

UNC CFAR NEWSLETTER

A NEW YEAR, A NEW START



Director's Corner

*Ronald Swanstrom,
UNC CFAR Co-Director*



WELCOME 2021!!! Many long-time locals will recognize the name Ephesus Church Road in Chapel Hill. The road is named for the Baptist church and the church is named after the Greek city Ephesus. Approximately 2600 years ago Heraclitus, a resident of Ephesus, coined the phrase "the only constant in life is change," a truism that continues to be relevant. 2021 does not take us "back" after four years most of us struggle to understand, but rather we now look forward to solving problems with new tools and new possibilities. Our CFAR started in 1998 and Heraclitus would not be surprised to learn that we constantly change. As we start the new year, I want to update you on a few of these changes.

The financial underpinning of the CFAR is a "P30" center award from NIH. Last summer we submitted our competitive renewal for this award. A 1600-page document was assembled by a cast of thousands under the careful oversight of CFAR Associate Director Dr. Prema Menezes and our talented Administrative Assistant, Lauren Su. The application was very favorably renewed ensuring uninterrupted funding for our CFAR for another 5-year cycle that will take us into 2026.

Most of you know that we have changed to a Co-

Director structure for our CFAR with Dr. Ada Adimora sharing the position of Co-Director with me. Several additional changes in our CFAR leadership include adding Dr. Audrey Pettifor as Co-Director of the Developmental Core and adding Dr. Ben Chi as Co-Director of our International Core. Today I want to focus on our new manager of the SCEED outreach office, Ms. Alicia Diggs, who is also the editor of this newsletter. Welcome Alicia! We have had a number of wonderful and committed managers of the SCEED office, and we hope to track them all down and report on their current activities in a future column. The SCEED Office started as the CODE Office and with our renewal will get a new name the Office of Community Engagement (OCE), with Alicia as Manager and Dr. Ron Strauss continuing as Faculty Director. Alicia has been a NC resident for the last 24 years where she has become a well-known advocate, activist, educator, and speaker for PLWH. She is a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS and serves on a number of advisory boards for local NGOs. Needless to say, she is a well-known leader in communities across central North Carolina. In her spare time, she has written a book ("Standing On My Healing: From Tainted To Chosen") and is pursuing her Ph.D. in Public Health. We are very fortunate to have Alicia lead our community outreach and education efforts. She is a special person and I hope all of you get to know her.

Enough for now, the future is calling us!



Greetings from Alicia Diggs

Friends, Partners and Staff

What a year we have had in 2020! HAPPY 2021 TO YOU ALL!

I am Alicia Diggs, the new SCEED Office Manager working alongside Dr Ron Strauss through the CFAR. I come to you from the City of Brotherly Love, Philadelphia, but I have been a resident of North Carolina for 24 years now. So, I guess that makes me a Philly-Carolinian! I am a mother of two adult children and a Glam-mom of 3, I received a Bachelor of Social Work from UNC-Greensboro and a Master of Public Health from Capella University. My focus in this work has been advocacy and leadership.

I bring to the UNC CFAR, connections and relationships from the Triad which adds to the connections and relationships within the Triangle. I have 20 years HIV lived experience, a strong passion for HIV advocacy, activism, and education. In my advocacy and leadership work I have been awarded the opportunity to be a member of the Presidential Advisory Council on HIV/AIDS (PACHA), the North Carolina State Lead for the Positive Women's Network USA (PWN-USA), a former board member of the North Carolina AIDS Action Network (NCAAN), a North Carolina Leader with the Black AIDS Institute's (BAI) Black Treatment Advocates Network (BTAN), SisterLove, and also the Women Interagency HIV Study (WIHS). The opportunities to be a part of big platforms is not what makes me

who I am but my hard work, speaking up for the voiceless and dedication to the cause does.

As a part of the CFAR I have a vision for our communities to work together across the state of North Carolina and eventually nationally to End the HIV Epidemic, to rid the stigma and dispel the myths associated with HIV. I am looking forward to working and growing with everyone as we build relationships and continue to do great work.

If you have any questions, upcoming events to share or interest in being a part of the Community Collaboration Board please feel free to reach out to me at alicia_diggs@med.unc.edu.

24th Annual National CFAR and National CFAR CAB Coalition Meetings

By Jimmy Gibbs

National Secretary

CCB Member



It was a trip like no other as we traveled virtually across the United States to San Diego for a week of virtual meetings with our colleagues.

The San Diego CFAR hosted the 24th Annual National CFAR and National CFAR CAB Coalition Meetings virtually from November 2-6, 2020. Over 450 CFAR Directors and Administrators, National CFAR CAB Coalition members, NIH Program Officers, HIV investigators and clinicians, and community members from across the country participated in sixteen separate meetings that were held over five days. The National CFAR Meeting(s) provided numerous networking and mentoring opportunities, including interactions with Program officers and leadership from NIH co-funding and participating Institutes and Centers.

Topics for our second symposium included: Border/Binational Health, Retention in Care: COVID 19, HIV and Health Disparities, Ending the HIV Epidemic, and HIV Prevention: Focus on PrEP. There were additional breakout sessions that discussed the National CFAR CAB Coalition (N3C) and The Faith and Spirituality Working Group.

The Business Meeting of the N3C was held and the following officers were elected to serve another 3-year term. Daiquiri Robinson, CAB Chair from the University of PENN was elected to serve as Treasurer and Craig Hutchison from UCSD was elected to serve as Vice Chair.

We all agreed that this was an exciting meeting with games and prizes and even with last minute changes from planning for an in-person meeting to a virtual meeting it was a huge success.

It was announced at the meeting that the baton will be passed from San Diego to PENN for next year's meeting.



The UNC Global HIV Prevention and Treatment Clinical Trials Unit

By Yerson Padilla, M.A.

Bilingual Community Outreach Educator

Educador Comunitario Bilingüe

The UNC Global HIV Prevention and Treatment Clinical Trials Unit has been a part of the research community for almost 30 years, focusing on treatment, cure and prevention of

HIV and AIDs. As of late, the Clinical Trials Unit (CTU) which includes a team of doctors, nurses, community, data, & regulatory staff, and research assistants, has incorporated COVID-19 vaccine research via the UNC COVID-19 Research Response. The CTU has helped in the Moderna vaccine clinical trials and is currently enrolling for the Novavax vaccine clinical trials, hoping to provide the data for an additional vaccine against COVID-19. The clinical research site (CRS) at UNC Chapel Hill is one CRS, among four international sites that make up the larger CTU. Additionally, the CTU works with local agencies and clinics to establish and maintain relationships within the communities we serve.



Our focus is not exclusively on research but also to provide education and information about COVID-19 and HIV/AIDs to communities that are disproportionately impacted. To learn more about UNC Chapel Hill's CTU please visit: www.med.unc.edu/medicine/infdis/actu/.



The CFAR HIV/STD Laboratory Core supports the UNC COVID-19 response

By Julie Nelson, PhD, UNC CFAR HIV/STD Laboratory Core Director

The UNC CFAR HIV/STD Laboratory Core has been involved in the response to the COVID-19 pandemic by supporting diagnostic and research needs at UNC-CH. Our Core usually provides specimen processing, repository, and research testing services for the CFAR community. In March 2020, we became aware that the Abbott m2000 system, which we routinely use for HIV viral load testing, would be required for COVID-19 testing. To maximize the testing capacity of the UNC Hospitals McLendon laboratories, we agreed to move our instrument to the McLendon lab, ensuring that a total of 3 Abbott m2000 systems would be available to ramp up testing. In addition, we temporarily (5 months) assigned one of our Abbott-trained technicians, Paul Alabanza, to help with SARS-CoV-2 testing in the UNC Hospital lab.

On the research side of COVID-19, our Core has supported 12 COVID-19 treatment studies and 2 vaccine trials on campus since May. We are the central laboratory for the Ridgeback/EIDD-2801 Phase 2 trial under Dr. William Fischer, providing sample processing for the UNC site and 10 other US sites, as well as immune marker testing. We also support the omnibus AIDS Clinical Trials Group A5401 trial that, so far, includes five different treatment compounds. Our support for these clinical trials includes kit and supply organization, specimen processing, specimen storage, specimen shipping, and shipping support for other sites. In support of the Moderna and Novavax vaccine trials, we conduct laboratory activities at two locations outside the UNC main campus (Chapel Hill North and Siler City) and aid in rapid COVID-19 testing. Our central laboratory site in Taylor Hall at UNC is our primary

location for processing, storage, and shipping activities. Each of the COVID-19 studies that our Core has assisted is utilizing different central testing labs, shipping companies, tracking software, kit types, and communication systems, providing a major organizational challenge for our team. As the Core Director, I am extremely gratified to see how every member of our staff has stepped up to confront these challenges and put in the extra time and effort to complete all projects in a timely manner. Our Core is proud to help in the campus-wide and nation-wide efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic.



Success at the first UNC CFAR Fall Virtual Networking Event in October 2020

By Carol Golin, MD, UNC CFAR SBS Core Director and Wendi Seiler, SBS Core Administrative Assistant

On October 28, 2020, UNC CFAR's Social and Behavioral Sciences (SBS) Core and RTI International co-hosted the exciting and collaborative UNC Center CFAR's Fall Networking Event for 2020 *HIV Research in the Era of COVID*. A UNC CFAR Networking event takes place each semester to provide a forum for researchers from multiple institutions and disciplines to meet and discuss emerging salient HIV research topics to stimulate potential collaborations. The event this fall, however, was different as it was the first such event to be carried out remotely due to COVID-19 restrictions.

In response to results from a pre-conference survey of potential attendees regarding their

preferred topics, the virtual event focused on four research areas as they related to *HIV Research in the Era of COVID*:

- COVID-19 & HIV Measures & Telemedicine
- Mental Health & Depression
- Health Disparities
- HIV Stigma

Sixty-five attendees from a broad array of disciplines and 13 esteemed panelists that represented UNC CFAR, RTI International and FHI 360, and local HBCUs participated in the event. Guests were welcomed by CFAR Co-Director Dr. Ron Swanstrom, UNC CFAR SBS Core Director, Dr. Carol Golin and Principal Researcher and Director of Substance Use, Gender and Applied Research and Director of the RTI International Global Gender Center, Dr. Wendee Wechsberg. Following these remarks, attendees joined one of the four breakout sessions of their choice, each session devoted to one of the four topic areas. Each small group participated in a collaborative discussion of the challenges and potential solutions for each topic area. As one participant put it "Meeting other colleagues and discussing research ideas and activities related to HIV and COVID... so helpful to hear how others are addressing challenging issues." Attendees who filled out an evaluation reported finding the small group discussions stimulating and a "nice way to connect [with other researchers] in a smaller setting" and "led to rich discussion." The CFAR was pleased to see that, although conducted under limitations imposed by a virtual setting, most attendees (87%) felt satisfied with the event even though 52% did feel it was *not as useful* as an in-person Networking event. Some participants, however, found that the virtual setting provided new opportunities compared with in-person events, such as enabling a greater number of attendees and potentially

greater facility for participating in more than one small group.

The SBS Core looks forward to future Networking Events being conducted in person. But until the time that in person meetings are safe, the SBS core will use "lessons learned" from the Fall 2020 Event to make future virtual meetings even better. And, as Dr. Carol Golin put it, "we are encouraged that, even though the event took place remotely, **40% of participants said they had met at least one potential future collaborator** at the October 2020 event. That is what these Networking Events are all about – meeting a new potential collaborator." As one attendee summed it up, "This was an excellent first [virtual] networking event! I know it's hard to pull this off and I appreciate the effort. It wasn't as good as in-person, but still very valuable. Thanks!"

Clinical Pharmacology and Analytical Chemistry Core, what do they do?

By Lauren A.R. Tompkins, UNC CFAR CPAC Core Manager

The Clinical Pharmacology and Analytical Chemistry (CPAC) Core, led by Core Co-Directors Angela Kashuba and Mackenzie Cottrell, provides expertise in small molecule drug development to assist investigators in nearly all aspects of HIV pharmacology research. Through complementary and integrated scientific expertise, the CPAC Core generates critical drug concentration data and translates raw data into clinically relevant results. Core faculty and staff facilitate research in preclinical and clinical pharmacology in pursuit of a common goal: developing safe, effective strategies for HIV prevention, treatment, and cure.

Current pharmacological strategies for reducing HIV transmission (TasP and PrEP) rely on daily dosing behavior to achieve sustained drug concentrations capable of controlling or preventing HIV infection. Next-generation strategies seek to minimize burdensome dosing schedules through the development of long-acting formulations administered at less frequent intervals. Through a partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation established in 2020, the CPAC Core now serves as the central pharmacology laboratory for Gates grantees exploring long-acting PrEP in preclinical models. As part of this effort, the Core has bioanalytical assays in place for high priority antiretrovirals being considered for long-acting formulations, including rilpivirine, islatravir (EFdA), and tenofovir alafenamide. Additionally, the Core's active collaborations with RTI, a UNC CFAR partner, facilitate the development of long-acting formulations for HIV treatment and prevention, as well as multipurpose prevention technologies.

Since the approval of once daily oral PrEP, a growing need has arisen for scalable measures to encourage uptake and adherence. The CPAC Core supports several investigators working with the Adolescent Medicine Trials Network for HIV/AIDS Interventions to advance technology-based PrEP interventions. To generate objective adherence data in the setting of PrEP, the CPAC Core has developed bioanalytical methods for large-scale application in clinical studies currently underway. The Core's routine analysis of drug metabolites in dried blood spots and pharmacology guidance, both in study design and data interpretation, provide critical infrastructure for a number of clinical studies at the UNC/Emory Center for Innovative Technology (iTech). These studies investigate social networking, gamification, and other tech-based implementation strategies developed for specific end-user groups within

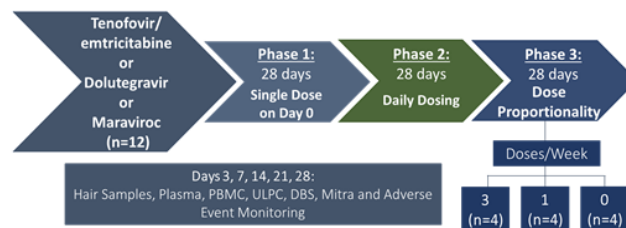
the broader population of adolescents and young adults at-risk of acquiring HIV.

In the past few years, the CPAC Core has pioneered the development of small-molecule imaging technology (IR-MALDESI) to quantify drug exposure across unperturbed hair strands as a chemical record of daily adherence behavior. Benchmarking studies using directly observed therapy have positioned the IR-MALDESI technology for the next phase of proof-of-concept testing in the clinical setting in 2021. In collaboration with the CPAC Core, two NIH-funded grants are currently utilizing IR-MALDESI adherence assessment, and opportunities continue to arise with growing interest in evidence-based tools for increasing adherence to daily therapy.

ENLIGHTEN Study (NCT03218592)

Establishing Novel Antiretroviral Imaging for Hair To End Nonadherence

Single-center, open-label, 3-arm, directly observed therapy, triple phase study



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UPCOMING EVENTS:

February 23: Women of Color and HIV webinar hosted by NCHTEC and SE AETC with Dr. Leshonda Wallace, PhD, MSN, RN, FNP and Alicia Diggs, BSW, MPH

Register: bit.ly/WOCandHIV

February 7: National Black HIV/AIDS Awareness Day which is Feb 7 #NBHAAD

March 10: National Women and Girls HIV/AIDS Awareness Day #NWGHAAD

March 20: National Native HIV/AIDS Awareness Day #NNHAAD