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WSU social work doctoral student gets funding to study depression therapy in high-risk pregnant women

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Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) has proven to be a powerful tool in treating depression, but can it work in high-risk pregnant women? A doctoral student at the Wayne State School of Social Work plans to find out in a groundbreaking study funded by the BlueCross BlueShield of Michigan Foundation.

Laurel Hicks, who is pursuing a dual-title Ph.D. in Clinical Social Work and Infant Mental Health, has been awarded \$3,000 to investigate the efficacy of MBCT in high-risk pregnant women. Many of these women may have suffered abuse, sexual assault, community violence, and other circumstances that can adversely affect mental and emotional health. She was awarded the foundation's annual research stipend on the strength of her proposal, "Improving Maternal, Infant, and Birth Outcomes in Detroit Mothers: A Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness Intervention."

Hicks' study is timely in light of Detroit's maternal death rate, which is triple that of the nation's and worse than that of some countries in the developing world. Detroit's infant mortality rate is the highest in the country, often caused by preterm delivery. Studies show psychiatric symptoms are a significant risk factor for preterm birth, which is more prevalent in high-risk populations. Hicks' exploratory study will examine whether MBCT, a group-based therapy that promotes awareness of and appropriate responses to unpleasant feelings and thoughts, is effective in high-risk pregnant women.

"Research shows that as many as 15-20% of women suffer depression during and/or following pregnancy, but while the MBCT curriculum has been adapted for pregnancy, it has not been studied in high-risk populations," said Hicks, who will recruit two groups of five to ten pregnant women to follow the eight-week curriculum early next year. "The aim of the study is to examine whether these women will even accept MBCT as an intervention and also to bring greater attention to their need for trauma-sensitive treatment options."

Hicks will be conducting her research with assistance from Wayne State's Merrill Palmer Skillman Institute for Child and Family Development (MPSI) and Carolyn Dayton, assistant social work professor and associate director of MPSI's Infant Mental Health Program.

"Depression during pregnancy or postpartum can interfere with a woman's ability to care for herself, follow medical advice, sleep and eat properly, and bond with her infant, and it places women at greater risk of harmful behaviors," said Hicks, who was recently named a 2014-2015 MPSI Fellow. "If MBCT proves helpful to some of these women, then we're advancing the ultimate goal of healthy moms and healthy babies."

Speaking to the study's importance, Dayton said "families in Detroit and ultimately across the country will benefit from this project and from Ms. Hicks' program of research. Her background in prenatal yoga, mindfulness meditation and trauma-sensitive care, coupled with her passion for supporting vulnerable mothers and families, makes her ideally

positioned to carry out this work.”

Information about the Wayne State School of Social Work Doctoral Program can be found at:

<http://socialwork.wayne.edu/phd/>

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