend expertise to legislators and policymakers, and help develop Tennessee’s infant mental health endorsement system and a baby court initiative. Giovanni is making an incredible impact on the people and systems involved in and impacted by infant mental health. Any improvements in this growing field are a step in the right direction for the country and world in giving a voice to infants and young children.

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Treating the whole patient

Dr. Shaleah Dardar’s work with one particular family captures her commitment to reflective care. The patient interaction involved a single mother of two children — a six-year-old with ADHD and three-year-old son with disruptive behaviors — both with a history of anxiety and trauma. The mother wanted to enroll the youngest son in preschool, but she was worried his behaviors would cause disruptions. She feared this situation, which would require her to pick up her son frequently, would cause her to lose her job.

Responding to the mother’s concern about her son’s behavior and the possibility of losing her job, Shaleah helped foster an understanding that the time the mother took off to bring her son to the clinic was worth the effort. Then, Shaleah took steps to make sure both the mother and her sons would benefit from their care. Shaleah coordinated with the mother and her schedule to make sure she could attend sessions at the clinic. In addition, she assisted in enrolling the youngest son into preschool and coordinated with his teachers to ensure they would not dismiss him from school early.

Over time, Shaleah worked with the mother on how to understand her sons’ behavior, helped build her confidence in managing the behavior, and assisted her in seeking treatment for her own anxiety and trauma history.

Shaleah shaped this family-centered interaction into a successful patient care experience by applying her reflective provider skillset learned during her Irving Harris Program training. By considering her patients as whole people with external circumstances such as school and work schedules — and not just physical bodies with collections of symptoms — Shaleah continues to provide the best, comprehensive care to patients today.
“I learned that being an Irving Harris Fellow was more than just training.

It meant having colleagues who are leaders in the field, working collaboratively with families to promote healthy relationships and well-being in young children, and pushing the field continuously through scholarship and advocacy. Most notably, the opportunity for reflective supervision has helped me become a more reflective provider when helping families.”

— Shaleah Dardar, MD
Extending and improving care in underserved communities

Mari Foster’s efforts are focused on creating a medical destination that provides care for Denver’s underserved and underrepresented Native American community. At her clinic, she connects with patients to identify their needs and ensure they feel heard. Mari shares that her work has taken on new dimensions as a result of her Irving Harris training. She has increased family-based intervention and expanded a network of supportive agencies for referrals to maintain a focus on the needs of and resources available for each child at hand. While demand for care in underserved communities increases, the field of infant mental health requires more patient care professionals like Mari. The Irving Harris Program plays a crucial role in addressing the needs of the field and educating the next generation of infant mental health experts who are capable of filling the gaps.
“The Irving Harris Program has provided me with proper training so I can ensure the needs of native populations, made invisible socially and systematically, are captured and addressed.”

— Mari Foster, LSW
“I am most excited about finding ways to bring child therapy insights and practices to parts of the world where there are almost no mental health services and exceedingly few trained clinicians.”

— Shanee Stepakoff, PhD
Taking child therapy insights across the globe

Dr. Shanee Stepakoff’s Irving Harris Program training provided her with a foundation for treating young children and their families in a broad range of underserved communities. Today, Shanee’s work focuses on providing care for young children and families experiencing trauma in the U.S. Most notably, Shanee’s passion for providing care to underserved communities led her abroad to touch lives in regions where mental health services and clinicians are few. So far, Shanee’s impact has been felt in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Jordan and particularly in Guinea, where she made significant improvements in the care of war-traumatized children.

When she was a clinician and trainer for the Center for Victims of Torture in Guinea, Shanee designed and implemented caretaker intervention sessions for Liberian counselors to better understand the mental health needs of adults and young Guinean children. Shanee based the entire sequence of sessions on core tenets she learned from the Irving Harris Program, which included the effects of trauma on children and caretakers, talking with children about difficult topics such as lineage and war, and understanding and managing children’s difficult behaviors.

In addition to establishing and conducting the intervention sessions, Shanee also trained Liberian refugee counselors to do the same work in their own countries when the war there ended. Ten years later, they continue to work with at-risk children, parents and families in Liberia.

Subsequently, Shanee spent over two years as the psychologist for the UN-backed war crimes tribunal, or “Special Court,” in Sierra Leone, where she was responsible for providing psychological support for witnesses. During that time, she designed and conducted trainings in transgenerational trauma, counseling skills and gender sensitivity for Sierra Leonean social workers and psychosocial support officers in the tribunal’s witness protection unit.

Shanee’s work abroad is crucial to the field of mental health and our ever-growing global community. She brought mental health services to underserved regions of the world, and by training local providers, passed the torch of excellent care on to those who then effected change in their own communities. With insights gained from her Irving Harris Program training, Shanee is improving myriad lives, both at home and abroad, in transformative ways.
“It was exciting to have been selected as an Irving Harris Fellow, and the opportunity to meet and work with new people in Denver was rewarding. My fellowship meant that I was joining a group of experts from whom I would learn and stretch toward my own passion in the field. It also meant that I was getting closer to my professional goals of clinical licensure as a psychologist.”

Vivian L. Tamkin, PhD
Visiting Assistant Professor, University of Southern Mississippi Counseling Psychology Program
Fellow Graduate Year: 2010

“My experience as an Irving Harris Fellow was instrumental in rounding out my doctoral education in clinical child psychology. Even today, my colleagues marvel that I had access to the level of quality training in infant and early child mental health provided during my time in Denver. Today, thanks to the Irving Harris Program, I have the opportunity to bring that knowledge to clients and trainees here in the Pacific Northwest.”

Steven Behling, PhD, ABPP
Clinical Instructor, University of Washington Department of Psychology
Fellow Graduate Year: 2011

“In addition to the education and training, the close-knit community truly made my experience special, and I will always be grateful for the opportunities I had in the Irving Harris Program.”

Dailyn Martinez, PhD
Psychologist, Children’s Medical Center of Dallas Neonatal Intensive Care Unit
Fellow Graduate Year: 2015
“What I liked about the Irving Harris Program training was that, for the first time in my education, I was able to read, research and debate what I learned with instructors who were highly respected within their fields, and relate this information to families and experiences I encountered.”

Katherine Bair, LCSW IMH-E®
Early Childhood Mental Health Specialist, Cañon City Schools
Fellow Graduate Year : 2002

“I began my fellowship just shortly after Dr. Bob Harmon passed away. While I never had the opportunity to know him, I felt as though his presence was palpable throughout my fellowship experience. He was and is legendary in the field of infant mental health, and it was incredible to be able to learn from his teachings.”

Melissa Buchholz, PsyD
University of Colorado School of Medicine Department of Psychiatry
Fellow Graduate Year : 2008

What are our past fellows doing now?

Our 2017 survey results from responding fellows show:

- **82%** provide direct service to more than 5,000 caregivers, infants, young children and/or pregnant mothers per year.
- **72%** serve mostly underserved, minority, low-income, high risk or vulnerable populations.
- **72%** provide training, classes, education or workshops on infant and early childhood mental health to thousands of students, providers, policymakers and stakeholders.
“What you have built with us is truly remarkable, and we are honored that the Irving Harris Foundation legacy will be carried forward by the fellows trained and lives changed.”

— Karen Frankel, PhD and Ayelet Talmi, PhD