

AZ mental health org promotes new research, researchers

Shannon Levitt | Managing Editor Jul 14, 2020



Mike and Lauren Meyer, founders of IMHR.
Photo courtesy of IMHR

COVID-19's physical toll is well-documented, and six months in, its mental toll is becoming frighteningly clear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Mayo Clinic and other heavy hitters are enumerating warning signs of anxiety and depression on their websites. Meanwhile, the Institute for Mental Health Research, an Arizona nonprofit working on innovative research in mental health for 20 years, recently turned its attention to the novel coronavirus.

The COVID-19 Mental Health Research Impact Fund is in keeping with IMHR's general research goals while also honing in on the significant mental health implications of the virus, as well as its direct effects on the brain and nervous system, said Mitzi Krockover, IMHR board chair.

"We're going to see a huge tsunami," she said. "It's multipronged — we're seeing trauma of our first responders and health care workers, as well as people with the disease and family members who've got quarantine and isolation issues. There's also the social isolation effects of children and the elderly."

With “issues of COVID on the brain,” Krockover hopes people in Arizona will be ready to cast a wide research net in order to answer pressing questions about the disease. That includes taking a chance on young researchers and untested ideas.

“We might just be at the beginning of this investment now, so we might have answers at the time we need them,” Krockover said.

When Mike and Lauren Meyer first created IMHR in 2001, it was as a public and private partnership. For the past 15 years, however, their vision of increasing research dollars in Arizona has received no state funding. The nonprofit organization is based in Scottsdale, but focuses on the entire state.

Research is expensive, and the really big money for medical research comes from government organizations such as the National Institute of Health. The grant money they and others provide generally goes to well-known or already established scientists and researchers.

IMHR recognizes that reality and aims to get seed money to support younger or lesser-known scientists who are willing to take risks with their work, because they are unencumbered by the demands of reputation. That seed money funds work that becomes the basis for proposals which eventually bring in the big grant money from NIH and others.

“We focus on young investigators — new investigators in Arizona,” said Keith Crnic, chief science officer and retired professor of psychology at Arizona State University. “Getting NIH grants is difficult for them, because the new people are competing with well-established people. It’s very hard for these young guys to compete with these old guys.”

Lauren Meyer also joked that IMHR is “agnostic” in terms of funding — willing to engage everyone from individual donors to corporations to fulfill IMHR’s mission statement: “To support innovative, comprehensive, early stage mental health research that addresses the most complex and problematic mental health issues facing society today.” It is a calculated effort to take big risks in order to have big payoffs.

“The dollars we raise fund research, fund researchers, bring money into the community,” said Krockover. Her pitch: “Your dollar goes a long way.”

Lauren Meyers, Krockover and Crnic also said this method means that mental health is not the only beneficiary. The money they raise for research stays in Arizona, and it creates ancillary jobs. This way it’s a win-win for the state, science and those who will benefit from successful research. Keeping the science and scientists local and placing Arizona at the top of the mental health landscape has always been a goal.

The organization touts on its website that by following this road from new promising research to big grants, it raised two million dollars that turned into \$20 million, with all of it going to finding answers to the pressing questions of mental health in Arizona — its ultimate goal.

Even with lofty and scientific ideals, for those involved, mental health issues are often personal. “When we cut the ribbon my daughter was one,” said Lauren Meyers. “And what drove it home is I experienced post-partum depression. It gave me a little hint of what was happening with people dealing with depression — I understood it viscerally.”

“We’ve all had mental health issues we’ve been attached to,” Krockover pointed out. “I worked at UCLA with women’s health and women’s issues, and the dearth of research about women in general and more so in mental health motivated me.”

As members of Temple Solel, both Krockover and Meyers said their faith is an element of their work. Krockover said the concept of tikkun olam definitely inspires her.

Meyers agreed. “She took the words out of my mouth.”

When her father died two months ago, there was an outpouring of support from the Jewish community, and people invested in research in his honor. Things like donating money or time volunteering on these issues can give people a sense of agency, Meyers said.

“Right now it’s natural to feel hopeless. But you can actually do something today.” **JN**