

[NYAPRS Enews] NYSOMH Celebrates Hispanic Heritage Awareness Month!

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on behalf of

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As we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month this year, the New York State Office of Mental Health's Office of Diversity and Inclusion wishes to recognize and honor the remarkable contributions and commitment that Hispanic and Latinx individuals have made to the mental health field. Additionally, OMH recognizes the unique challenges faced by Hispanic and Latinx individuals and reaffirms the Agency's commitment to ensuring marginalized, underserved and minority communities receive equal access to quality mental health services and supports.

OMH wishes to highlight some of the many individuals who have demonstrated unwavering commitments and dedication to OMH's mission to promote the mental health of all New Yorkers. These individuals have all made amazing contributions to the mental health system as a whole and demonstrate the importance of holding the system accountable for making change and promoting equity across all areas.

Dr. Rosa Gil - Dr. Rosa M. Gil, Comunilife's Founder, President and CEO, has had a distinguished career in New York City's health, mental health, supportive housing, social service, and higher education sectors. Since Comunilife opened in 1989, she has centered the work on the intersection between health and housing with the goal of addressing the critical social determinants of health and enhancing the health outcomes of New York City's underserved communities. Under Dr. Gil's stewardship, Comunilife has developed more than 2,678 units of affordable and supportive housing for the City's hardest to reach residents, the homeless, mentally ill, and people living with HIV/AIDS and other health conditions. With a commitment to innovative programming, Comunilife, under her leadership, created the City's premiere Medical Respite Program. Working with two large New York City private hospital systems, the Medical Respite Program was expanded during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 2008, Comunilife created Life is Precious™ (LIP), a nationally recognized program for Latina teens who have seriously considered or/and attempted suicide. To date, more than 400 Latina teens have participated in LIP not one of whom has completed suicide. LIP's accomplishments are measured by the positive results achieved by the girls. This is validated by an evaluation which has been conducted, since 2013, by the New York State Psychiatric Institute/Columbia University - New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence. The research has shown that for every month a Latina teen participates in Life is Precious™ her level of suicide ideation and depression decreases. Dr. Gil has recently been appointed to the NYS Vaccine Equity Task Force as well as numerous other Federal, State and City commissions and boards including the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (Deputy Chair), The NYS Suicide Prevention Council, The Board of Health (NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene), NYS Governor's Interagency Council on Homelessness, The Commission of Health Care Facilities in the 21st Century (The Berger Commission), and The Minority Women Panel on Health Experts (U.S. Public Health Services).

Dr. Gil is a member of the President Carter Mental Health Task Force and the Board of Trustees of Emblem Health. In addition to her tenure at Comunilife, Dr. Gil was, among many positions, the Chairperson of the NYC Health and Hospital Corporation, Health Policy Advisor to the Mayor, Executive Director of Woodhull Medical Center and Metropolitan Hospital, Executive Deputy Commissioner for Families and Children Services at the NYC Human Resources Administration and the University Dean for Health Sciences at CUNY. She is one of the founders of the Urban Institute for Behavioral Health of New York City, Latino Commission on AIDS, the Association of Hispanic Mental Health Professionals and 100 Hispanic Women. Dr. Gil has published numerous articles on mental health, ethnicity, child welfare, and gender issues. She is the co-author of the “Maria Paradox”, the first authoritative book on self-esteem and Hispanic women.

Talia Santiago - Talia Santiago is the Statewide Language Access Coordinator at the NYS Office of Mental Health. In this role, Talia works to ensure that individuals involved in the mental health system, who are limited English proficient, deaf, hard of hearing or have speech impairments, receive quality language access services, and supports. Talia delivers presentations and technical assistance to providers, stakeholders, and advocates regarding best practice approaches to providing language access services and supports to all individuals who need them. Additionally, Talia has played an integral role in the creation of agency-wide policy guidance focused on delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate care to all individuals.

Talia’s skill set and subject matter expertise has assisted OMH with driving systemic change and overall improving access and quality treatment outcomes for marginalized communities. Talia was born and raised on the Lower East Side of Manhattan to immigrant parents. She obtained an associate degree in Applied Science, a bachelor’s degree in Sociology, and a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate in Diversity & Inclusion in the Workplace. Talia has well over 15 years of experience in the advocacy of underserved populations. Talia currently sits on Albany County’s Early Intervention Council (EICC) and in 2019, she worked closely with the Developmental Disability Planning Council & Cornell University through their feasibility study to ensure their Partner’s in Policymaking training was culturally & linguistically appropriate.

Talia often states that growing up in a disenfranchised community, a limited English proficient household, and her experience as a civil rights advocate has shaped her lens of the world. It has also fueled her passion for addressing the longstanding inequities that exist in communities of color. Talia describes herself as a life-long student and is currently in the process of obtaining her Master’s in Public Health. Talia will embark on this journey in July 2022 at John’s Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Oscar Jiménez-Solomon, MPH - Oscar Jiménez-Solomon is a researcher and advocate who has dedicated his career to reducing inequities in mental health by tackling its social determinants through research, innovative interventions, and policy advocacy. Oscar was born and raised in Peru and immigrated to the U.S. as a young adult. He obtained a Master of Public Health at Columbia University (2003) and after completing a bachelor’s degree in Sociology at the Pontifical Catholic University of Peru (1997). Oscar is currently pursuing a PhD in Social Policy at the Columbia University School of Social Work. Since 2013 Oscar has served as Research Scientist at the New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence, New York State Psychiatric Institute (NYSPI), Columbia University Medical Center.

In this role, Oscar provides OMH with subject matter expertise on delivering best practice approaches to serving marginalized, underserved, and unserved communities. Additionally, Oscar has delivered presentations to providers, stakeholders, and advocates on the importance of ensuring mental health

services are responsive to the linguistic needs of those being served. Oscar has also led the development of videos and training materials to improve the engagement of culturally diverse youth in first episode psychosis and improve access to language interpretation. Oscar's expertise and skillset has allowed OMH to continue to hold the behavioral health system accountable for making system wide improvements to the delivery of cultural and linguistically appropriate care. Oscar's work has also contributed to OMH's ongoing efforts to address social determinants of mental health, such as unemployment and financial hardship.

Currently, Oscar is Principal Investigator of a study funded by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention to pilot *From Hardship to Hope*, a peer-led financial wellness intervention to reduce financial hardship and suicide risk. In addition to his role at the New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence at NYSPI, Oscar is a PhD student researcher at the Columbia Center on Poverty and Social Policy, where he is conducting research to better understand how poverty and psychiatric distress reinforce one another and identify the policies that can best break the cycle of impoverishment and mental health decline.

Dr. Roberto Lewis-Fernández - Dr. Lewis-Fernández is a Professor of Clinical Psychiatry at Columbia University and the Director of the New York State Center of Excellence for Cultural Competence and the Hispanic Treatment Program, and the Co-Director of the Anxiety Disorder Clinic, at New York State Psychiatric Institute. In this role, he provides subject matter expertise and guidance to ensure that mental health providers across the system are well informed on the importance of delivering culturally appropriate care to all individuals being served. Dr. Lewis-Fernández was educated at Harvard College, Harvard Divinity School, and Yale Medical School. He trained in psychiatry at The Cambridge Hospital (1986-90) and completed a Dupont-Warren psychiatric research fellowship (1990-91) and a NIMH-sponsored fellowship in clinically applied medical anthropology (1991-93) at Harvard Medical School.

His research focuses on developing culturally valid interventions and instruments to enhance patient engagement, reduce misdiagnosis, and help overcome disparities in the care of underserved cultural groups, especially Latinos. Additionally, he led the development of the DSM-5 Cultural Formulation Interview, a standardized method for cultural assessment for use in mental health practice and was the Principal Investigator of its international field trial conducted in Canada, India, Kenya, the Netherlands, Peru, and the United States. His integral role in developing this standardized method has led to system wide improvements regarding provider's understanding of how culture affects individual's experiences of mental health conditions. Dr. Lewis-Fernández's leadership and expertise has promoted increased attention and focus on the long-standing inequities that exist within the mental health system for underserved communities and has overall promoted the delivery of culturally informed care to all individuals.

OMH's Continued Equity Initiatives - OMH recognizes that the past year has been extremely challenging for Hispanic and Latinx individuals with COVID-19 disproportionately impacting people of color. We remain committed to implementing strategies to reduce disparities and address long standing inequities existing for communities of color.

As an Agency, OMH has continued to work to address specific, unique challenges faced by Hispanic and Latinx communities. OMH has partnered with other agencies and organizations to increase supports and services available to Latina adolescents in response to the increased suicide rates among this community. These efforts include hosting focus groups across different counties for parents of Latina adolescents to promote a safe space to share experiences and promote system wide improvements.

Additionally, OMH has continued to strengthen and improve language access services for individuals receiving mental health services, through policy guidance and technical assistance. This work includes the creation of a comprehensive and progressive policy that outlines concrete strategies to be implemented across the mental health system, promoting best practice approaches to the delivery of cultural and linguistically appropriate services. In addition, OMH has worked to have equity language

included in all agency RFPs, which includes adding specific criteria regarding the responding organization's plan to appropriately provide services that meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the service population.

OMH remains focused on increasing information sharing, to further inform providers, advocates and stakeholders about the unique challenges faced by special populations. In alignment with these efforts, OMH continues to host regularly scheduled webinars that provide best practice approaches and practical solutions to improving access, quality, and treatment outcomes for marginalized populations. These well attended webinars are delivered by subject matter experts and have focused on topics including declaring racism a public mental health crisis, improving services for limited English proficient, deaf, and hard of hearing individuals, and the importance of creating and maintaining an inclusive work environment. Additionally, OMH has worked to create numerous tip-sheets and resources focused on bringing awareness and attention to supports and services available for special populations. We invite you to explore the resource created surrounding Hispanic and Latinx Mental Health:

- Spotlight Series: Hispanic/Latinx

Although strides have been made to address the longstanding inequities existing in the behavioral health system for Hispanic and Latinx individuals, as well as all people of color, the work is far from over. OMH will continue to progressively work to break down barriers to care, increase information sharing about prevalent challenges and issues impacting communities of color and implement system wide policy changes that promote the reduction of disparities.

As we celebrate Hispanic Heritage Month 2021, we ask you to join us in increasing our attention and focus to promoting the equity of all New Yorkers.

Matthew Canuteson

Pronouns: He, Him, His

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