

# LEO Newsletter

## Spring 2015

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WILSON SHEEHAN  
LAB FOR ECONOMIC  
OPPORTUNITIES

# A Message From the Founders

*Bill Evans and Jim Sullivan reflect on recent developments at LEO*

We seem to start each of our letters by saying that a lot has changed. This time is no different. Since our last newsletter we doubled the size of our staff; hosted our second research conference; launched a new randomized control trial evaluation and several other projects; and forged new partnerships.

Three new staff members have joined the Lab full time. Katie Kuka (ND '98) joins us as an Associate Director after working in nonprofit consulting, private sector finance and public accounting. For LEO, Katie will wear many hats: directing operations, budgeting, and finance; and helping with strategic planning and agency relations among other responsibilities. We are excited to bring Katie back home to Notre Dame. We also hired two Research Associates: Brendan Perry and Elisabeth O'Toole. Brendan (an Applied and Computational Mathematics and Statistics major) and Elisabeth (an International Economics major) graduated in May from Notre Dame. Also joining us will be seven undergraduate Research Assistants to work on LEO research projects. It should be an exciting summer!

Earlier this spring, we hosted our second research conference, "Improving Evidence, Improving Outcomes," that was sponsored by the Russell Sage Foundation and the Wilson Sheehan Foundation. The two-day conference brought together researchers and social service agency directors to promote greater collaboration and foster evidence-based program design. Academics and service providers presented on key policy areas including comprehensive case management, early childhood education, prisoner reentry, affordable housing, and post-secondary education. We expect the conversations from this conference to be the starting point for several new research projects.

In March, we launched our latest randomized control trial evaluation, the Padua Pilot, in Fort Worth, TX. This intervention provides intensive, wrap-around case management services, seeking to build on individual strengths to empower families for long term success. The intervention and evaluation have been in design for more than two years. Over the past few months, Catholic Charities of Fort Worth enrolled the first clients into the program that expects to serve more than a hundred families in the first year. Look for new research results on the Padua Pilot this time next year!

Our research efforts are starting to bear some fruit. A working paper outlining our evaluation of the Reading for Life juvenile diversion program in South Bend is on the LEO web page. Research from this project and the Homelessness Prevention Call Center in Chicago will be presented at conferences this summer.



Bill Evans at LEO's Spring Conference

Lastly, we are excited to announce that our partner, Catholic Charities USA, has appointed a new president, Sr. Donna Markham, an Adrian Dominican sister and clinical psychologist. She will start in her new role on June 1. We met with Sr. Donna when she visited campus a few months ago. Under Sr. Donna's leadership, we look forward to continuing to grow our partnership with the Catholic Charities network.



Jim Sullivan at LEO's Spring Conference

# Staff Spotlight: *Rachel Fulcher Dawson*

Rachel Fulcher Dawson joined the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities in March 2014 as an Associate Director after consulting for LEO part time during the previous year. She holds a PhD in Education Policy from Michigan State University and also teaches a class at Notre Dame on Early Childhood Education Policy in the United States. She lives in South Bend with her husband Scott and four daughters Grace, Ellie, Caroline, and Rose.



## **What is your role at the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities?**

LEO is so new, it's like a start up company, really. Since I've started, my role has changed and evolved in a short amount of time. A big part of my job is finding funding for our projects: writing grants and meeting with foundations and donors. I also work with existing and new partner agencies developing projects in the early stages. My expertise as a researcher is early childhood education, so I am heavily involved with growing and supporting projects in that area.

## **Why did you join the Wilson Sheehan Lab for Economic Opportunities?**

My background and training are in education, evaluation and public policy. I taught middle school, worked on Capitol Hill, worked with preschool policymakers in Michigan and in Indiana and now teach here at Notre Dame. Personally, I feel very lucky to find myself in a career where my faith-based commitments to social justice, my professional commitment to doing research that is helpful and my passion for early childhood education are all a part of the job. My dad was a plumber for 35 years; he worked so hard and we had little money, but we always, always were raised to focus on education and on helping others. My parents are also fundamental to why I chose my professional path and ultimately joined LEO!

## **In your opinion, what role does research play in reducing poverty?**

The type of impact evaluation research that LEO does involves three things: Looking at what's been studied and how, working with agencies to design a way to measure outcomes and doing analyses. Most agencies are simply not equipped to do these things on their own, but desperately want to run programs that help people living in poverty. Researchers bring a fresh perspective and resources to agencies who often are collecting a lot of valuable information, but don't have time or energy or training to do impact evaluation.

## **How does LEO's work improve the ability of agency partners to serve those living in poverty?**

Social service agencies are staffed with people who are passionate about helping others and daily face the effects of poverty and suffering in the people they serve. I have such admiration for social workers, case managers, teachers, and others who are talented, hardworking individuals who feel called to do this work. They do the heavy lifting, for sure. What LEO does is help them think differently about the impact of their work on the people they serve. We help them think about how to measure what they are doing and to rethink how they can improve their programs by focusing on efforts that permanently move people out of poverty.

## Faculty Affiliate Updates

LEO's research network is comprised of faculty affiliates from universities around the country with experience designing and evaluating anti-poverty programs. LEO identifies interesting projects and matches them to academic researchers with appropriate expertise.

### Bill Evans

Professor Evans will present results from LEO's *Reading for Life* evaluation this July at the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) Summer Institute.

### Abigail Wozniak

Professor Wozniak is completing her yearlong term on leave at the White House Council of Economic Advisors. She will return to Notre Dame this July.

### Jim Sullivan

Professor Sullivan will present HPCC results at the University of Wisconsin's Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) this June. He also recently received an NIH grant for *Stay the Course*.

### Chloe Gibbs

Professor Gibbs begins her new position as a Professor in the Department of Economics at the University of Notre Dame on July 1.

### Melissa Kearney

Professor Kearney is ending her successful term as Director of the Brookings Institution's Hamilton Project this summer. She will return to her post as a Professor of Economics at the University of Maryland.

## Research Project Update

### Evaluating the Homelessness Prevention Call Center

**Partner Agency:** Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago (CCC)

**Policy Area:** Homelessness Prevention

**Investigators:** Jim Sullivan & Bill Evans

**Significance:** Homelessness continues to be a significant issue across the United States that is both symptomatic of and contributes to further economic problems. Nearly 2 out of every 1,000 people in the U.S. are homeless. Although most major cities operate call centers similar to the CCC's Homelessness Prevention Call Center (HPCC), little is known about the efficacy of these homelessness prevention efforts.

**Project Description:** HPCC serves Chicago residents facing imminent homelessness. The HPCC screens callers for eligibility and refers eligible callers to agencies that will provide temporary financial assistance to help families pay rent or utility bills so they can remain in their residence. The HPCC aims to prevent homelessness by intervening before individuals and families run out of options.

**Experimental Design:** LEO is evaluating the ability of the HPCC to prevent homelessness and promote stable housing situations by connecting eligible callers with temporary financial assistance. Key to this study is the fact that the availability of funds for assistance is functionally random. Combining the HPCC call data with homeless shelter admittance data from the Chicago Alliance to End Homelessness, LEO can determine the impact of this intervention by examining whether eligible individuals referred to financial assistance are less likely to enter homeless shelters than eligible individuals who call when funds are not available.

**Results:** Preliminary results are promising. Eligible individuals who call when funding is available are 60 percent less likely to end up in a homeless shelter over the next 6 months. LEO is currently writing a research paper about the HPCC evaluation and continuing to investigate other housing stability outcomes.

# LEO Partner Spotlight: Kathy Donahue

Kathy Donahue is senior Vice President for Program Development and Evaluation at Catholic Charities Chicago (CCC). LEO is partnering with CCC to evaluate two programs: the WIC Food and Nutrition Centers and the Homelessness Prevention Call Center (opposing page).



**LEO: Tell us a little about the services that Catholic Charities Chicago provides and the clients that you serve.**

Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Chicago covers Cook and Lake Counties in the Chicagoland area. One of the largest Social Service Providers in the Midwest, the agency serves more than 1 million persons annually with 155 programs at 163 locations. Programs are organized into 5 service areas that cover human needs from “cradle to grave” and every point in between. Services include: Pregnancy programs, 16 Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) Food and Nutrition sites, 20 affordable housing buildings with wrap-around services, Senior Health and community based services, and basic human needs like shelters, rental assistance, and food pantries.

**LEO: What are some of the greatest challenges that your clients face?**

In the Chicagoland area a person must earn \$17.00 per hour to afford housing, transportation, food, etc. Most low wage earners or persons on fixed incomes need supports to make the economics of living in an urban area possible. The concentration of poverty persists in many communities with blight, boarded up buildings, lack of local employment, and lack of access to robust grocery stores. All of this contributes to generational poverty that needs high intervention touch points.

**LEO: How has the evaluation of the WIC Food and Nutrition Centers impacted that program and how your agency assesses and/or operates programs generally?**

The evaluation of the WIC Food and Nutrition Centers gave us stunning information that helped us target our future efforts. We learned that low-income teen mothers have a very low WIC coupon redemption rate. We started brainstorming about counteracting that. We learned our locations are well placed in food deserts and close to the right communities. We also were able to present the benefits of our service model to a new Governor and to Illinois WIC staff. Having a well-respected evaluator lends credibility and transparency.

**LEO: Is there a new program you are developing or an existing one you're adapting to fill an urgent need in Chicago?**

Catholic Charities is making a great impact in reducing readmission rates for hospitalized seniors, reducing Medicare spending, and minimizing penalties for hospitals. Building on the success of the Hospital Transition Program, we are developing a model for the Medicaid population. These programs affirm the value of comprehensive social service that Catholic Charities brings to all of our projects.

# HPCC By The Numbers

A Snapshot of the HPCC Evaluation

## Homeless on a Single Night



U.S.  
1.9 per 1,000



Illinois  
1.1 per 1,000



Chicago  
2.4 per 1,000

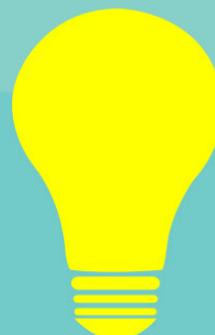
## Call Center Use



16,585 Calls for  
Rent



10,718 Calls for  
Security Deposits



5,801 Calls for  
Electricity



3,364 Calls for  
Heating

60% A dark green downward-pointing arrow.

Reduction in  
Homelessness  
due to Call Center  
Referrals