

New Program to Train Next Generation of HIV Behavioral Scientists

A new University of Miami and Miller School of Medicine-led training program is seeking the next generation of HIV behavioral scientists – specifically pre- and post-doctoral trainees in public health and psychology.



From left, Sannisha Dale, Ph.D., Daniel Feaster, Ph.D., and Viviana Horigian, M.D., M.H.A.

Participants will be trained to be conscious of the structural impediments driving health disparities, engage with and elevate the voices of community stakeholders in research, and ultimately commit to a career focused on addressing HIV and mental health in Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ communities that are most impacted by HIV.

The program, named Culturally-focused HIV Advancements through the Next Generation for Equity (CHANGE), was recently funded by the National Institutes of Health's Ruth L. Kirschstein Institutional National Research Service Award and will be under the leadership of multiple principal investigators Sannisha Dale, Ph.D., assistant professor in the University of Miami's Department of Psychology, Daniel Feaster, Ph.D., professor in the Miller School of Medicine's Department of Public Health Sciences, and Viviana Horigian, M.D., M.H.A., professor, also from the Department of Public Health Sciences.

CHANGE was developed through the University's Center for HIV and Research in Mental Health (CHARM) and will continue to be supported by the center's infrastructure. Close collaboration and partnership with community-based organizations will be central to ensuring that scholars are trained to genuinely engage communities.

"HIV scientists with expertise in public health and psychology play an essential role in addressing HIV," Dr. Dale said. "However, ending the HIV epidemic will remain an unattained goal if our approach to training is simply to both select and mentor scholars with an intellectual curiosity and interest rather than a true commitment to centering and up-lighting Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ communities that are the most impacted by the epidemic. My vision for CHANGE is to train scholars with such a commitment."

Addressing health inequities and disparities

Black, Latinx, and LGBTQ communities in Miami – an HIV epicenter – face health disparities linked to structural racism, homophobia, transphobia, poverty, violence, and co-

occurring mental health challenges. The disparities are visible in new HIV diagnoses, suboptimal engagement in care, and low rates of viral load suppression.

“I am excited that we are inaugurating this training program for our community,” Dr. Feaster said. “South Florida has been disproportionately affected by HIV for too long. Our diverse community must build on its strengths to address this public health challenge. It is important that we bring new energy and diverse viewpoints to the fight to ameliorate disparities affecting the health of our community. We will build the teams to lead this work in the next generation.”

To help in addressing these disparities and make strides in halting the HIV epidemic, CHANGE will ensure the recruitment of trainees committed to serving the hardest-hit communities and provide critical skills and preparation for a research career for pre-doctoral trainees and a pathway to research independence for the post-doctoral trainees.

“Science is failing minoritized populations in the U.S.,” Dr. Horigian said. “Adequate pipelines of training for the professional development of minoritized scientists are scarce, and research is not focusing effectively on the disparities affecting these populations. Launching this program of training for the next generation of scientists focused on disparities in HIV, mental health and substance abuse outcomes, and focusing on minoritized communities, is a result of our institutional commitment to combating racial injustice.”

Access to multidisciplinary expertise

CHANGE will give trainees access to multidisciplinary expertise and funded projects among communities that have documented HIV and mental health disparities and are disproportionately impacted in South Florida and nationally, as well as exposure to applied methods and theory that cut across the HIV/mental health and prevention/treatment continua and that are highly applicable to developing competencies in health disparities research.

Training activities, such as CHANGE seminars, coursework, volunteering with community-based organizations, and experiential learning opportunities in lab, as well as resource rich research projects will enable students to achieve program competencies, which include:

- Social determinants of HIV and mental health outcomes
- Community-based participatory research/community-engaged research
- Biological and clinical foundations of HIV and mental health prevention, care and treatment
- State of the science methods for design and analysis and reproducibility
- Innovations in assessment, intervention, and implementation science in specific populations
- Professional and career development
- Training in the reproducibility of results and responsible conduct of research
- Scientific and grant writing

Steven Safren, Ph.D., professor in the University's Department of Psychology and director of CHARM and the Health Promotion

and Care research program said that he is proud that CHANGE will be part of CHARM.

“It is so incredibly important to train a diverse pool of psychologists and public health scholars in the mental health components of HIV prevention and care,” Dr. Safren said. “This will be an incredible resource for our trainees and for the University of Miami.”

A kick-off event of the new training program will take place virtually on Tuesday, May 11 at noon. For more information on the program structure, requirements, and application processes, please visit www.charm.miami.edu/change or email change-program@miami.edu.