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Social Work Students Create Practice Learning Lab During COVID



When the COVID-19 pandemic turned the world upside down, up-ending life as we know it, [Governors State University](#) Senior Lecturer [Phyllis West](#) was inspired.

Instead of seeing a problem, she seized an opportunity to help [Master of Social Work](#) students learn how to assist people during the pandemic.

“Without question, COVID-19 is a major disruption in every aspect of our lives,” West said. “We witnessed how much disruption it was causing — so much stress — and thought, what if something positive could come out of COVID?”

Drawing on a combined 60 years of experience in social work and public health, West and University Lecturer Lori Crowder created the [Social Work Community Practice Learning Lab](#) (CPLL) internship in the summer 2020 to continue through the spring 2021.

West explained, “The idea was to help social work students understand how to address current community-level conditions from a social work and public health perspective, particularly in underserved communities where the effects of the coronavirus have hit the hardest. By participating in the lab, students build and share knowledge associated with COVID-19, structural racism, violence, and voter disenfranchisement while

deepening the understanding of radical self-care and collective care, and making a lasting difference in the community.”

In addition to her work at Governors State since 2013, Crowder serves as Executive Director of the Alliance of Local Service Organizations (ALSO). She said the pandemic amplified the call for help. “Early on, issues came up that were perfect for social workers to address and that also provided a way for them to engage.”

Both faculty members have expertise in addressing violence, public health, community social work and education — all areas that have been significantly affected by the virus outbreak.

West has been at Governors State for 13 years, but for more than two decades has developed scores of partnerships with Chicago-area social service agencies. These relationships with public health and social service agencies provide meaningful experiences for students. For example, Crowder's ALSO allows students hands-on opportunities and training in the areas of violence, outreach, and education.

Always looking to extend learning beyond the classroom, West is the faculty advisor for the Social Work Student Organization (SWSO) and faculty leader for Service Learning Abroad. She has led annual [service-learning trips](#) to places like Ghana, the hub of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. The work reflects her own commitment to social justice.

“Social workers were made to serve people and communities who experience structural racism and disenfranchisement, which are exacerbated by the COVID pandemic,” she said.

With the pandemic forcing people to stay home and conduct much of their lives online, West and Crowder decided the lab would take place online as well.



Crowder and West required student participants in the lab to become certified contact tracers by taking a course with Governors State University and Johns Hopkins University.

The contact tracers course provides "immediately useful skill," Crowder said. "When social work students are trained in a public health approach to community practice, they are learning a critical combination of skills and methods to support those who are hardest hit by this and future public health crises," she said.

In addition to classroom lectures, students have chosen from internship opportunities with the [South-Southwest Comprehensive Strategic Partnership](#) (SSWCSP), led by Hazel Crest Mayor Vernard Alsberry, Jr. This group of social service agencies that collaborate on pandemic-related resources, information and services for south suburban Cook County. Student interns have worked in areas including workforce development, health care, senior services, youth and young adult engagement, faith-based practices and food accessibility.

This fall, CPLL lectures and internships have focused on four areas: COVID-related health care, domestic violence, structural racism within the education system, and voting.

To study voter disenfranchisement, CPLL teamed with the Chicago League of Women Voters on Facebook Live for one class session. For another class, students met virtually with Alsberry, a longtime South Suburban public official, and Cook County Circuit Court Associate Judge John Fairman.

In a recent class, students asked Mayor Alsberry and Judge Fairman how to sort through long lists of judicial candidates and what it takes to get people to the polls.

“How do you research the different candidates?” asked Misha Wofford-Young, a student who is interested in social justice and advocacy.

Fairman had practical advice. “The short rule is that if you’re looking for qualified candidates, look at all the bar associations,” he said. “And there’s nothing like being rated by your own people. If an African American judge is not recommended by his own bar association, for instance, that tells you something.”

Alsberry, who serves as Committeeman of the Bremen Township Regular Democratic Committee, said that organization consists of politicians who review candidates and make endorsements. He pointed out one key difference between elected officials and elected judges.

“Elected officials set policy, but judges carry out those policies. People need to be aware of who’s on the bench because those judges can change a life in a split second.”



Wofford-Young has found her online internship experiences useful.

“I created flyers regarding voter education and resources, such as the Election Protection Hotline number, and posted on Facebook and Instagram,” she said. “I’ve had many friends and family that liked and shared the information as they are aware of others who’ve had problems at their polling site.”

Students also appreciate the unique experiences the lab has presented.

"I have been able to interact and network with some very influential people, including mayors of Southland cities and villages," said Sherlicia Grizzard, who worked with the SSWCSP partnership to help plan and promote the Mask Up Southland campaign.

She enjoys the practical aspect of the lab. "This is not classic textbook social work; the Community Practice Learning Lab is hands-on training on what social workers really do in and for communities," Grizzard said.

West said that although the University's digital approach to social work education is novel, student interns must still attain the goals set by the [Council on Social Work Education](#), an accreditation association for social work programs. She said they are succeeding.

"Our students are developing their public speaking skills, their skills in technology, in leadership, in accountability, in how they are learning to work with groups of people and how they are delivering on their goals," West said. "It's exciting."