THE SOCIAL WORKER

Lessons Learned:
What 2020 taught us and how we can improve

FORDHAM Graduate School of Social Service
7 Lessons Learned
What we gleaned from attending and sponsoring an anti-racism national summit

Features

4 GSS helps organize national teach-in on police brutality and structural racism
Social work leaders from across the country came together to draw attention to where it's needed.

5 GSS and GSAS collaborate on East Harlem families project
Social work is interdisciplinary. Life is interdisciplinary. Read about it here.

13 Ravazzin Center celebrates 25 years
A keynote from Senator Gillibrand and a discussion of pressing issues highlighted the quarter-century.

15 GSS forms committee for racial and social justice
Faculty, administrators, students, and alumni are coming together to improve GSS and our community.

18 GSS student helps Bellevue staff heal
Monique Lalane saw her colleagues struggling and knew they needed help – even if she could have used some herself.
Dear GSS Community,

As social workers, we specialize in helping others navigate change. The year 2020 certainly put all of our skills to the ultimate test! It has been a year like no other. A global pandemic, widespread public protests against racism, social and economic injustice, a historic presidential election — these all have changed our country in ways that may take years for us to fully understand. Yet through it all, I could not be prouder of how the Graduate School of Social Service (GSS) community has risen to meet the unprecedented challenges we’ve faced.

Thanks to the dedication and adaptability of GSS faculty and students, our pivot into fully remote learning last spring continued seamlessly into the fall. Our community partners have stepped up to help create and stabilize our critical field internships, while our generous alumni have provided essential financial support to students who would not have otherwise been able to continue with their studies.

GSS is more committed than ever to excellence in social work education because more than ever, the world needs skilled and compassionate professionals prepared to lead positive change in the 21st century. As we welcome 2021, I’m confident in our ability to draw strength and wisdom from the lessons of the past year and to work together to advance true equity and social justice. Moreover, I’m honored to be part of a school, a university, and a profession committed to eradicating racism and to building authentically inclusive organizations and communities. Thank you to all of you who continue to support GSS and our mission, and welcome to all who wish to join us in manifesting critical change in the new year.

Sincerely,

Debra M. McPhee, Ph.D.
Dean
Fordham University
Graduate School of Social Service

“I’m honored to be part of a school, a university, and a profession committed to eradicating racism and to building authentically inclusive organizations and communities.”
AMIDST THE CACOPHONY
of noise and opinion on Twitter, a group of social work academics regularly chat under the hashtag #SWTech to discuss technology in social work. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement, their conversation shifted to police brutality. A professor in the group challenged the others to address the issue in their classrooms.

“[He] asked, well, ’What are you doing about this? We need to be responding to this in the field,’” recalled Lauri Goldkind, Ph.D., an associate professor at the Graduate School of Social Service and frequent contributor to the tech dialogue.

By late June, Goldkind had formed a steering committee with professors from the University of Southern California, Columbia University, Salem State University, and the University of Buffalo. The committee decided to hold a teach-in, which took place from Oct. 26 through Oct. 30 at social work schools across the country. Using the hashtag #SWEduActs, the group promoted the event on social media and asked social work educators to commit to teaching a class on police brutality during the teach-in week. Goldkind and Elspeth Slayter, Ph.D., social work professor at Salem State, offered prep sessions and resources to the professors in advance on Twitter.

“We’re an education-focused group, so we decided that we should have the difficult classroom conversations, no matter whether they’re teaching a research stats class or clinical coursework,” said Goldkind.

In addition to holding their own classroom conversations, participants tuned in to Zoom on Oct. 27 when GSS hosted “#SWEduActs National Social Work Teach-In.” There, they watched a TED talk by Kimberlé Crenshaw on intersectionality, followed by a panel discussion on police brutality with experts including Sharon Moore, Ph.D., professor at the University of Louisville; Tina Sacks, Ph.D., assistant professor at UC Berkeley; and Mel Wilson, who sits on the board of directors at the National Association of Social Workers. Desmond Upton Patton, Ph.D., associate professor at Columbia, who initially challenged his #SWtech colleagues to “do something,” moderated.
GSS AND GSAS COLLABORATE

THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE and the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences have begun the planning stages of a collaborative, community-based project in East Harlem. The project is titled “Mutuality and the Spanish-Speaking Immigrant Families in East Harlem: The Work of LSA Family Services.” Working with the LSA Family Health Service Organization (LSA), the two Fordham graduate schools will help LSA evaluate the effectiveness of their programs offered to families in need in the area.

The project’s team is spearheaded by three faculty members – G. Lawrence Farmer, Ph.D. (GSS), Carey Kasten, Ph.D. (GSAS – Modern Languages and Literatures), and Brenna Moore, Th.D. (GSAS – Theology), while also including one student intern from each department. Farmer thinks the interdisciplinary approach will optimize the workflow, make for a more well-rounded study, and offer better insight into the services LSA provides to families in their community.

“I think it’s important because this is an agency that really would like to learn more about the impact of their programming,” Farmer said. “They’ve [LSA] grown over the years to provide a broad array of health and wellness services to the community they serve, and they see it as a mission and a part of their spiritual mission, but they also want to know exactly what are the impacts.”

THE SOCIAL SERVICE STUDY

The team of researchers will interview and survey 40 families who have experienced the programs at LSA, using their answers to showcase what programs these families think are effective, and what could be improved. Moore noted that when she and her colleagues first had the idea for the project, it seemed like a great way for everyone involved to take time to pause and advocate for healing — especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“We decided it might be healing for us, the students, and LSA to do something really creative and productive, even in this time,” she said. “[We decided] that you can really stay committed to the work that we are all meant to do, and actually put something positive out in the world at this time.”

Of the 40 families they will interview, many will be Spanish-speaking immigrants – a group LSA makes sure to advocate for in their mission. This is where Kasten offers her expertise – not only on the Spanish language, but also to provide context and information about this community of people. By learning about the language and the culture, the team will have a better understanding of the potential issues experienced by those at LSA.

“Mainly my students learn about the Spanish-speaking communities in New York and some of the issues that are particular to those communities,” she said. “So, I can provide some context, insight, and resources for the research team that may be more culturally sensitive, but also more historically informed.”

Moore will provide an outlet for information on the spiritual side of LSA, researching the history of the world view and faith that animates the agency’s work. According to LSA’s website, “the first Little Sisters of the Assumption arrived here [East Harlem] from Paris to nurse the ‘sick poor’ in their own homes with respect and dignity,” and although they describe themselves as a secular nonprofit today, their foundation’s history is steeped in the Catholic religion.
Farmer will contribute his specialty by conducting the interviews, creating the surveys, and determining how this data can be used to promote social justice at LSA and in East Harlem as a whole. He said that LSA grounds itself on a mutuality model – empowering its members as well as providing for them – and added that he knows people who were once recipients of LSA’s services, who came back to help provide those services to others. If anyone knows what works and what doesn’t, it’s them.

“This is, in particular, a group of families that has experienced a lot of marginalization and very intense marginalization over the last four years,” he said. “Agencies see themselves as providing services to them, and sometimes don’t engage them in hearing their voices in terms of what their needs are, or how the services are being experienced by them. It’s really important for us to lift up these families who have experienced so much marginalization.”

**HOW IT STARTED**

You can’t expect to help anyone without building trust with them first. Whether that be with a client or an agency, establishing relationships and rapport is what defines an effective social worker. If you don’t start there, you don’t start. Period.

This is why Moore is so vital to the project. Aside from her expertise on theology, she was also a long-time volunteer at LSA. “When I started volunteering, I wanted my kids to go and see a good place doing positive things,” she said. “We’d drop off animal crackers and baby carrots. Sometimes it might feel like just a drop in the bucket, but really what can happen is the relationships can be built.”

Then, after years of volunteering, she became a board member. She formed relationships. She discovered that one of LSA’s executive board members, Sister Margaret Leonard, was a GSS graduate, class of 1967. Another relationship.

**ENDING THE GRADUATE SCHOOL SILO**

Farmer, Kasten, and Moore all believe that having multiple perspectives on this project will allow it to be more well-rounded and effective. They all noted that sometimes graduate schools can be siloed into their areas of research, becoming so hyper-focused on their own work and not leaving much room for collaboration with other disciplines. This project will break those boundaries.

And it’s not just beneficial for the faculty and their particular fields, but also for students who may be interested in other disciplines.

“For students in particular who get involved in these sorts of projects, it enriches their learning – it allows them to get exposed to other disciplines, other ways of viewing the same phenomenon,” Farmer said. “It improves their ability to think critically and outside their own discipline. It’s consistent with the overall mission at Fordham: expose people to a broader, liberal arts education.”

The team also hopes their research methods will be used as a model for other schools, both at Fordham and elsewhere. But most importantly, they want to stress that this project is about the community – everything else will follow.

“In the abstract, we’re [usually] very much in our own silos, doing our own research,” Moore said. “But if you focus on a community problem and a community need, and what kind of solution academics could offer, it suddenly gets interdisciplinary immediately. Because life is interdisciplinary.”
WHAT WE LEARNED

THE HEADLINE

RACISM IS A VIRUS
This September, the Graduate School of Social Service served as a sponsor for this year’s SWHELPER 2020 Anti-Racism Virtual Summit. The summit took place over the course of two days, from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

**DURING THIS TIME,** speakers invited participants to examine social work through an anti-racist lens, and discuss social workers’ roles in the Black Lives Matter movement.

As one of the many benefits of sponsoring this summit, SWHELPER granted students and faculty at GSS free admittance to the 16 hours of crucial content. We asked members of the GSS Action Committee for Racial and Social Justice to highlight some of the most important things they took away from this experience.

**HERE’S WHAT THEY HAD TO SAY**
**TESSA ENGEL**

**M.S.W. Graduate**

“I wasn’t able to attend all of the summit, but perhaps the thing I reflected most upon was the myriad ways that the profession of social work itself upholds and perpetuates white supremacy. I’ve forced myself to consider how various facets of social work (juvenile justice, foster care, white school social workers working in schools with primarily BIPOC students, social workers collaborating with the police, and more) need to have a deep reckoning about how to properly address and dismantle white supremacy.

“I also reflected on just how white-washed the social work curriculum is (at Fordham and in general), and how the field of mental health and psychotherapy in general is dominated by white scholars and white voices. I want to elevate and learn from BIPOC individuals and communities doing this work, and I wish for it to be incorporated into the core curriculum of all social work programs by the CSWE (Council on Social Work Education).

“Overall, I will carry these reflections as a new MSW as I continue to engage in the field and with different communities during my professional trajectory.”

**SAMEENA AZHAR, PH.D., Assistant Professor**

“For many years, I thought my experiences of being marginalized within social work academia were unique to me. But the summit helped articulate how racism has, in many ways, been endemic to social work education since the very origins of our profession. Recognizing and holding the field accountable for these racist histories and ongoing tensions is an important first step to creating more equitable spaces within social work.

“Some of the ways that social work schools can confront these racist histories is by ensuring that anti-racist content is infused into our curricula; that faculty and students of color are recruited and provided guidance in terms of academic progress, graduation, tenure, and promotion; and that marginalized communities are prioritized for scholarship and fellowship opportunities.”

**KIMBERLY HUDSON, PH.D., Assistant Professor**

“What struck me most about the virtual summit, and what has continued to stay with me in the weeks since, is the power of storytelling, of telling our difficult truths. Charity Chandler-Cole took us, her audience, on a journey, weaving together her personal experiences with a critical analysis of various systems in her talk on racism in child welfare, imprinting on our hearts and minds a vision of justice so clear and so urgent.”
“My main takeaway from this summit is that there is a glaring need for social work to play a critical role in dismantling white supremacy across all of our systems — health, social service, education, criminal justice, child welfare — just to name a few. To do this, we must reckon with our own professional history and make some serious changes to the aspects of our practice that are complicit in white supremacy and function to perpetuate existing inequities that have only been magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am inspired by the work of so many social workers involved in this collective endeavor, and am excited that the newly formed GSS Action Committee for Racial and Social Justice can function as one mechanism to bring the GSS community together to do this work.”

“All of the sessions were great, and each one was unique and rich in information and personal experience. I loved how the sessions were centered around the one common theme.

“Each speaker brought their individual experience to the table and shared their personal stories about growing up, working, and/or living in this world.

“It was powerful listening to Eric Garner’s mother and sister speak about their experience following the loss of their son and brother Eric. I had not previously looked at who was speaking at that session and was taken aback when I realized who the main speakers were. I was grateful and moved by the fact that Eric’s mom and sister took time out of their days to help us understand their grief and trauma and share the importance of empathy.

“At one point in the session, Eric’s mother shared a petition with everyone watching the session. She had created a petition to make Sept. 15 Eric Garner Day in their city and state. It struck me how they turned such a tragedy into a celebration of Eric’s life and a fight for justice. One quote that stuck with me was when Eric’s mother said, ‘I decided to get up and turn my mourning into a movement and turn my sorrow into a strategy.’”
FACULTY HIGHLIGHTS

Mary Ann Forgey, Ph.D., Professor

The New York Times

Mary Ann Forgey, Ph.D., was featured in The New York Times for her letter to the editor titled “How to Help Children at Risk of Abuse.”

Jordan Devylder, Ph.D., Associate Professor

Published on Sept. 17 in the American Journal of Public Health (AJPH) with co-authors Lisa Fedina, Ph.D., and Bruce Link, Ph.D., the study, “Impact of Police Violence on Mental Health: A Theoretical Framework” is the first article to offer a theoretical framework for why police violence differs from other types of violence in terms of its impact on health and mental health, Devylder said.

GSS ADJUNCT PROFESSOR
ANTOINE LOVELL
FEATURED IN ABC DOCUMENTARY

GSS adjunct professor and doctoral candidate Antoine Lovell was featured in an ABC documentary titled Our America: Living While Black. According to abc7ny.com, the five-part docuseries culminated in a 60-minute documentary — and went “beyond the statistics to explore inequalities facing Black families across the country in institutions related to policing, health care, education, and housing.”

In a feature article on Lovell, ABC7 had this to say:

“For a time as a youth, Antoine Lovell, now a doctoral candidate and a university professor, was homeless in New York, riding the subways with his mom for shelter. His bedroom was the No. 3 train.

“It was an experience that shaped his life. The course of his life was sealed when a social worker helped him, and he decided he’d do that kind of work, too, one day. He is now a professor at Fordham University in Manhattan as well as Delaware State University, where he teaches social policy. His specialty? Housing and homelessness, the core issues he’s been wrestling with from a young age.”

BY THE NUMBERS

25


93

RAVAZZIN CENTER MARKS 25TH ANNIVERSARY

FORDHAM’S HENRY C. RAVAZZIN CENTER ON AGING AND INTERGENERATIONAL STUDIES celebrated 25 years this November, choosing to forgo a big celebration and instead host a forum focused on pressing issues facing older adults: isolation and loneliness.

Titled “The Decade’s New Public Health Challenge: Alone, Lonely, Isolated,” the Nov. 9 discussion brought together experts from the academy, government, and the private sector to examine the intergenerational problem that has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The event was sponsored by the Graduate School of Social Service, which runs the center; Adelphi University; the New York City Department for the Aging; and the State Society on Aging of New York. Panelists hailed from the Veterans Administration, the Westchester Department of Senior Programming, Hunter College, Older Adults Technology Services, DORAT, and AARP.

“The global pandemic has certainly increased isolation and loneliness for people of all ages, but it really is older adults of our communities that are the most vulnerable,” said Debra McPhee, Ph.D., dean of GSS.

PRIORITIZING THE NEEDS OF OLDER ADULTS
In prerecorded remarks, United States Senator Kirsten Gillibrand cited the morning subject’s timeliness, as well as its unfortunate timelessness for older adults.

“Older Americans were already feeling isolated before the coronavirus pandemic, then we asked [them] to stay home to limit their exposure to the coronavirus,” she said. “That meant spending more time alone with fewer visits, if any.”

She added that one in five deaths during the coronavirus pandemic in the state occurred in long-term care facilities and that residents of color were especially at risk.

“This pandemic has highlighted the need to prioritize new solutions and new tools to combat problems older Americans face in accessing care and maintaining social interaction,” she said. “No one should have to face their later years or their health struggles alone.”

Bob Blancato, a member of the board of directors at AARP, agreed.

“If I could wave my policy wand, I would like to see this new [presidential] administration declare social isolation and loneliness a public health emergency,” he said during his presentation.

Panels discussed ways to implement virtual programming at senior centers, how to integrate consumer technology, and how to expand established connections in the digital realm.

McPhee offered a bit of history on the Ravazzin Center. She noted that a former dean of the Graduate School of Social Service, Mary Ann Quaranta, Ph.D., established the center in 1995 with Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., who was president of Fordham at the time. Irene Gutheil, Ph.D., served as the center’s first endowed chair. Today, the center continues to advance best practices and policies in the care of older adults while maintaining an emphasis on social justice. In 2015, McPhee appointed Janna Heyman, Ph.D., to spearhead efforts to expand the center’s work by addressing issues across the lifespan.

SOCIAL ISOLATION VS. LONELINESS
In her remarks, Heyman made a distinction between social isolation and loneliness.

“Isolation is more of an objective state and loneliness is more of a subjective feeling. They’re related experiences, but social isolation is often the lack of contact because an individual has a limited social network or is lacking relationships,” she said. “Some people decide to be so socially isolated, and that’s okay. But loneliness is an emotion. People who are lonely perceive intimate relationships are not there, and they have a different quality of life because of that.”
Manoj Pardasani, Ph.D., former assistant dean at GSS, now dean of Adelphi University School of Social Work, said that location doesn’t matter when it comes to social isolation.

“People think of seniors as being isolated in rural areas, but you can live in an apartment building with 2,000 people and still be socially isolated. It’s not issues of rural versus urban versus suburban,” he said.

**TECHNOLOGY AS A MEANS OF CONNECTION**

Pardasani said that the pandemic has increased use of telehealth services by seniors, something he said he would like to see continue into the future. He said before quarantine, seniors interacted at senior centers, libraries, and intergenerational community centers. Many of the services they found at those locations had to be moved online.

“The one light that I saw through this pandemic was the use of technology and how we could integrate it into services with adults. It was panic-driven for sure, but it has shown us that if tech is effectively used we can engage older adults,” he said.

He noted that as seniors continue to age they may no longer be able to access services in a physical space because of mobility issues, putting them at higher risk of social isolation and loneliness.

“When we come back to the new normal, this is an opportunity where we need to think of programs and services that are not just available to people on-site, but for people who can connect from home,” he said.

**NOT JUST MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES**

Heyman said it’s important to note that social isolation and loneliness are not just mental health issues. Study after study has shown that social isolation can increase the risk of premature mortality.

“Loneliness can also increase the risk of death ... and can have a 68% increase in hospitalization,” she said. “This is an important aspect we need to be aware of, and it has been complicated by COVID-19.”

Heyman said that almost 25% of older adults, age 65 and older, are considered socially isolated and 43% of those age 60 and older are lonely. She reiterated Pardasani’s point that tech can play an important role, citing a 2020 AARP study that said 81% of 50- to 69-year-olds have access to smartphones and computers. Though for the 70-plus cohort, that usage drops to 62%.

**INTERGENERATIONAL HELP IS KEY**

Heyman said that the intergenerational approach is vital. She noted that Fordham students affiliated with the Ravazzin Center and GSS pick up the phone to call older adults who do not have the technology.

“They’re making the connection. They’re on the front lines being there for the older adults,” she said. “One student said an older adult said to her, ‘Will you call me back?’ Of course, she said, ‘Yes, I’ll be there. I’m going to be right there and reach out to you again in a couple of days just to see how you’re doing.’ Well, that can make a world of difference.”

“Loneliness can also increase the risk of death ... and can have a 68% increase in hospitalization. This is an important aspect we need to be aware of, and it has been complicated by COVID-19.”

—JANNA HEYMAN

Conversations across all generations were important before the pandemic, and they will be critical over the next few months and far into the future, she said.

“The intergenerational aspect of children and adults and older adults coming together, and it doesn’t always have to be in a place—it could be on a phone, it could be on Zoom—as long as that intergenerational aspect can bring people together to communicate with each other, it will help everyone.”
On July 15, 2020, the Graduate School of Social Service's Action Committee for Racial and Social Justice held its first meeting for what will be an active and ongoing process of structural change, and promoting an anti-racist future.

The committee, spearheaded by Dr. Binta Alleyne-Green, associate professor and director of field education at GSS, defines its purpose as:

“To provide a mechanism through which GSS community members can engage in coordinated efforts that promote anti-racism using an intersectional lens and address social injustice, specifically white supremacy within our own institutions (GSS and Fordham University) as well as the larger social contexts of New York City, the United States, and globally.”

In addition, committee membership is open to the entire GSS community – including students, staff, faculty, alumni, administration, and other key stakeholders – interested in working toward that purpose.

**THE PRECEDENTIAL MEETING**

The meeting opened with an introduction from Alleyne-Green and Associate Director of Admissions Stephen McGowan. They welcomed guests with a presentation of “Why We Have All Come Together,” citing the structural change long overdue at GSS as an institution, and in the community at large. In this presentation, the committee also put forth its definitions of both anti-racism and white supremacy.

Laura Wernick, Ph.D., an associate professor at GSS, followed by addressing some of the community agreements set for the meeting. These included things such as active listening, being present, equitable discomfort, and honoring people’s stories – among many others.

“If you’re someone who tends to be a bit shy, try your best to voice your ideas,” Wernick said. “And if you’re someone who is generally outspoken, maybe take this time to work on your active listening.”
Wernick made sure to remind everyone that this is a process. She noted that the committee didn’t expect to solve racism in one 90-minute meeting, but that it’s the first step in a series of advocacy actions.

**STAYING CENTERED AND BREAKOUT GROUPS**

In a meeting focused around racial and social inequalities, there are bound to be some tough and uncomfortable conversations. To prepare for this, the committee took some time before discussion to focus on centering inward.

Derek Tice-Brown, Ph.D., an assistant professor at GSS who specializes in complementary and integrative health practices for depression and anxiety, invited guests to participate in a meditation exercise. He asked participants to close their eyes, roll their shoulders back, and try to release tension that may have built up in anticipation for any difficult dialogues.

“Notice that when you roll your shoulders, it opens up your heart,” he said. “And this is how we lead the fight against oppression – with our hearts.”

After Tice-Brown’s exercise, the committee brought forth one more item to remind everyone “why we are all here.” Lauri Goldkind, Ph.D., GSS associate professor, read aloud “An Invitation to Brave Space,” a poem by Micky ScottBey Jones, which focused on amplifying voices that aren’t heard elsewhere, and fighting through all of our scars to create a brave space. For some perspective, in the 125-word poem, the powerful pronoun ‘we’ is included 14 times.

For the next 40 minutes, participants were divided randomly into breakout groups – with each group assigned a facilitator from the committee. Facilitators asked four main questions for insight into the participants’ motivations. These questions included “What brought you here?”; “What would an anti-racist GSS look like to you?”; “What would it take to get there?”; and “What outcomes would you like to see from this group?”

The groups provided all different stakeholders within the GSS community with opportunities to voice their opinions and ideas for a better future. In addition, the random selection provided a mix of perspectives, which allowed a cross-pollination of viewpoints from around the school.

To conclude the meeting, guests received a survey to fill out based on their expectations and future involvement with the committee. Action options ranged from signing up for emails to helping organize events for voter registration and serving on subcommittees dedicated toward internal or external change.

And for this committee, action is the key component.

“We want to have measurable outcomes,” Alleyne-Green said. “This will not be a committee where things get discussed, but no action is taken.”
MEAGHAN JARENSKY BARAKETT,  
GSS '16

On Nov. 6, 2020, Barakett was named to the Fordham University Board of Trustees. Barakett is the founder and executive director of One Girl, Inc., a nonprofit that develops young women into leaders through charity, advocacy, and community organizing.

JACQUELINE Soboti, GSS ’09

Soboti hosts her own podcast, “Two Therapists Tales,” which features “conversations about mental health and the topics our micro, macro, and global communities face.”

STEPHEN MCGOWAN,  
GSS '14

McGowan, along with his Bronx-based running group BX Pints & Pavements, has delivered food to hospital workers since COVID-19 struck.

Staff at Lincoln Hospital enjoy a pizza delivered by BX Pints & Pavements
“That was a harsh reality myself and every other social worker [in the hospital setting] had to realize: that we were also considered essential workers,” she said. “We had many of the same expectations as doctors or nurses or other healthcare professionals, in that you were expected to come to work, and you had to make every effort possible.”

Lalane is a social work supervisor in the Department of Psychiatry at Bellevue, and also the clinical director of its addiction consult service. She adjunct teaches at both Fordham GSS and NYU Silver School of Social Work; is a group facilitator of the Living Well Program, which, in collaboration with Fordham’s Beck Institute, provides trauma-informed services to women who are survivors of domestic violence and homelessness; and is also focused on her dissertation.

So, when someone asked her to help doctors and nurses on staff at Bellevue cope with the mental anxieties and stressors brought by COVID-19, it might have been tempting to say, I have a full plate right now.

She didn’t.

HELPING HEALERS HEAL
At Bellevue, a public hospital within N.Y.C. Health & Hospitals, staff provide service and care to patients regardless of their ability to pay, or their citizenship status. Patients come from all over N.Y.C. and beyond, many with complex needs and various psychosocial stressors. And during the height of COVID-19, staff felt overwhelmed with the influx of patients.

Helping Healers Heal (H3) is a comprehensive program at Bellevue that provides emotional support to its staff, implemented by N.Y.C. Health & Hospitals. The program relies on staff to volunteer, and Lalane is one of the trainers for the “peer champions.” And when COVID-19 came down like thunder on the hospital, H3 needed more healers to volunteer and more initiatives to help support the staff.
“The part of it that I’ve been really involved with is what we call ‘wellness rounds’ – that is something that just came out of the COVID response,” Lalane said. “I literally just walk around the units, such as inpatient medicine or ICU, introduce myself to staff, and I’m there to provide an in-moment check-in, see how they’re doing, and remind them about the resources we do have available to support staff. It can be difficult for healthcare workers to step away from what they’re doing to focus on themselves.”

Despite what staff experience personally, Lalane said, their greatest concerns, worries, and focuses center on what patients go through. The devastation and loss experienced by so many is palpable. For some staff who may not feel like talking, Lalane may simply offer them a smile or a snack. She said the ability to be present, affirm the experience of struggles, and encourage what has been accomplished is significant.

“At times, it can feel like I’m a sponge for their unfiltered thoughts and emotions, all along the continuum from positive to negative,” she said. “My hope is that this interaction can be helpful for them to then return to their work a little bit lighter, and to know it’s OK to reach out for support.”

COVID-19 has spread everyone in the hospital thin, and the concept of volunteering when you’re already under immense pressure can be daunting. We must remember, Lalane endures the hardships of ‘regular’ work – then, she volunteers for H3 in an effort to support her peers. But the identified need and importance of these services seem to outweigh the challenges.

“Even though most staff acknowledged the importance of this and the need, it’s still something that you have to commit time to doing, and it is kind of draining work and challenging in a whole host of other ways,” she said. “But I think that speaks to people like myself and other H3 peer champions who just want to do this work to help our coworkers.”

In addition, Lalane said it’s not just the fear and anxiety of coming into work and getting sick that takes a toll on the staff – it’s the isolation afterward. The devastating impact of the virus on patients and their families brought with it an intensity many hadn’t faced before. Afraid to infect loved ones, some staff members choose to stay in a hotel or make other living arrangements over going home.

“Having to manage that on top of the stress of the day-to-day work was something most people hadn’t experienced,” she said. “What I still am marveled by is the staff still wanting to come to work and provide premiere patient care in the face of all of this!”

**ADDED SOCIETAL TRAUMA**

In addition, H3 has had to contend with another societal upheaval besides the coronavirus pandemic.

The country’s uproar over the senseless killing of George Floyd and the attention to systemic racism in America spurred a new wave of collective trauma for healthcare workers. Not only do staff like Lalane have to manage the effects of this trauma themselves, they come to work and provide services for patients who experience the same thing.
Lalane notes that these occurrences leave staff feeling incredibly drained and even burned out. She tries to see the positive, saying the situation also created a good opportunity to talk about coping strategies and mechanisms for taking action. Although this is a good first step, the future for total staff self-care, like so many things in the world right now, is uncertain.

“It starts with being able to recognize and have insight that you might be experiencing certain symptoms, or not being able to function like you usually are, and navigating that while working because we still want to be here for our patients,” she said. “But how do we best take care of ourselves? I don’t have a perfect answer for that.”

SOCIAL WORK DURING COVID-19
Social work isn’t glamorous. It isn’t center stage. But it’s vital.

When modern media highlights frontline workers, social work often gets lost. We, as a society, are thankful for our doctors and nurses and grocery store workers and so many others – as we should be. But for social workers, whose job is often arduous and sometimes behind-the-scenes, the cameras don’t seem to flash as bright.

“It’s unfortunate that social workers are not being talked about enough in the response to COVID-19,” she said. “I can only speak for working in a hospital setting, but I’m sure this applies to every social service agency. Social workers are right there, and we’re not always getting that same recognition.”

But Lalane doesn’t supervise, teach, train, and work on her dissertation for attention. She wants to help people. That’s what keeps her showing up, despite the mounting challenges.

“It’s been a struggle. I’ve really seen how this has all impacted me, because I haven’t been able to stay as motivated or on top of things as I usually am. It’s hard to feel positive with all of the uncertainty,” she said. “What keeps me invigorated is learning, gaining a deeper understanding, and new experiences. Being exposed to new tasks and skills that I can work on to further help people enhance their well-being.”

Working during the pandemic has also added new meaning to hospital social work. Lalane speaks passionately about the immense value of hospital social work, a field she has worked in for 12 years.

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- MONIQUE LALANE

“The point of contact with a hospital is often associated with complex issues and crisis, so social workers are critical in navigating these challenging moments for patients and their families,” she said. “The settings [medicine or behavioral health, inpatient, outpatient, emergency department, etc.], functions/role, and skillset for hospital social workers are incredibly diverse.”

And despite H3 responsibilities adding another heaping helping to her already-crowded plate, the program brought its own reward to Lalane’s life.

“I, like my coworkers, have a sense of, ‘we’re all in this together for better or for worse,’ and I think there is some relief provided by knowing you’re not alone,” she said. “Even now, as I go around, I feel as though I can even feel support from the people I’m going to support.”
