



SAN DIEGO STATE
UNIVERSITY

Imperial Valley

PRESS RELEASE

SDSU-IV to lead unique health disparities research project

Dr. Helina Hoyt, Nursing Program Coordinator at San Diego State University-Imperial Valley, has been awarded \$125,000 in direct costs from an administrative supplement to the San Diego State University HealthLINK Center for Transdisciplinary Health Disparities Research (SDSU HealthLINK Center). This award will fund an innovative yearlong project that will bring together community leaders and multidisciplinary university researchers to formalize a research coalition and select a pilot project focused on improving the region's minority health outcomes.

The initiative is being funded by the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities of the National Institutes of Health (NIMHD) under Award Number U54MD012397.

"I am thrilled to be the project leader of this research and innovation initiative," Hoyt said. "This is a very exciting process because it builds a collaboration through the university that allows us to enhance the good work already being done here in Imperial Valley."

"In essence we will make SDSU-IV the hub to connect academic and scientific expertise with community leadership," Hoyt said. "This project is about creating infrastructure that builds community-academic partnerships, produces lasting connections and a communication network that will lead to further work surrounding the quest to decrease health disparities in our rural, border region."

Long before Imperial County's challenges in containing the spread of COVID-19 made headlines, the region's health disparities had been well documented. The rural, border county has a population of 180,000, 85 percent of whom are Hispanic or Latino. The county has among the lowest median income levels in the state and one of the highest unemployment rates. The county's rate of asthma, obesity and diabetes all exceed the state average.

A group of 17 Imperial County leaders, representing diverse sectors of the community have already volunteered to serve on the coalition that will collaborate with university researchers. The wide-ranging group includes medical professionals, representatives of both El Centro Regional Medical Center and Pioneers Memorial Healthcare District, and representatives from Calipatria State Prison, the Imperial Valley Food Bank, the U.S. Border Patrol and numerous other local organizations.

Helen Palomino, Executive Director of the Cancer Resource Center of the Desert, who is on the coalition, said she is enthusiastic about the process.

"It's a wonderful opportunity," she said. "Creating a hub to work with researchers on community health needs lets us work together to solve problems holistically."

Hoyt said the coalition will start by reviewing recent health research completed in Imperial County.

"A lot of wonderful work surrounding health im-



Dr. Helina Hoyt

provement and reducing health disparities in Imperial County has already been completed," Hoyt said. "We want to build on that."

The coalition members will identify research priorities and infrastructure needs in Imperial County, California, while working with the SDSU HealthLINK Center. The coalition will select a pilot project to fund that supports these priorities and needs to advance research in rural, border communities. SDSU-IV social work and nursing leadership master's degree students will also have a chance to work on the pilot project, to enhance their skills and develop the leadership experience needed to help solve problems locally.

"Collaboration in this process is key," Hoyt said. "By teaming community leaders with researchers, we have the best chance of devel-

oping sustainable solutions."

The parent award to this administrative supplement, the SDSU HealthLINK Center, was funded in 2018 by a five-year, \$19.9 million grant from NIMHD and is part of the national Research Centers in Minority Institution Program. This award was one of the largest in the university's history to establish a center for minority health and health disparities research. The Center applies a transdisciplinary approach to its research where investigators leverage their networks and knowledge to collectively "link" multiple areas of expertise toward one goal — the development of infrastructure and services to advance minority health and health disparities research. The Center's transdisciplinary team consists of faculty from multiple colleges and disciplines at SDSU, members of partner organizations, administrative and technical staff at SDSU and the SDSU Research Foundation, SDSU students and volunteers.

Locally, the SDSU-Imperial Valley's Development and Community Affairs Department is also hard at work building the Imperial Valley's only public four-year university through philanthropy, foundation grants, corporate investment, and public/private partnerships, Director Victor Nava said.

This work helps the university strengthen its three pillars of excellence first established here 60 years ago — Teaching, Research, and Service, which expands that which is known in various fields and gives students an opportunity to participate in academic research.

Throughout the years, philanthropy has been essential in providing scholarships to thousands of SDSU-IV students. For these students, scholarships were essential to completing their education. Today, many scholarship recipients are now our alumni holding key positions in schools, hospitals and government agencies throughout the Imperial County.

Today, SDSU-IV's Development and Community Affairs team has the additional responsibility of bringing philanthropy to support the expansion of SDSU-IV's academic reach into essential areas in healthcare, sustainable energy, STEAM, and other academic programs that both support the higher educational needs of Imperial County and provide economic development opportunities for Imperial County's future.

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