

SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

The Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health: Continuing a Strong Legacy of Research, Training, and Service Towards Social Justice and Health Equity

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Social Work in Action is a solicited column from the social work community in Hawai'i. It is edited by HJHSW Contributing Editor Sophia Kim PhD, of the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa.

New Name, Enhanced Vision

In 2016, we began work to strengthen collaborations between social work and public health and, in December 2020, our school officially became known as the *Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health*. With this new name comes an enhanced commitment to research, education, and service in social justice and community health and well-being. We continue to build on the deep and valuable legacy of our namesake Myron “Pinky” Thompson and towards our vision of *achieving social justice and health equity for the people of Hawai‘i and citizens in a changing world*.¹ This article highlights our history and our investments in interdisciplinary teaching, research, and community service. We end by articulating goals and actions to inform, and even transform, the future.

A Strong Legacy

Over the past 85 years, social work education at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa (UH Mānoa) has pursued a mission to generate, transmit, and apply knowledge related to social work and social welfare, with special attention to Native Hawaiian, other Pacific Islander, and Asian populations in our state and region. For more than 65 years, public health education at UH Mānoa has trained public health professionals and conducted research that benefits the people of Hawai‘i and the Asia-Pacific region, honoring principles of discovery, innovation, engagement, inclusion, and leadership.

Faculty in the Department of Social Work (DSW) are experts in areas ranging from child welfare, youth development, mental health, substance use, gerontology, indigenous wellbeing, Asian and Pacific Islander health, juvenile justice, hate crimes, community intervention, health care policy, and international social welfare. Faculty in the Office of Public Health Studies (OPHS) are experts in topics ranging from infectious disease to chronic disease, from child health to end of life, from indigenous

to global health, from genetics to the environment, and from health promotion and prevention to treatment and services. In 2016, these faculties chose to work together, bringing their strong independent units to form a *kauhale* (village).¹

This merger, built on several years of collaboration, allowed us to formalize a shared vision. While each unit had its own mission and areas of expertise, it was clear that we were united in our efforts to promote social justice, advocate for the oppressed and marginalized, and enhance the health and well-being of all citizens of Hawai‘i, the Pacific region, and the world. This transition from *hale* (house) to *kauhale* aimed to improve the reach of each unit through systematic and systemic collaboration as well as the maximization of resources in the areas of recruitment, research, instruction, and community service and engagement. The recent name change to the *Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health* represents the last, formal stage in the merger. Collectively, the units within the Thompson School are invested in teaching, research, and community service that is culturally anchored, community engaged, and population-focused addressing both the needs of the community as well as the strategic directions of the University of Hawai‘i system and UH Mānoa.

Interdisciplinary Education

At its core an interdisciplinary school, the Thompson School prepares its students to apply interdisciplinary, community-based, and culturally focused knowledge and skills to address societal challenges and promote population-based wellbeing.² Students experience a very diverse set of topics areas and the value of the intersections across those areas. For example, public health develops knowledge and skills in epidemiology, environmental and indigenous health, policy development, program management, data management, and social and behavioral health. Social work develops knowledge and skills in meeting social and emotional needs from trauma and planning

for effective resolution of crises, such as pandemics, from both interpersonal and community perspectives. Students are guided to operationalize these skills through community-engaged research with faculty members and student practicums around societal needs and community networks.

More than 600 students are enrolled in degree-granting programs at the Thompson School (Figure 1).

Undergraduates may pursue a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) or a Bachelor of Arts in Public Health (BA PH). Graduate students may pursue the Master of Social Work (MSW), a Master in Public Health (MPH), a Master of Science in Public Health (MS), or a PhD in Social Welfare, Epidemiology, or Community-based Translational Research. In addition to on-campus programs, both the BSW and MSW programs have online options, serving students across the state and Guam. The campus-based Master of Public Health (MPH) is planning to expand to include an online version with specializations in Health Policy and Management and Native Hawaiian and Indigenous Health (NHIH). Most of the PhD classes have been moved online during COVID-19, under consideration are plans to continue online attendance options for students that cannot travel to the Mānoa campus. While all programs include information on indigenous health and social welfare, the MPH in NHIH is one of the only master's programs in the world providing in-depth training in Native Hawaiian and indigenous health, including classes on data strategies in small populations, indigenous food systems, and health ethics, law, and politics around indigenous well-being. With a similar commitment to indigenous learning, the DSW has the strategic priority to build a Hawaiian place of learning. This priority is based on the belief that ancestral ways can enhance educational excellence, and is manifested in program values and interdisciplinary curriculum highlighting Hawaiian culture.

The Thompson School is also engaged with other schools to provide interdisciplinary training. For example, OPHS partners with the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM), College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, and the School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology to deliver a course on OneHealth. The course recognizes that the vast majority of emerging infectious diseases are zoonotic, meaning they start with the transmission of a microbe from animals to humans. Human encroachment on animal habitats and human consumption of wild animals contribute to the emergence of infectious diseases. Thus, students learn about the connectivity between humans, animals and the environment to develop more effective solutions to mitigate and prevent infectious diseases with epidemic potential.

The DSW leads the interdisciplinary *Ke A'o Mau* (learning preserved) program, which aims to further develop a workforce that is community-based and culturally anchored in Hawaiian knowledge.³ KeA'o Mau honors the genealogy of the Thompson

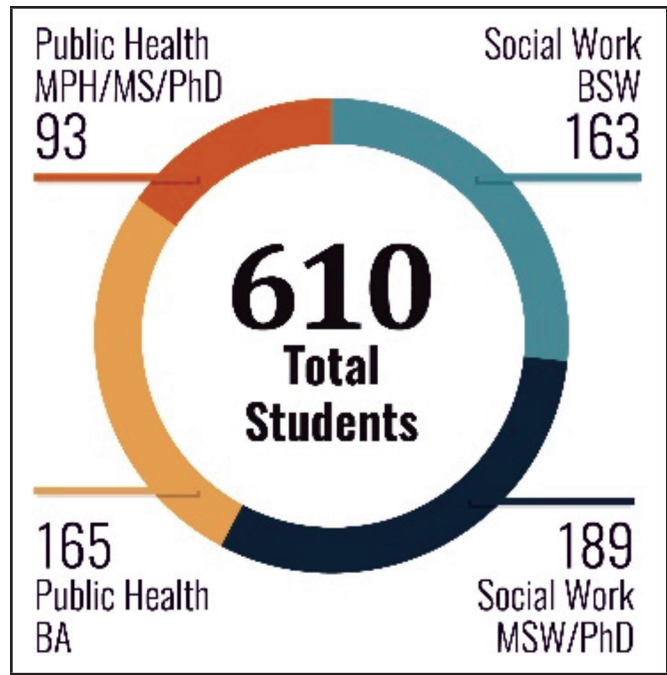


Figure 1. Thompson School Enrollment 2020

School by introducing students from social work, public health, nutrition, medicine, and other health fields to experts in Hawaiian tradition. Students engage with community-based experts in discussions of how these traditions can inform modern-day health and well-being. Students also undertake service projects in Hawaiian communities as part of the course. Ke A'o Mau is supported by The Hawai'i Pacific Foundation, and select workshops are open to the community.

The Thompson School also is an active member of the University of Hawai'i's Interprofessional Education (HIPE) program. Through HIPE, faculty members from medicine, nursing, pharmacy, public health, and social work lead students from these different disciplines to work collaboratively on "case studies" of patients facing multiple, intersecting issues.^{4,5,6} For example, students from multiple disciplines may develop a care plan for an older adult whose medical problems are underlain by medication interactions, family conflict, nursing needs, and social determinants of health, including poverty, housing and food insecurity, social isolation, stress, and discrimination.

These shared perspectives are very relevant to real-world needs. Recognizing the impact on health of upstream, social determinants, healthcare systems are adding social and behavioral domains to electronic medical records (EMR).⁷ Including these domains within EMR will provide important, practical data for diverse health care-related activities, including health services research, clinical practice, and patient engagement. But doing so demands an interprofessionally engaged health care workforce that can link patients to social services to address the social

determinants of health, assess community-level needs as well as individual needs, and advocate for policies and programs that can address the up-stream causes of poor health.

Interdisciplinary and Community-Engaged Research

Among several interdisciplinary research projects at the Thompson School is Hā Kūpuna National Resource Center for Native Hawaiian Elders.⁸ Established in 2006, Hā Kūpuna has contributed new knowledge on Hawaiian elders to the literature and classroom on healthy life expectancy, disease risk, preferences for health and long-term care services, issues facing *keiki* (children) caring for *kūpuna* (elders) with dementia, issues facing *kūpuna* caring for grandchildren, the lives of *kūpuna* who live outside of Hawai‘i, historical wisdom from Hawaiian-language sources, and contemporary wisdom from *kūpuna* served by the Ke Ola Pono No Nā Kūpuna program of ALU LIKE, Inc. The program is funded by the US Administration for Community Living and is advised by representatives from five community-based Hawaiian-serving organizations, state and county offices on aging, and other academic units across UH Mānoa.

The Thompson School also collaborates on infrastructure building grants with JABSOM, including the Geriatric Workforce Enhancement Program, funded by the US Health Resources & Services Administration, and Ola HAWAII, funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities. Ola HAWAII is led by leaders in medicine, social work, and public health, with a goal to impact health disparities among priority populations including Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos. Additionally, faculty are engaged in interna-

tionally recognized research and innovative real-life projects in health literacy and culturally-relevant communication⁹ and with successful large-scale, theory-based research and training programs. Locally, OPHS has collaborated with the State of Hawai‘i Department of Health (DOH) for more than 20 years on the Healthy Hawai‘i Initiative Evaluation,¹⁰ while DSW has collaborated with the State of Hawai‘i Department of Human Services (DHS) for more than 20 years on best practices in child welfare. All of these interdisciplinary research projects engage students to build their skills in community-responsive inquiry.

Interdisciplinary Service in Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

The need for synergy within the Thompson School and across the University of Hawai‘i system became even more apparent with the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the Thompson School, units are responding across disciplines, in interwoven action, teaching, and research, to meet the ever-expanding and changing needs of our local and global communities towards the need for resolutions across public health and social needs. While the novel coronavirus pandemic has upended life in Hawai‘i and beyond, the Thompson School faculty, students, and alumni have been performing vital research and have engaged in action to understand and mitigate the local spread of the disease (Table 1).

Through work in our local and global communities our unit missions and collective vision have solidified our interdisciplinary alliance and further cultivated our collaborative professional leadership to advance social reform and public health. Our epidemiologists, gerontologists, global health analysts, health systems researchers, indigenous health researchers, behavioral

Table 1. Recent Publications Including Thompson School of Social Work and Public Health Students Highlighting Diverse Areas of Expertise and Engagement
Article
Congenital syphilis: A case report demonstrating missed opportunities for screening and inadequate treatment despite multiple healthcare encounters during pregnancy ¹¹
Community Transmission of SARS-CoV-2 at Three Fitness Facilities — Hawai‘i, June–July 2020 ¹²
Health Literacy, Digital Health Literacy, and COVID-19 Pandemic Attitudes and Behaviors in U.S. College Students: Implications for Interventions ¹³
Gene-obesogenic environment interactions on body mass indices for older black and white men and women from the Health and Retirement Study ¹⁴
You Think You’re Stressed? Health Care Providers Need Support, Too ¹⁵
Pandemic Highlights Health Disparities For Filipinos In Hawai‘i ¹⁶
Protect Our Hotel Workers As Hawai‘i Reopens Tourism ¹⁷
Perspectives and Experiences of Obstetricians Who Provide Labor and Delivery Care for Micronesian Women in Hawai‘i: What Is Driving Cesarean Delivery Rates? ¹⁸
Social Connectedness and Homelessness Amidst a Pandemic: Are the Social Impacts of Quarantine on Homeless Populations Being Adequately Addressed? ¹⁹
Emerging Disparities of the COVID-19 Pandemic Among Older Adults in Rural Hawai‘i ²⁰
A Culturally Informed Scoping Review of Native Hawaiian Mental Health and Emotional Well-being Literature ²¹
Association between central sleep apnea and atrial fibrillation/flutter in Japanese-American men: The Kuakini Honolulu Heart Program (HHP) and Honolulu-Asia Aging Study (HAAS) ²²
Identifying Best Practices in Adoption, Implementation and Enforcement of Flavoured Tobacco Product Restrictions and Bans: Lessons from Experts ²³

mental health researchers, child and adolescent social welfare researchers, and faculty with other areas of expertise are collectively serving as content experts for government leaders and performing innovative research to understand the changing needs for food, eldercare, youth development, social needs, and chronic disease management. Most critically, our units are training the future workforce of epidemiologists, social workers, and other public health experts to help prevent and mitigate the effects of any future pandemics in our community and beyond.

Looking to the Future

A'ōhe pu'ū ki'eki'e ke ho'ā'o 'āia e pi'i.
No cliff is so tall it cannot be climbed.
 (Puki, 1983, 25, #209)

As the Hawaiian 'ōlelo *no'eau* (proverb) suggests, our new name reflects our core belief that interdisciplinary education, research, and service optimizes our success in addressing social justice and health equity in Hawai'i and the broader society. The unique perspectives of social work and public health provide a strong foundation from which to make improvements in the social determinants of health, social justice, and health equity. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed many problems and challenges that we, as a society, face in a health crisis; we need to find effective and equitable solutions. Through educational programs, research, and community engagement, we at the Thompson School continue to help develop professionals, practices, and policies to address these current pressing societal and health needs. But, our work goes beyond health needs.

From our shared and unique areas of expertise, we can help lead a path forward towards the *greater good* – not a good for some or for the most privileged, but for all of us. We, as the Thompson School, have the opportunity now to build on the work of sociocultural and political activists from the distant and near past, and implement strategies that promote social justice, health equity, and well-being, consequently advancing human rights for a transformative society.

The passion, engagement, and expertise of our students, faculty, alumni, and staff bring deep meaning to our work and are the building blocks for future health and wellbeing. We look forward to continuing to grow together in our shared and unique areas of strengths to provide synergistic, innovative new areas of scholarship and training in health and wellbeing for our students, workforce, community, and world. We aim to expand our community-focused and engaged workforce, emphasizing deep training in fundamental root causes, and skill-based knowledge to address social factors and create health equity in strong and resilient communities.

We are honored to continue our work, which reflects both the strategic directions of the University of Hawai'i system and the strategic priorities of UH Mānoa and builds upon generations of

community engagement, with the blessing from the Thompson 'Ohana (family), as the Thompson School of Social Work & Public Health.

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