

2014-2015 Outstanding Thesis Award Winners



As a recent graduate of the Master's in Social Work program, Susan VanAllen is all about helping people. In the past, she worked as an in-home therapist for autistic children; now she is part of a mobile crisis unit for the Department of Behavioral Health, where she is called on the scene to assist suicidal, homicidal, and severely disabled individuals, often working directly with law enforcement. But the population that she feels most passionately about helping—whom she describes as “near and dear to my heart”—is justice involved youth. Her Outstanding Thesis Award winning master's project, entitled *Overcoming Barriers to Mental Health Service Utilization among Justice Involved Youth*, explores new ways to help this troubled population.

Susan's project uncovers research that shows that youth in the juvenile justice system are 10 times more likely suffer from mental health disorders than youth in the general public—yet less than half of them actually receive help. In order to discover why services are lacking or refused, Susan decided to turn to her fellow social workers for answers. Her project theorized that this group of service providers would offer fresh insights into a topic previously addressed only by clients and clinicians. Working with social workers from the San Bernardino County Office of the Public Defender and San Bernardino County Juvenile Justice Community Reintegration, she developed three focus groups to discuss barriers against, and catalysts toward, connecting youth with their much-needed mental health services.

“I've never conducted anything like a focus group before,” Susan said, adding that she had initially intended to hire a professional facilitator. “This was one of the biggest challenges for me. I couldn't have done it without the support of Asia Williamson from the Public Defender's Office and Allison Cunningham from Juvenile Justice Community Reintegration. I owe it to them that this project was a success.”

Susan believes the most significant finding of her work is the need for a paradigm shift in San Bernardino County's juvenile justice system. “We need to move away from a punitive, ‘I have power over you’ type of thinking, to a restorative justice model,” she said. Her project discusses the benefits of following a restorative justice model and avenues for executing this shift.

Susan hopes to one day develop a youth program in the high desert, where she resides. Working with justice involved youth is particularly meaningful to her. “I can relate to these kids a lot. I struggled a lot as a youth, myself. There's so much hope when you're working with kids because they still have so far to go in life. Sometimes they just need one good mentor to believe in them.”

The Office of Graduate Studies offers a hearty congratulations to Susan VanAllen and her successes thus far, and wishes her the best in her noble future efforts. Thanks to Susan and others like her, justice involved youth may begin to receive the mental health services that they need.