



CSUF Social Science Research Center director Laura Gil-Trejo, left, with Rachel Peterson, project manager at the SSRC. (Photo by Drew A. Kelley, contributing photographer)

## **CSUF Social Science Research Center’s work with nonprofits recognized**

By Greg Mellen

When Gov. Gavin Newsom visited the new HOPE Center in Fullerton a few weeks ago, he gushed about the facility as an example of what can be accomplished with collaboration that is “all about data, all about outcomes.”

The Homeless Outreach and Proactive Engagement Center brings together an array of social service and mental health providers and personnel, law enforcement, and public safety services. Teams can be dispatched quickly when and where needed to connect individuals experiencing street homelessness with immediate aid and appropriate services, and gather and share real-time data for positive outcomes.

To date, the HOPE Center is perhaps the pinnacle achievement of the North Orange County Public Safety Collaborative, a coalition of police, local government and nonprofit groups from 11 North Orange County cities.

For all the political capital that can be drawn from the opening of something like the HOPE Center, it merely underscores an emphasis on collaboration and regional approaches to what the governor described as “vexing societal issues.”

Much of the groundwork for the collaboration, collection, analysis, and sharing of data and improving outcomes, is being conducted by the CSUF Social Science Research Center (SSRC) and its director, Laura Gil-Trejo.

Working from classrooms in the basement of McCarthy Hall on the Cal State Fullerton campus, Gil-Trejo and her staff have been working for the past five years with the Collaborative to help support projects such as the HOPE Center.

State Sen. Josh Newman, D-Fullerton, helped form the Collaborative in 2017 and has been instrumental in raising \$27.8 million in state funding for the coalition, 60% of which has gone to 60 community-based programs focused on youth violence prevention and intervention, reentry services for the formerly incarcerated, and homeless outreach.

“Today’s ribbon-cutting builds on five years of very solid work (to create) an innovative and promising model to address the root causes of homelessness,” he said. “It’s created around a premise of regional cooperation and coordination using data and data-centric, evidence-based approaches that we learn from and that we apply.”

In the past, Newman noted, the groups were “all working on the same problems, but often not in concert.”

Gil-Trejo says collaboration is “what we want to accomplish as a whole,” and the HOPE Center is an example of what can come from it.

However, the HOPE Center is also symbolic of processes that the Social Science Research Center has been sowing and instilling throughout programs funded and supported by the Collaborative.

From left, Director of CSUF’s Social Service Resource Center Laura Gil-Trejo and Project Manager Rachel Peterson pose for a photograph on Friday, November 11, 2022. (Photo by Drew A. Kelley, Contributing Photographer)

“In the first four years, the (nonprofit) networks were growing. That didn’t mean they were necessarily collaborating,” Gil-Trejo said.

Now, that is starting to change, which, Gil-Trejo said, “is ultimately what we’re trying to (accomplish).”

Newsom said the nonprofits supported by the Collaborative are “coordinating in a collaborative fashion the likes of which you rarely see.”

While homelessness is the most visible problem the Collaborative and Social Science Research Center address, it is only one area on which the coalition is concentrating.

### **Beyond talk**

Collaboration is one of those buzzwords that social service providers and nonprofits use freely. Sometimes too freely.

So, too, are terms like “data-driven,” “results-oriented,” and “analytics.”

But those are qualities donors look for to maximize their contributions.

That’s where the Social Science Research Center and Gil-Trejo come in. The center is helping local agencies learn to work more effectively internally and together to overcome obstacles, real or perceived.

The center’s motto is “applied research in the public interest,” with “applied” being the key word. Many nonprofits struggle not only to get beyond the dialogue to the doing, but also showing it with data-driven, outcome-based results.

Take, for example, My Safe Harbor. The small, Anaheim-based charity supports mostly single-parent families by educating and empowering mothers. Although it knew it was doing good work, proving it on a spreadsheet was another matter.

“We’ve been doing all this great work for 10 years, but being small, we didn’t have the resources to collect and analyze data,” said Jessika Ahlberg, program director for My Safe Harbor.

Then Ahlberg met Gil-Trejo through the North Orange County Public Safety Collaborative at a training session for nonprofits on how to conduct evaluations.

“Our role is to be neutral and objective, that’s how we come in,” Gil-Trejo said. “We look at a program as holistically as possible and whether or not it’s meeting its stated objective.”

According to Gil-Trejo, her group’s job is not to dictate what or how the agency should operate, but to help it self-evaluate.

The Socratic method has worked in helping nonprofits figure out where they are.

In cases like the HOPE Center, many groups and agencies can come together to build something bigger.

It is a time-consuming process that, after four years, is starting to pay dividends.

Gil-Trejo and the Social Science Research Center helped My Safe Harbor create data-driven evaluations that help donors see how, or if, the community has benefited.

“She asked a lot of questions to help us figure out what we wanted,” Ahlberg said. “It made us come up with our own questions.”

### **Rising together**

The next step is for nonprofits to start working together, to break “siloed” and hometown-only approaches, and truly collaborate so that, as the saying goes, “all boats rise.”

Newsom enthused that the Collaborative was “creating platforms of engagement (that are) breaking down silos that are incredibly vexing and frustrating.”

My Safe Harbor recently started working with Solidarity, a Fullerton-based nonprofit that works to uplift families in underserved neighborhoods.

The Collaborative approved grants to both My Safe Harbor and Solidarity. One is to expand My Safe Harbor’s Strong Families Institute to fathers. Solidarity was awarded funds to work with My Safe Harbor to learn about the unique 30-week class and curriculum and bring it to Fullerton. This year, for the first time, classes of mothers from both Anaheim and Fullerton graduated from the class.

Ahlberg said the commitment to work with Solidarity and share and teach its curriculum came only after years of building trust and confidence that the Fullerton group shared its values and would respect and not steal its material.

“We’re not just sharing information, we are working together,” Ahlberg said. “That’s what (the Collaborative) envisioned.”

Similarly, Solidarity and OC United have been working on a joint project to divert youths from gangs in Fullerton and Placentia to meet and engage in positive ways.

“The goal is to build engagement in the community,” said Rachel Peterson, project manager at the Social Science Research Center. “As community members progress in the program and work together, they begin to see their similarities.”

While Peterson was talking about community members, the same applies to nonprofits.

The Collaborative also sponsors professional development presentations and workshops that cover areas such as grant writing, capacity building, professional and board development, and peer-to-peer teaching.

“They’re not just a big scary group that keeps track of what we’re doing,” Ahlberg said.

Peterson says her program is ready to help groups advance to a new phase.

“In the first four years, we were trying to figure out what works,” she said. “Now that we’re past that initial phase, it’s important to look at what the future could look like.”