

Northeast Ohio Medical University
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs (ORSP)

2026 Summer Research Fellowship Program Application
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Project Description

1. **Project Title:** Addressing Individual and Structural Barriers to Medical and Behavioral Healthcare for Returning Citizens
Location: NEOMED, community sites in Portage County
2. **Abstract:** People leaving jails and prisons, or returning citizens, have high medical and behavioral health needs that remain unmet during their return to the community due to a fragmented service system and competing demands to meet basic needs. To better address medical and behavioral health needs among this population a community-centered, multi-level approach to coordinated care is needed. This project seeks to better understand the needs of returning citizens and develop a community collaborative approach to increasing connections to healthcare.
3. **Significance:** Returning citizens, or people who have been incarcerated in prisons and jails, experience higher rates of chronic and infectious diseases. Additionally, people who have substance use disorders or mental illnesses are overrepresented among those incarcerated. This population has a high need for medical and behavioral health care, yet it is often unmet, especially as people returning to the community from jail or prison often need to find a place to live, a place to work, and re-establish important relationships. Under multiple competing demands, healthcare often falls to the side as basic needs become the priority. The transition from incarceration is an opportunity to engage people into wraparound services that addresses both their basic and health needs, yet services and supports are often fragmented within communities. Portage County offers a monthly Citizens Circle which is comprised of key providers of health, behavioral health, and social services who meet directly with returning citizens to help them get connected to services. Likewise, the Circle provides an opportunity for providers to collaborate with each other to eliminate barriers to services. Yet it is not clear how the Citizen's Circle is impacting individuals' lives. Engaging with individuals directly, while also working to

eliminate systemic barriers to care, has the potential to improve community health, not just for returning citizens but also for others in the community who have multiple needs and have difficulty navigating multiple sectors. This project will seek to answer the following research questions:

- A) What are the best ways to engage people in medical and behavioral health services, while also supporting basic needs, during a return to the community from jails and prisons?
 - B) How can communities create an active coalition of medical, behavioral health, and social service providers working together to provide wraparound services for returning citizens?
4. **Goals/Objectives:** This research fellowship is a community-engaged project examining barriers to healthcare for returning citizens. The fellow will work with the PI and community partners to develop a community needs survey and then use the results of that survey to develop a multi-level intervention. The goals of this project are: 1) to understand the individual and systemic barriers to accessing healthcare for returning citizens; 2) develop a multi-level intervention to improve access to medical, behavioral, and social services for returning citizens.

Depending on the stage of the project, the student fellow will be involved in conducting a literature review, attending community meetings to understand the scope and reach of services in Portage County, assist in developing a survey or interview to be administered to people recently released from jail or prison, and assist with analyzing data and writing up findings. These findings will inform the development of a multi-level intervention to improve access to care for people recently released from jail or prison.

5. **Research Methods:** This is a community-engaged research project, meaning that the research is conducted in partnership with service providers and community members. Dr. Barringer has been attending meetings in the community like the monthly Portage County Citizen's Circle and other community collaborative meetings like the Reentry Coalition and Stepping Up to meet key collaborators across multiple service sectors. By attending these meetings, she is also getting a better understanding of community needs and service barriers from the perspective of service providers and community stakeholders. The goal is to develop a community needs survey (developed in partnership with providers, peers, and those newly returned to the community) to better understand gaps in services, barriers to access, and what is working from the perspective of those needing help. Portage County has engaged in needs assessments at the community level, but this project could provide a new perspective into community needs, by including individuals who are directly impacted by incarceration.

The student fellow will engage in multiple aspects of the research process which may include a review of the literature, develop additional research question, develop a survey instrument and/or interview guide, and analyze data.

6. **Proposed Methods of Data Analysis:** Depending on the type of community needs survey developed, data analysis could include survey analyses and/or coding and theming of interviews.
7. **Significance of Anticipated Findings:** The findings of this community-engaged pilot study combined with existing community-level assessments will support an application for a larger research study to implement interventions at both the individual and systems/structural level to improve connections to care.

Student Fellow Training/Mentoring Plan

The student fellow will work closely with Dr. Barrenger on this project. At the start of the fellowship, they will develop a research plan for the fellow based on the students' interests and skills and to align with the stage of the overall research project. The fellow and Dr. Barrenger will meet weekly (at a minimum) to review progress on tasks and develop new research goals. The student will engage in a combination of independent and collaborative tasks. The fellow may also accompany Dr. Barrenger in attending community and research meetings in Portage County. Dr. Barrenger will instruct and supervise the fellow on survey and interview development, data collection, data analysis and dissemination of findings. The fellow will have space to work in the Bonfine/Barrenger lab within the Psychiatry Department and the Health Services Research Focus Area. The fellow will also have access to computer software to aid in data analyses as needed. The fellow will receive training on the ethical conduct of human subjects' research and will be guided to ensure that all aspects of the project adhere to IRB protocols.