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New Initiative Will Fund School-Based Mental Health Services for Children and Youth

*Caring Across Communities to Help Immigrant and Refugee Families Overcome Cultural
and Language Barriers to Services*

Princeton, N.J., June 15, 2006 – The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (RWJF) today launched a new program to support partnerships between schools and mental health service providers to reduce emotional and behavioral problems among children in low-income, refugee- and immigrant-dense communities. *Caring Across Communities: Addressing Mental Health Needs of Diverse Children and Youth*, is a three-year, \$4.5 million national program that advances RWJF's efforts to meet the needs of vulnerable families who may not be served by traditional health and social services. The program will be led by Julia Graham Lear, Ph.D., director of the Center for Health & Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) at George Washington University's School of Public Health & Health Services.

Caring Across Communities places special emphasis on helping schools work with community organizations to reduce the significant cultural and language barriers to quality mental health services that face children of immigrant and refugee families. Immigrant and refugee populations are growing in size in communities across the nation, and their health and social service needs are expanding as well. In 2002, children of immigrants under age 18 totaled 13.5 million in the U.S. In addition, more than half of these children are raised in families with income below 200 percent of the federal poverty level, and they experience daunting economic, education and health challenges.

Studies show that, while as many as one in five U.S. children experience some signs of a mental disorder, their needs too often go unmet—especially among non-white children. In particular, children from immigrant and refugee families often face economic, social and personal hardships related to the family's relocation to another country; these factors – poverty, separation from family members and the challenges of acculturation – may influence their mental health and overall well-being. Unfortunately, children of immigrants, especially those who have immigrated recently, are less likely to receive necessary mental health services than their non-immigrant peers.

(more)

In an effort to fill this gap, the *Caring Across Communities* program will provide and promote innovative approaches that are culturally, developmentally and language-appropriate to address the complex psychosocial issues affecting immigrant and refugee families. Schools, faith-based organizations, multicultural service agencies and community mental health centers have become important sites for services and interventions tailored to the unique needs of these populations, and they will be key partners in *Caring Across Communities* grant projects.

“It’s crucial to develop strategies to help overcome barriers to mental health services for children of immigrants and refugees,” said Julia Graham Lear, Ph.D., director of the Center for Health & Health Care in Schools and research professor at GWU’s School of Public Health and Health Services. “Typically no one organization has all the tools and resources needed to help these children and their families. That’s why these grants will support partnerships among all the key community groups that can contribute to the solutions.”

“Refugees in particular have incredibly challenging circumstances,” said Lear. “They may come from countries at war, where they may have seen or experienced torture and persecution. Being displaced can absolutely contribute to mental health problems among refugees, and having limited proficiency in English worsens the adjustment process for these children.”

“The Foundation is committed to expanding the availability of tailored mental health services for immigrant and refugee children, where the need is particularly acute,” said Judith Stavisky, M.Ed., M.P.H., senior program officer at RWJF. “*Caring Across Communities* will engage schools, community agencies, faith-based groups, families and others to provide high-quality, culturally appropriate mental health care to meet the particular needs of these children.”

Caring Across Communities will award approximately \$100,000 per year for up to 3 years to an estimated 15 geographically and ethnically diverse project teams. Participating organizations might include community mental health centers, multicultural service agencies, faith-based organizations, or other immigrant-or refugee-serving organizations with mental health expertise. An elementary, middle or high school can be either a sole site for services, or a significant provider in a network of care. Grantees must use approaches that are culturally and linguistically relevant to children and their families.

The *Caring Across Communities* Call for Proposals is available online at www.rwjf.org/cfp/caringacrosscommunities. Initial brief proposals are due July 28, 2006. Potential applicants should contact the program at (202) 466-3396 or visit www.healthinschools.org for more information.

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The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation focuses on the pressing health and health care issues facing our country. As the nation’s largest philanthropy devoted exclusively to improving the health and health care of all Americans, the Foundation works with a diverse group of organizations and individuals to identify solutions and achieve comprehensive, meaningful and timely change. For more than 30 years the Foundation has brought experience, commitment, and a rigorous, balanced approach to the problems that affect the health and health care of those it serves. When it comes to helping Americans lead healthier lives and get the care they need, the Foundation expects to make a difference in your lifetime.

The Center for Health and Health Care in Schools (CHHCS) is a nonpartisan policy and program resource center located at The George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. CHHCS builds on a 20-year history of testing strategies to strengthen health care delivery systems for children and adolescents. For the past decade, with support from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Center staff and consultants have worked with institutional leaders, state officials and clinical providers to maximize outcomes for children through more effective health programming in schools.