

Researcher Spotlight: An Interview with Destiny Villasenor

BIOGRAPHY: Destiny Villasenor is a strategic Community Health Worker (CHW) and patient advocate at Loma Linda University Medical Center for the Institute of Community Partnerships.



CIAPM-Funded Project: A Multi-Component Intervention to Strengthen Families and Build Youth Resilience (Loma Linda University; LLU, Lead Principal Investigator: Dr. Ariane Marie-Mitchell)

With over five years of experience in high-impact program management and patient advocacy, Destiny serves the Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE's) Program and ACE's Whole Family Care Hub at LLU. As a CHW, she has enhanced community well-being through effective case coordination, program implementation, and cross-agency collaboration, and has demonstrated leadership in health initiatives, securing government funding, mitigating barriers and social determinants of health, and driving multi-disciplinary program success. She specializes in serving underprivileged

families and adolescents who have been affected by toxic stress, and hopes to soon further her career as an oncologist studying cancer theranostics.

She obtained her Bachelor's in Biological Sciences from California State University, San Bernadino.

1) Why are community partnerships important for health research?

Community accessibility and building rapport/relationships with intervention groups are critical to supporting clinical discovery. Providing general knowledge builds trust and increases participation. This type of systematic investigation analyzes patterns of occurrence, determinants, and intervention with a focus on relationships and mitigating the effects of “toxic stressors.” This research will improve the precise understanding of biological data (analytical evidence), while unearthing solutions that promote personalized preventive services combined with effective therapies. Research of this nature is crucial to improving health outcomes/population health equity, as well as reducing health care costs for society.

Community partnerships are vernacular to health promotion as “drivers”. There is an observant correlation in their humane ability to positively address, impact, and influence collaborative impact by individual respective contributions. Collectively, these contributions are recognized as

the participation of a sole unified body of persons. This holistic approach directly channels the network of community from an individual whole-person standpoint. The culmination of health research lies in delineating the effects it has on society.

2) How has your background and experience with this CIAPM-funded project impacted your professional goals?

My background and experience with this CIAPM-funded project has significantly shaped my professional goals by enhancing my knowledge in interdisciplinary collaboration. My professional history, CHW training, and lived experiences have led me to serve this project passionately.

I increased research participation in our evaluation by encouraging family enrollment in research. I advocated for interviews and surveys to expand the inclusion of family experiences in the evaluation of our ACE's program based upon the positive feedback families share, and our ability to enhance our performance efforts during the research project.

This project has contributed to my understanding of data-driven decision making and health promotion research initiatives. Working on this project has reinforced my aspirations of advancing health research in oncology, particularly in areas that integrate technology and public policy. Being a part of this effort has also motivated me to pursue leadership roles where I can influence impactful change and foster innovative solutions as a physician in the future. Overall, this experience has clarified my commitment to meaningful projects that address real world challenges, while also getting a better understanding of the importance of research. It's all possible thanks to my organization, clients, and clinicians; they have been the pinnacle of my hope and value for integrity.

3) What impacts have you seen from this CIAPM-funded project addressing the health impacts of ACEs and advancing health equity?

Our team at Loma Linda University Medical Center and Loma Linda SACHS (Social Action Community Health System) has been led by our clinician Ariane Marie-Mitchell, MD, PhD, MPH for this specific CIAPM-funded project.

She is an instrumental provider for preventive care through the Preventive Medicine and Pediatrics Departments at Loma Linda University. The staff's degree of commitment to deliver on the frontlines of this initiative is honorary, as they have each dedicated their time, energy, and resources to the project and its outcomes.

We help our families along their journeys to finding support after experiencing ACEs. Parents are motivated by our unique interventions; they have shared how they felt "valued" and "understood" during their enrollment and become empowered to reclaim their resiliency. We navigate, educate, and coach caregivers with a patient-centered approach.

In our trainings we use trauma informed language while mentoring families with handouts on how to develop resilience, stress management and healthy relationships as a priority. These families have shared pieces of themselves and their paths with us with such confidence, as they have developed resiliency against all of life's odds.

During coaching, I have noticed the impact in seeing healthier relationships bloom in the home. Familial stress is being regulated with the incorporation of effective techniques that are easy to follow. The biggest impact is their demonstrated comprehension of resilience when they boldly share their success stories during our time together. This is evidence that they are using their tools and practicing at home. I often hear parents say, "I just don't know if I am doing it right?" during our initial encounters.

When they don't need their "family mentors", all their goals are achieved, and I hear "I can do it!", and I can see our project's touch on advancing health equity. I believe these encounters address health impacts and will have lasting effects that will empower, enhance and educate generations to come.