

**Episode 39 - Maria Cristalli and Dr. Catherine Dulmus: University-Community Partnerships: A Match Made in Social Research and Human Services Heaven**

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu). We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson and I'd like to take a moment to tell you about a new feature of living proof. In addition to listening subscribing to and sharing podcast you can now rate and write a review of each episode of living proof to rate or write a review of a podcast. Just go to our Web site at [www.socialwork.buffalo.edu](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.edu) forward slash podcast and click on Create your own review button. We look forward to hearing from you. Translating research into real world practice is imperative in order for our social work as a profession to operate from an evidence base. It is also the mission of this podcast and of University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Buffalo Center for Social Research to promote research practice and practice to research. Today's podcast features a conversation about a partnership that joins the resources and expertise of the community and the university to fulfill that mission. Recently the University at Buffalo School of Social works Buffalo Centre for Social Research entered into a five year partnership to provide research expertise to Hillside family of agencies hillside family of agencies Family and Children Services organization that provides an array of services to enhance child well-being across central and western New York and Maryland. It is one of the largest agencies of its kind in the country.

[00:02:11] This innovative partnership has set its sights on overcoming the challenges and barriers associated with the development and implementation of the most effective treatments for children and families facing a wide range of behavioral and emotional challenges. Through the partnership UB Will assist hillside and program development and evaluation and hillside will provide UB with a wealth of recommendations and opportunities to research cutting edge issues and problems that affect children and their families. Our guests today are Maria Cristalli hillside family of agencies Chief Strategy and quality officer and Catherine Dulmus Associate Professor associate dean for research and research center director. They discuss the origins and goals of a partnership. Its current status and what they've learned along the way. Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the School of Social Work is our interview interfer your Catherine and Maria. I really appreciate you being willing to come and talk to me on a Friday afternoon no less is what I'm beginning to get a sense for as I learned and talk to other people at other universities is I think a pretty unique model and partnership for how universities and community agencies can work together. And so really I just would like us to spend some time talking about this partnership that really you guys created. I mean I was partly that it came from you. And basically just to give you an idea here we're talking about a partnership between the school of social work specifically the research center and hillside which is a very large community based agency.

[00:03:55] Maybe Maria you could start by just giving us a sense for who hillside is and how you folks came to even become interested in moving in this direction of research and this kind of partnership. Hillside family of agencies is a large not for profit organization. We serve approximately 9000 families in central and western New York in Prince George's County Maryland and we offer to our service recipients child welfare mental health Juvenile Justice Special Education and Youth and Family Development Services across that geography. And so part of what we were trying to accomplish is every five to seven years. We spend some time evaluating our strategic content strategic intent is a strategic direction that we hope to accomplish over a longer timeframe usually back to seven years. And we were the last several years in creating an integrated system of care because of the scope of services it's really important to integrate those well for Youth and Families. So feeling that we can that we sought out to create a new direction for the organization

and spend some time talking to people in the human service child serving field about the external environment factors that affect in our industry. And we came up with the position since we feel that we've done a good job creating services an array of services that really focuses an individual on family needs that it was time to focus on advocacy and effectiveness of those services. So our new strategic content that was approved by our board in 2007 was that hillside would like to be the leader in translating research into effective practice solutions. So practice is something I would say wouldn't you agree Catherine that were pretty good. Absolutely.

[00:05:49] I also want to and they take their strategic content very seriously because one time I mentioned about them being a leader and I quickly learned they want to be the leaders and translating research and with to practice solutions which really speaks to their commitment as an agency as to the contribution they want to make and where they see themselves. And I think that is really important and we spent a lot of time talking to individuals about that and really feeling because the gap between when research is published and when it's integrated in practice settings is just almost 20 years about 17 years that we really needed to lead the way in elevating the importance of the integration of research into practice settings. So that's what we would like to accomplish and we think not only will it be significant for the children and families that we're serving but significant for the field as well. You have this intension setting a new direction for the agency for the next five to seven years and actually after that as well. But that's what you have to focus on to get there. How do you get to the idea of developing a research partnership that happens while it didn't happen right away. Because part of what we realised quickly when were you looking at a new direction is the competency of research was one of our core competencies service and solution certainly is one. But research was not a core competency of the organisation. So immediately the direction was will we have to bring in staff that can focus on conducting research and to coordinate and direct this function to build this capacity. So our initial take on it was we will bring in a research director to the organization and craft this position.

[00:07:39] And actually that's about the time that I met Catherine and I'd like to just stop you for a second here there because it was interesting how we met and I always highlight this to people and I toss up the story because she and one of another employee at Hillside are coming here to the research center to meet with a doctoral student who was working on a oneanother contract. The school has and as a doctoral student she had enough foresight to recognize that hillside was an agency and that these in the area the works of significant importance and that maybe I should meet them as director of the research center. I'm very thankful for that because that was very bright. I would say if the doctoral student should recognize that and she brokered the meeting and Eugenie came to the research center and she happened to be in the building and I sat down at the bottom and I certainly was aware of how side because before I got my Ph.D. I was a practicing social worker in the southern tier and I had children many years ago on my caseload hillside. And so I was familiar with hillside. As I sat and met with Jeanie and Maria I him very quickly to recognize the scope and the depth and the breadth of this organization that I had no idea had 134 million dollar annual voucher that served as many families 9000 I think he said. Maria twenty four hundred employees. And as I sat and listened to them I realized what an important agency they were in the area and how critical it was for the center in the research center to form some partnerships with.

[00:09:13] I certainly wasn't thinking about it from a research perspective because the agency has been taking our students in the field license for some time but I recognize the potential for some collaboration and our vision was very grow because if you remember we talked about strategic content in the center's vision statement research that creates real world impact. It was as we said of that day it was. It was interesting how conclusion we were and when where we were at and where we wanted both to be and how much we would be able to complement each other and assist each other in our goals. So I knew right away Nancy that Catherine would be an advisor that I would want to bring in to the conversation of how we were going to create this infrastructure for hillside

family agencies. Because that day in the meeting she talked to me about their intent was to hire a research director and so she started to kind of pick my brain around job description type of things and asked if I would be assistant whatever way I could to help them and so to survive the interview committee so that you would serve on the interview committee and help interview as we tried to bring in some talent nationally because we talked about a national search. And so over the next few months maybe it wasn't. There was e-mails back and forth a Yeah I gave some feedback on the job description and I drove to Rochester which was about an hour and a half from here for some interviews. And little did I know where my lead.

[00:10:41] If you want to tell us the story or what I found was certainly what early on experts also advised that it's going to be very difficult to bring someone into a role like this in an organization that doesn't have the research capacity. There'll be a lot of people out there that would enjoy stirring it up. But a university affiliation would be critical to attracting the right person does not want to be your average researcher. It's going to be someone who's very familiar with the practice of social work in the other disciplines that contribute. So right away I knew that there was going to be issues. Sure enough with the candidates that applied for the position it was an issue of a trailing spouse or needing a university appointment or bringing a person in. It just wasn't the right fit. So it was almost I think nine months later the one candidate that we thought would be a good fit. But then it was back to the drawing board and it was almost a year after we met. So I think I know Catherine is the type of person that I really want for this position but she already has a university appointment and a great role at UB and what are the chances of getting her to commit to Hillside family agencies. But why not ask. So one day we get lunch in July. Do we get that. Yes I do remember that lunch. And my question to Catherine was I think the right talent set. I really like to have you. What will it take to do this to be the research director. My effort my the first thing out of my mouth was I would have put more thought into that job description. I knew I was writing for myself.

[00:12:25] I it was kind of felt like she started out wanting 100 percent of me 80 percent 50 percent we got we got to that when I said that might be possible. And then the collaboration with the research center and the school of social work. But I was quick to talk to her about that just having some of me wasn't adequate to be able to deliver what it was that hillside wanted because they really at this point had come to the decision that they wanted a research director and that they understood there were some infrastructure that needed to take place in order for the agency to have this research agenda. And so we started talking about the kind of brainstorming about the center here as a center of such research. We have a statistician we have a grants administrator I've got access to doctoral students and we started to think about what a package might look like that would be able to provide the resources and the expertise they needed in order to move their strategic content for. And that was very appealing. From my point of view because I was figuring on five to seven years to get infrastructure in place to be able to execute the research function that we were interested in pursuing. But the partnership offered as Catherine mentioned a diverse skill set because we were starting with Ground Zero. I mean we didn't we didn't have anyone on board. So not only a director who could oversee the strategic direction for research for Hill. But the statistician grant writing capabilities all those backroom functions that it really essential pulling it up sooner rather than later.

[00:14:00] So we kind of talked over lunch that day and they said maybe they said I didn't say yes I said maybe. But you didn't say no. I didn't say I didn't say no. I said no 100 percent of for you. When we got down to 50 I said that might be possible. And so that's when I came to uni and said this is what's on the table. What do you think. I initially put you out of your mind. I remember you shaking your head no. But now we talked about it a little bit and it sounded intriguing and you know in the sense that I knew enough about hillside to know that the agency had a lot of wonderful things and that a partnership might partnerships in general I think build more strengths than anything else. I mean you can't move ahead in this world without good collaboration. So I figured

well it wouldn't hurt to talk. So we went down to over to Rochester and had our next meeting. And by that time the Inci serves as a very successful spokesperson and selling the model to our president and CEO and introducing Catherine to Dennis Richardson our president and CEO about why it was really important to have someone with her skill set. Do you want to talk about some of the skills that you thought were really essential. Yeah I mean I think that having spent years on this interface that practice and research one of the models that I've sort of come up with and talk to people about is that I think there are groups of people.

[00:15:25] There were researchers there are practitioners and then there are a few people who are in both worlds. There are researchers who in both worlds and their practitioners in both worlds and I can't think of them as bicultural people who can speak both languages who understand both worlds and I will say one of the things we've tried to do with the school is to have researchers who have that perspective and that's one of the ways I think that we're unique and Katherine is certainly one of those folks. I tried to think about from a hiring standpoint the best researchers usually want to be in universities or in pure research shops they don't want to be in an agency unless they are at the end of a career when it looks like a good place to be or they're starting. And the only way you're really going to get the resources you want is through a partnership and I think I really believe that. So it wasn't a hard thing to sort of selling first. Just like the drug companies when they do the drug company studies you look at them with some suspicion because it's the drug company who's doing the entire study. Whereas when a study is done and you've got an external partner involved it has more credibility.

[00:16:24] And I think that was one of the things I said is if you really want to position hillside as a leader in this area it's got to be more than hill side of the table that one of the things universities buy has a certain amount of credibility in the world in terms of how research is done and that there is a lot more involved in doing that than just having a person come in it is a whole infrastructure and that in this way you get access to continual access to groups of students who come in and out who actually can be deployed in a variety of ways and bring their practice and research together. So I just thought the idea for more for it to be a conduit and a way to begin to link together was really there although I have to admit I still don't have a sense for what this is going to look like five years from now but I think it's more about trusting the process you get the right people together. You work together you create things as you go and you end up with that intention realized but how it's realized into the structure. I'm not so sure. So I think I basically just set all of that. I mean I think that it's not that you guys couldn't get someone 100 percent but it was going to be a stretch. And here we have people who really think that their jobs are the best jobs in the world they're not taking them because they're the richest jobs necessarily but they allow them to combine practice and research and that's certainly what Katharine's passion is. So it seems like a good fit. Yes I would agree an absolute good fit and I agree with the two principles that you've talked about. Because I think we have found in any program evaluation work in quasi experimental work that we're doing that is always an external point of view.

[00:17:55] It's much more valuable outside of the organization and I think the second point Katherines practical nature I know has been very valuable from our staff perspective because part of achieving the strategic vision is to get our workforce especially our Direct Line staff involved and excited about research. So if the research director isn't speaking the language that they're comfortable with if it introduces more work in a new language then they're going to be a little bit resistant. And I think she has certainly been a nice addition and a good fit with their culture and only her leadership team. But our staff. It's been an interesting experience so far and you're right Nancy we're kind of creating and as we go along I think that from my perspective I think I've heard you say it is very. That has really exceeded our expectations so far. That's what we've been able to kind of build and accomplish and I think that one of the important things is that right from the beginning we realize the goal wasn't for me to come in and build an infrastructure or research

infrastructure site and then leave. It was really about collaboration between the research center in partnership with hillside to create a research infrastructure and together to be able to conduct their research and move the field forward. And I think that I would absolutely agree. And one of the things that we envisioned early on is that Katherine are the research director or the partnership with UB was going to facilitate a network of connections with experts that were interested in the work that we're doing at Hillside. Family of agencies hit subject matter expertise so that Catherine would be the facilitator and the negotiator of these relationships.

[00:19:39] And for a very small number of projects she may serve as a principal investigator but for the most part we were going to create and bring in experts into the organization. So we have the partnership between the school of social work and hillside family of agencies. And now we're creating new partnerships with other organizations and universities that really fit with the research and service areas that we're interested in pursuing over the next three to five years. I'm wondering if you could say a little bit about Catherine you made mention of the accomplishments that you both can see in just this first year about what you have seen some of these partnerships are some of them and what are some the unexpected things that you've seen there was some things you put into place it sounds like. And then there are other things that have sort of happened that you maybe were surprised about I think one of the things that the partnership came together with was one doctoral student that was dedicated to the partnership. And that's been wonderful because they have a doctoral student who has been able to do literature searches and assist us with some data collection and a variety of task is the partnership and fighting ways. But what ended up happening is that there are so many rich opportunities for students there that we've really expanded beyond just within the immediate contract chain variety of other suits I think we have six doctoral students now either Duwayne or in the process of planning their dissertations and their wonderful dissertations are community based. Some are doing Intervention Research there and it's just think a rich environment for doctoral students and opportunity for them to be able to conduct their research there.

[00:21:20] And it's also nice because it's from the faculty as well into the agency that serve on these committees not only within social work and the other disciplines on campus as anticipated it's just this semester we developed a field you know. And certainly hindsight has always had field students but they've never been within various departments. And so it kind of developing a model where students come in we have both first and second year MSW students but they're having a variety of experience as the one piece of their placement is they're really serving US heavy to do things around research and evaluation. It's really you know that the doctoral students are related to some dissertation and other work that we have done so I think it's been a very rich opportunity and environment for student learning that the Master's and doctor level that was I had vision that I didn't think it would happen so quickly. So real win win for the organization because at the same time bringing in both the doctoral students and the MSW students and matching them with the intervention research going on in services we have resources that we're able to add to collecting data. Bringing in the literature reviews helping with the research projects so it alleviate some of the stress from staff's perspective. So they see yes there's more that we're looking at questions that we want research on. But at the same time we have some resources in terms of people power coming in to show us how to do this. So the true diversity of skill sets between the research and the practice I think we're seeing some of that at service level think and that's been a really nice development from the partnership that we've seen.

[00:23:00] What are some of the other things that you can think of. Well I certainly think the relationships with new universities and developers of evidence based practices and I think even hillside has been integrating evidence based practices into our services for a number of years. But I think over the last year the conversations have been richer about evaluation and research because we have research that is part of the process at our early installation adaption of some of these

practices and we're doing better planning of how that program evaluation or research is going to look several months or years into the implementation. And I think that's been very helpful. How have some of these new relationships unfolded. In other words some of those sound like they were unexpected that there were opportunities that opened up as a result of the partnership coming together to say more about that without getting into lots of details why you think that happen. I guess from my perspective one of the bonuses for me is I guess I thought from the University we'd be coming in and bringing all this all these resources and expertise to sign and I expected it would be reciprocal relationship in many ways. I underestimated how reciprocal how reciprocity would be I guess because I have been hillside has a variety of universities and research contacts across the country that they have already had relationships with or had beginning relationships with but they brought us into the university and so we've really Granat have been able to broker some introductions with other researchers for research for some this hillside.

[00:24:46] And it's really been ready for the school such work for the center because we've been exposed and partnering around some NIH France and such with partners that we probably wouldn't naturally have managed other universities and research centers across the country. So it's really been a win win for both perspectives and I think from my point of view what UB and the School of Social Work has brought to the table is the expertise about the credentials of who you know thinking strategically about partnerships about experts in the field and how to look and screen for experts. We did have relationships prior to the partnership but I think the level of expertise in really spending the time finding the right match were getting better and that's because of of Catherine's advisement. I think that one of the other nice things that has started to happen is that we're publishing together or writing articles together the agency and the university and the different partners and the students are involved in writing. And I think that we're very committed to partnership as to disseminating the findings not only from the research is being conducted but also from the Partnership for small and retirement. Right now right enough an article outlines the partnership and kind of the development of where we're at. And you know we both have such a value for us the dissemination the translation and for research practice and making sure what we're learning and the practice setting gets disseminated back out. It's really really been a positive experience as we learned to write together because it's very interesting when we write a paper together.

[00:26:25] When I added up from a researcher perspective Maria it's a different from a practice perspective and I think it's a richer publication at the end of the day when we submit the article for publication because it really brings in to the perspective of both research practice and I think it helps that be more practical and relevant at the end of the day than if either one of us had written that alone. And I think from an agency's perspective dissemination has not been a strength especially written documentation in the form of peer reviewed articles. So part of what Katherine learned early on in her due diligence is that you know there's lots of good work going on. We do try and get to some national conferences to present but the documentation and the discipline and the rigor of publishing and how to get that message out is really key and becoming the leader. So that's something we have to get better at. I think where we focus a lot of face to face oral communication building relationships and we're not as strong in written peer reviewed articles and publications. So that's a strength that the partnership is helping us to develop. But we have a long way to go but it's been very helpful because that is part of what we want to try to accomplish. We can't provide services to everyone in the nation or the world. But what we're doing needs to be shared and a very deliberate way to make changes in the lives of children and families. And so learning to do this better in planning ahead of the key areas that we need to focus on.

[00:28:00] It has been very helpful running year one to set up what those priorities are and to create some focus and create teams of people from UBI and from hillside that work and then just like to say Murray and I've said this before but hillside is just such a unique place. I think that agencies are

not funded to do research. It's not a funding stream for it and that they have made it such a priority that they have you know the reporters directors and the senior leadership has really set forth the strategic Tenet not only set forth that follow the resources to make it happen at a time like this one. Funding is difficult fast and when an agency isn't funded to research scientists I think it speaks to the strength of Hillside and how strategic they are and how like the most entrepreneurial in their approach to delivering services and really unable to see their role in contributing to the larger population of children and youth across the country. Well the thing that I hear in common that is has value that hillside holds about research and that research would be an important part of providing good practice that those things go hand in hand. And that's certainly a value that school social work holds. So there's sort of a shared value that brought you together. That's not always the case. I mean people there were researchers who don't believe that. And there were practitioners not believe that but this was sort of a marriage that was built on a shared value system. Absolutely and we have. So we kind of joked about it before that it was like the like the perfect to a group of variables that came together because several of the faculty members have attended different meetings and research planning meetings and board meetings and a variety of things.

[00:29:49] And I think you're right and think that the type of faculty we have shared those values and they have interface beautifully with the staff and the board and the leadership of Hillside and they are able to really convey how much we value what hillside does and how much we value what we can accomplish together. It's been a very good very good that I would agree and I think from a leadership staff perspective it at Hillside we understand and we want to know what works. So part of embracing research to practice and practice to research closing the loop and we believe we can do that better. And at the same time we do want to know where were effective and where we need to make changes. So it really is a natural quality improvement cycle to be able to test how well your services are impacting the outcomes that you set out to accomplish. So I think this partnership gives us a richer organization the power both Eubie and Hill site to be able to handle this and tackle another priority simultaneously. Yes. At the end of the day we both want the same thing we got better outcomes for children and their families. And so you know this is one approach one creative approach they've taken to try to address that and hopefully over time we'll find that it's a very effective partnership. And I think in times of economic times like these when you know you don't have the core competencies that are part of the organization it takes a whole lot longer to grow those internally.

[00:31:19] So I think partnerships really were where you can figure out roles how your skills compliment each other and get to work on the very important work because I think as resources continue to be tight it will be more important to show that you can demonstrate outcomes and their impact. And you know families and other populations. Absolutely. One of the things that I think some people would wonder as they listen to this is really social work as a profession does research in the community and certainly Maria you and your agency had plenty of experience with research being done in your agency. It might be hard question to answer but do you think can you highlight what's different about this than the way research has been typically done when both from the University angle but from Hillside's experience all I think from Hillside's experience it's very easy to answer Nancy that typically researchers in universities that have approached us because we serve so many of them families have have come in with their proposals already done. Can we get the access to your subjects your families. Here's our research question. Here's what we're trying to pursue and fit us into a proposal that are already been conceptualized. So what this model it really gets to when we were we were putting together the strategic content. We were very deliberate that we wanted research to be focused strategically. So part of that was us contributing to the thought of how research would be conducted how the questions are formulated. What do we want to know now and truly being an equitable partnership between the researchers and the practitioners in not being reactive not being the research just come in and say here's what we want to look at because we believe we do have a perspective. It's one side of the equation but it's very valuable.

[00:33:13] So I think this partnership has changed it and it's also been a clear message to our partners that we're embracing community based participatory research principles and part of that really focuses on what each partner has to bring to the table and the value of that being all those same community based participatory research principles we've applied to the permissions and so we've both come to the table with a sharing of the vision of sharing of the power sharing a field we look at the CVP suppose we actually put them in a powerpoint and apply them to the partnership so that not only are we expecting and with others that we partner with around research but we're actually lies in the partnership and I think it has made us stronger because of him. So it's a shared vision shirt power in the process of planning conducting the research. Any other elements that are core in this process making sure that all stakeholders are part of the process. So certainly the two organizations but funders are strategic partners. Our youth and our families making sure that they have a voice in how research the get from the questions to the implementation of the process and the sharing of the dissemination process with share the publications the authorship with share the presentation reference they were whatever you would call it in order to be able to work together and really not only work together to formulate the research questions. So I think that's critical if we really want to do something about the 17 year gap.

[00:34:50] I think that as researchers we can assume we know the best questions we need to work with practitioners in the practice community to help us formulate those research options so we make sure we're asking the right ones. And so to have in the partnership both researchers and the practitioners at the table from the beginning as we formulate the research questions all the way through designing the methodology conducting the research and then disseminating it and sharing the fruits of our labor together when we go to publish and present I think is critical and certainly aligns itself with the CVP our values as listen to Catherine. And we are listening to you talk about the difference in this approach. As someone who's really looked at this gap in the research and practice I mean I think depending on which side you looked at you got a different story about why it was there. The researchers perspectives were that there were these practitioners who just refuse to pay attention to research and who were out-of-date. And if you talk to practitioners what you find is that the research wasn't relevant and that's the beauty of this model is it really addresses those things that come together. I mean I'm reminded about when the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse came to New York State offering to bring researchers into alcohol practice settings around issues that were important to the agencies and they asked the agencies to list the problems they were confronting they needed help with. And and I thought that they were going to contend with this list of evidence based practices that would apply to what the agencies wanted. But what they found is that most of the list the agencies had they didn't know about in terms of research.

[00:36:27] There was very little overlap between what agency says they needed to know and what researchers had to share. And so you can try to speed that process up by having each side share more of what they know. But that's really not the solution. This kind of model is really the way out of that sort of either or paradigm. I think this is one model. These types of community and nursing partnerships that truly can impact research to practice and research and practice to research and do something about this 17 year gap. Not saying it's the only approach but I think it's one helpful approach. I would agree and it's very collaborative very focused on a diverse skill set and the cap military skill set coming together. And I think in terms of speed and efficiency it really breaks things up to scale quickly and at the same time my guess is that each partner will be changed enough by the process that along the way who he'll site will be who the Research Center and the School of Social Work will be by the five years into this process. Both are going to look different as a result of that when they were absent and that will be exciting to see how that evolves as well. In addition to some of the interesting findings that come out of this I am excited to see anything either you want to add before we we get you back to your busy jobs. I don't think I have anything more. Maria I think we covered it. We didn't think you need to make any taking the time to do it.



[00:37:58] You've been listening to a conversation on University community partnerships to promote research to practice and practice to research. Thanks for joining us. And tune in again next time for more lectures and conversations on social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at [www.socialwork.buffalo.ed](http://www.socialwork.buffalo.ed). At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.