



# University of Connecticut

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## NEWS RELEASE

### **UConn Awarded \$3.8 Million to Create One of First Health Communication Centers Nationwide**

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STORRS, Conn. – A team of University of Connecticut researchers has won a \$3.8 million federal grant to establish the Center for Health Communication and Health Marketing on the Storrs campus.

The new UConn center is one of only two agencies in the country funded by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to focus on health communication.

“Health communication research is critical to improving our nation’s health and well-being because effective health communication campaigns positively impact everything from lifestyle choices, the use of preventive care and informed decision making for the treatment of chronic diseases to preparedness for bioterrorism and other emergencies,” said UConn Communication Sciences Professor Leslie Snyder, the center’s new director.

“Private companies spend billions advertising products while the government has historically spent a fraction of that amount promoting health,” Snyder added. “The CDC’s investment in this new center at UConn is a step in the right direction. The center will help determine how well existing advertising and public health communication campaigns and interventions work. The center also will examine the best ways to communicate with at-risk populations, taking into account dramatic advances in communication technologies over the past two decades.”

The new center, which will be housed within UConn’s Center for Health/HIV Intervention and Prevention (CHIP), is funded for three years. During that time, it will develop two communication tools, using what is known as “an educational entertainment approach,” to deliver messages about safe sex and the dangers of using club drugs to hard-to-reach teen and young adult audiences in Hartford and other urban areas in the region.

“We want to reach young people with positive health messages in a way they want to be reached,” Snyder said. One project is developing a video game, the other is putting on a series of shows starting this summer.

“Enlisting the support of peer artists to integrate culturally appropriate messages about a healthy lifestyle in their performances at substance free venues is a cost effective way of reaching urban youth who choose not to use” says Dr. Jean Schensul, Senior Scientist at the Institute for Community Research and head of the drug use prevention project. “ Our collaboration with the Center and its experienced faculty will strengthen the communications dimensions of the approach while adding new intervention and measurement strategies to the Center’s repertoire.

In addition to creating new communication tools for hard-to-reach audiences, the new UConn center will monitor the advertising of healthy and unhealthy products and analyze research literature to determine the effectiveness of existing health communication campaigns. During its first three years, the center also will work with public health departments in all 50 states to assess their health communication activities and identify programs they have designed that may be appropriate for duplication in other states or nationwide.

The UConn center’s collaboration with the Connecticut Department of Public Health, among other partners, will provide state residents exposure to cutting-edge health communication technologies that ultimately stand to be adapted for use nationwide.

"Public health professionals must act more like marketers to effectively educate the public about health issues and healthy lifestyles," said state DPH Commissioner J. Robert Galvin, M. D., M. P. H. "The creation of this health communication center at UConn will enable us to develop marketing campaigns that make a difference in the health of Connecticut's residents, and in the lives of people across the nation. We are excited about our developing partnership with UConn’s new center and the promise it brings for innovative and effective health campaigns."

Faculty members at the UConn Health Center and CHIP will be involved in the new center as research affiliates. The center also will partner with scientists from outside institutions and professionals in public health, communication, marketing, and health industries.

"The Center of Excellence in Health Marketing and Communication at the University of Connecticut will be conducting innovative research on marketing and communication strategies that leverage existing and future technologies, are culturally appropriate, and bridge the expanse between science and behavior change, said Jay M. Bernhardt, director of the CDC’s National Center for Health Marketing. “The CDC and National Center for Health Marketing look forward not only to the important insights that this talented group of researchers will discover, but also to the positive health impact that can result from their work."

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