



THIS WEEK



Subscribers to The Rochester Business Journal can access the **digital edition archive**.



SPECIAL PUBLICATIONS



Latest special: **Giving Guide 2020** or view the **special publication archive**.

Home / Path to Excellence /

White stands out as leader of Children's Institute

By: Velvet Spicer | January 24, 2020

When Ann Marie White took the helm at the Children's Institute Inc. six months ago she had big shoes to fill; Dirk Hightower had led and grown the organization for nearly three decades. But the agency is in good hands with White.



Ann Marie White

As the director of the Office of Mental Health Promotion (OMHP), which White created during her time as associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center, White had the knowledge and experience the Children's Institute was looking for.

"Ann Marie brings a wealth of knowledge on mental health to our agency and is the right person to guide Children's Institute as we work with partners and funders to help expand our programs to reach more children in need," said board President James Lewis III following White's hire.

With degrees in human development and psychology from Cornell University, Columbia University and Harvard University, White also

brought with her the educational background necessary to successfully run the Children's Institute, a Rochester-based national nonprofit that works to strengthen children's social and emotional health.

White said that it was while earning her bachelor's degree from Cornell that she resolved to focus on human development.

"And then I made the decision in graduate school to always try to work through research at the intersection of research science, community improvement action and schools or institutions in the community that work on behalf of children and families," White said. "I always wanted to be at that intersection and loved the interplay of research, action and education. It's a triple-braided cord that once woven together is not easily broken."

Prior to joining UR more than 15 years ago, White had worked for former U.S. Sen. Christopher Dodd on his Subcommittee on Children and Families. The Democratic senator from Connecticut founded the first Senate Children's Caucus and authored the Family and Medical Leave Act.

White also had experience working at the National Institutes of Health in the office of the director, where her focus was on promoting leading edge ways to accelerate scientific progress around issues of health and children.

It was while at NIH that she met the chair of UR's psychiatry department. White had been working on creating a new way to do science which engaged the community as science "experts" derived from lived experiences.

"You could think about all the biases science holds if it's not a diverse profession," White said. "One of the ways that we can change that is by acknowledging that there are many things about health that haven't been studied and if we open science up in terms of other perspectives then we'd have some real interesting science and some new innovation and all this new improvement."

White was able to bring the idea of community engagement to UR, where the psychiatry department already was looking at how a medical institution could meet its mission through that exact practice. In her role as OMHP director, White and her team asked the question: As an academic medical center, how can we really work collaboratively with communities around our shared interests?

"The interests of the medical center have to do, obviously, with service and health improvement, but with education as well—the next set of health professionals the community will have," White explained. "And also it cares about population health and public health and community action because there's so much happening outside the walls that will influence the patients that come through their doors."

While at UR, White developed participatory research with volunteer "natural helpers" seeking to strengthen urban neighborhoods' violence prevention activities. Joining the Children's Institute, White said, was the next logical step in her career.

The agency uses research and evaluation to develop and promote effective prevention and early intervention programs and best practices for kids, families, schools and communities. Children's Institute is affiliated with the University of Rochester and has served the local and national community for more than six decades.

The organization was founded as Primary Mental Health Project in 1957 when a Rochester City School District psychologist and an RCSD social worker met with University of Rochester faculty member Emory Cowen to write a grant that would enable them to look at young children who were having difficulties in school.

In 1970, Primary Project, as it had become known, became a nonprofit with the goal of providing indirect services and support to schools and to work with schools collaboratively and collectively. Cowen served as executive director of the agency until his retirement in 1991, when Hightower was named as his replacement.

Children's Institute has two arms: programs and service, which develops, implements and trains on different types of programmatic approaches to children; and research and development, through which staffers conduct ongoing work in a continuous improvement forum, as well as basic research.

"Our current mission, based on our last five-year strategic plan, is to support and equip those that work with children so that every child succeeds," White said. "Meaning we really, fundamentally as an organization, care about every child."

Collaboration is one of the keys to the Children's Institute's success, White said.

"We work and align with different groups all the time," she said. "A lot of our work is also done in partnership, so we're part of community collaboratives such as ROC the Future, and we're working on systems integration, which is an effort led by Congressman Joe Morelle. We're also elbow-to-elbow with many other agencies and individuals that really care about families in our area."

With an annual budget of more than \$5 million, the Children's Institute is funded in a variety of ways including the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Agency, state funds and local foundations. The organization has grown significantly in recent quarters and employs more than 40.

White's goals for the Children's Institute differ little from her predecessor's.

"What's important to me is really understanding how change happens and being able to hold both the stability and change processes that are needed to keep good things going and help us identify where we have consensus improvements we want to move forward," she said.

White said the next avenue of growth for the Rochester community is to think inter-sectorally at a system level and organizational level on how to work together on behalf of children and families.

"We both have the expertise and we can help build the expertise," White said of the agency. "My parents said to me growing up here, they said Rochester is a great place to raise a family. And I want that to always be true. Where we can point to research and data where there are bright spots—that helps our community."

vspicer@bridgetowermedia.com / 585-653-4021 / @Velvet_Spicer