

UT Southwestern Medical Center

Progress on the UT Southwestern School of Public Health

August 16, 2021

To the UT Southwestern community:

We are pleased to write to you today about an important new institutional initiative – formation of a UT Southwestern School of Public Health. This will be our first new school in more than 50 years and fourth school overall.

Our region, state and country are facing many longstanding public health challenges, including high rates of many common chronic illnesses, disparities in access to care, and the impact of socioeconomic determinants on health. In addition, our public health is often impacted by acute challenges such as emerging infections. In the last ten years alone, West Nile, Zika, Ebola and now SARS-CoV-2 viruses (among others) have threatened the North Texas region. Improving the overall health of our communities requires better understanding of the underlying factors that contribute to these problems and development of innovative interventions.

Beyond the need to address our public health through research and innovation, as the COVID-19 pandemic has shown, there is also an urgent need for additional public health resources in our communities, including professionals trained in preventive interventions, epidemiologic crisis response, surveillance, contact tracing, and public health outreach. More than 200 of 254 Texas counties lack public health professionals who can address these needs.

It is for all of these reasons that, following extensive faculty discussion, UT Southwestern requested permission to establish a new School of Public Health. We are pleased to report that the UT System Board of Regents has approved our request and that the Texas State Legislature endorsed this new initiative in this year's regular session, appropriating seed funding for the new school in the coming new biennium.

The UT Southwestern School of Public Health will be dedicated to producing a new generation of public health leaders skilled in data sciences, epidemiology, health policy, health care delivery research, implementation science, and other disciplines. It will build upon our strengths in basic and clinical sciences and the expertise we have developed in fields such as bioinformatics, computational biology, population and data sciences, and biomedical engineering. The school will also leverage assets in Dallas-Fort Worth – one of the most diverse and fastest-growing regions in the United States – by partnering with multiple community organizations, regional health systems and universities, including our partners Parkland Health & Hospital System, Children's Health, and UT Dallas.

In order to accelerate this new initiative, we are pleased to announce that **Celette Sugg Skinner, Ph.D.**, Professor and Chair of the Department of Population and Data Sciences, will serve as Interim Dean of the UT Southwestern School of Public Health. An expert in health disparities, access to care, and prevention, Dr. Skinner joined UT Southwestern in 2007 as Chief of the Division of Behavioral and Communication Sciences and founding Associate Director of Population Research for the Harold C. Simmons Comprehensive Cancer Center. Since 2018, she has served as Chair of our Department of Population and Data Sciences. Dr. Skinner also holds the Parkland Community Medicine Professorship.

As Interim Dean, she will oversee a continuum of activities necessary to establish the school, including the recruitment of faculty and the development of curriculum. Planning for the school will occur in two phases. Phase 1 will assemble and organize the academic programs and faculty, with the goal of admitting the first class of Master of Public Health students in the fall of 2023 and Ph.D. students in the fall of 2024. Phase 2 will aim to expand and establish new research and pursue multifaceted school accreditation.

The future of Texas depends on the health of its people. By advancing the science of public health and providing future leaders with the skills to quickly respond to public health issues as they arise, the UT Southwestern School of Public Health will work to eliminate health care disparities as we pursue our mission of promoting health and a healthy society. We are honored to carry out this important responsibility.

Sincerely,

Daniel K. Podolsky, M.D.
President, UT Southwestern Medical Center

W. P. Andrew Lee, M.D.
Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost
Dean, UT Southwestern Medical School