

CELEBRATING
EXCELLENCE

2023 ANNUAL REPORT



Our Mission

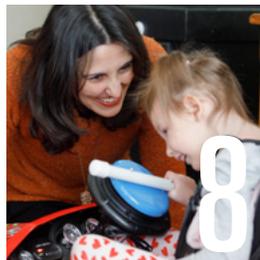


Is to be world leaders in transforming the lives of all individuals with disabilities and complex health care needs, their families and the community through outreach, engagement, premier educational programs, innovative research and extraordinary patient care.

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Munroe-Meyer Institute 2023 Annual Report

Editorial team: Melonie Welsh, MS;
John Keenan, MA; Kelsey Kirk

Photography: Kent Sievers, Rich Watson,
John Keenan, MA, UNMC Strategic Communications

Design: Tom Waples, UNMC Strategic Communications

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Director's Message

I have had the pleasure and privilege of serving our community as director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute for almost eight years. Looking back, a lot has changed. We built our amazing new building, navigated a pandemic, recruited remarkable new people, developed new leaders, reorganized and expanded our services. The list of changes is staggering.

However, the most important goals endure, despite the unrelentless grinding of the wheels of time. Our mission endures, unchanged, and our commitment to excellence is unwavering. Being world leaders and transforming lives still shines bright as a guiding light on our quest for excellence, and this is the central theme of the 2023 annual report.

Excellence is expected from all of us at MMI – from the check-in desk to the institute director. I encounter it every day, and I hope you do, too. I hope that sharing a few stories of excellence in this annual report provides a glimpse into how we change lives and transform the future of our clients and the community.

In this report you will see only a miniscule sampling of the many MMI efforts. Included here are stories on how the pediatric feeding department, one of only three of its kind in the country, is bettering people's lives across the lifespan. You will read about a trio of research projects in the physical therapy department that aim to transform the lives of children with mobility challenges. We also are showcasing our nation-leading applied behavior analysis PhD program, as well as an innovative attempt to build the social skills of children on the autism spectrum. You will read about our commitment to bring exceptional autism services to all communities of Nebraska and a vision of the ACT (Autism Care for Toddlers) Clinic network to achieve this lofty goal. Finally, you will hear the voice of families describing the impact our teams made on their daily lives.

Reading this annual report makes me proud, and my heart is overflowing with gratitude – to the patient families who entrust their loved ones to our care, to all MMI employees who make the magic happen and the community members, partners and leaders who ensure the framework in which we can thrive.

Excellence is an enduring goal, resting on the pillars of teamwork, community and caring. Thank you for allowing us to be excellent!

Karoly Mirnics, MD, PhD
*Director and Hattie B. Munroe Professor
Munroe-Meyer Institute*

Sarah Connolly, PhD, leads participants in the BRIDGE program in social activities.



BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS

“Tell me one of our rules?”

“Be a good friend!”

The answer, high and excited, and accompanied by a raised hand, comes from one of the three small boys sitting in a chair in front of Sarah Connolly, PhD.

Dr. Connolly and the three boys sit in a circle in the large classroom that serves as the home base for MMI’s Building Relationships in Dyad and Group Environments (BRIDGE). The program is a new service in which small groups of children on the autism spectrum receive applied behavior analysis treatment while working toward improving social skills.

The goal of the program is to identify barriers to transitioning to less restrictive educational settings and developing target interventions for overcoming these barriers – in short, to provide natural settings, including play sessions, where children can develop and practice social skills, as well as perhaps develop friendships.

The three-and-a-half hour program, held three days a week, combines sessions of traditional, one-on-one ABA therapy with group activities. At circle time, for example, the three youngsters sit together and interact with one another as Dr. Connolly leads them in a series of activities and songs, concurrently teaching (days of the week, seasons of the year) and driving good classroom behavior and social interaction (raising hands before speaking, congratulating one another on good answers).

“The need for the program was identified as an extension of MMI’s existing, excellent clinical services,” said Dr. Connolly, who created the MMI program with support from a Munroe-Meyer Guild grant. “As clients are transitioning out of our early intervention clinics, our clinicians are advocating that



A BRIDGE therapist works with a participant.

they need something to support more advanced social skills and bridge the transition to everyday settings. We are developing social skills to help them be successful in environments such as schools or typical peer groups.”

Dr. Connolly, a longtime colleague of integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder Director Alice Shillingsburg, PhD, had used the dyad approach to ABA at other sites before coming to MMI. She was excited to bring the program to the Omaha-based institute, pointing to “the national recognition, the specialization of MMI. Since I was a trainee, I’ve always kept an eye on what research is coming out of MMI and what its services look like.

“There are few other institutions, particularly in the medical community, that have such an unflinching commitment to serving the diverse needs of individuals with developmental disabilities. MMI is known and appreciated by the broader community, as well. We have a beautiful facility

and talented team of clinicians and scholars. I always say that families can walk into MMI with their heads held high, knowing that their child will be accepted and supported regardless of the challenges they face. At MMI, families have access to the excellent services that their child deserves.”

The BRIDGE program is designed to provide more independence by moving from one-to-one therapy into a more social setting while still incorporating ABA treatment strategies.

“In this field, we are aware of the immense gains that can be made by children who participate in early intensive behavioral intervention – it quite literally can change their life trajectory,” Dr. Connolly said. “With the BRIDGE program, we’re offering services in an effort to expand on the gains that were made in a one-to-one ABA therapy, while providing more naturalistic settings where kids can practice those skills and start to develop friendships and social skills.

“A lot of people recognize the need for transitional services where kids have opportunities to receive targeted intervention in developing meaningful social relationships.

“While we have a lot of well-established and empirically supported resources for clinicians delivering traditional one-to-one ABA therapy; we have less to guide us in how to adjust those services and deliver ABA in group-based settings. This is a significant area of need, given that most children will transition out of one-to-one ABA therapy and into traditional classroom settings, and this can be stressful. Through BRIDGE, we have the opportunity to innovate, and we hope to contribute to the body of empirically supported resources for clinicians interested in providing this type of service.”

BRIDGE sessions can foster friendships among the participants, who are between 4 and 6 years old, Dr. Connolly said.

“There are few other institutions, particularly in the medical community, that have such an unfailing commitment to serving the diverse needs of individuals with developmental disabilities.”

“When kids are younger and getting intensive one-to-one services, we see really wonderful relationships develop from that,” Dr. Connolly said. “A lot of times, a child’s ABA therapist may become their favorite person in the entire world. We work really hard to establish rapport between the therapist and child, and we get really excited about this connection, as it facilitates an opportunity for the child to learn so many new and helpful things. The therapist often makes adjustments for the child and builds on the child’s interests and preferences.

“However, when kids encounter peers, it can sometimes be hard to learn that peers won’t always do the things we want to do or talk about the things we’re interested in. All relationships have give and take, and kids need opportunities to practice that sense of reciprocity inherent in any relationship.

Through BRIDGE we are trying to build lasting friendships and teach the value of relationships.”

Children who have been successful in one-to-one learning contexts but would benefit from opportunities practice their language, social and adaptive skills in a novel context, with more peers and less one-to-one support, can be considered for the program.

The program has no strict inclusion criteria, Dr. Connolly said, although some foundational language skills are needed. “That doesn’t have to be vocal language,” she said. “That also can be using a speech-generating device, so long as the child demonstrates some fluency in using their communication device to interact with others and across a range of contexts. For kids who communicate with speech-generating devices, it is

mutually beneficial to the vocal and non-vocal communicators to learn to interact with peers who have diverse communication abilities.”

Currently, the program serves five children with commitment to expand in the near future.

She thanked the Munroe-Meyer Guild for its support of the program, which began at MMI in August 2023.

“Their generous support has been incredibly helpful in supporting our start-up. It allowed us to be very deliberate in selecting the right materials and enhancing our space, in an effort to build a sustainable program that meets the unique needs of the population we serve. I am very grateful for the generosity and support from MMI Guild.”



A BRIDGE therapist works with a participant.



No place like MMI

Andrea Cunha, PhD, gets the best of both worlds working in clinical research at the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

Dr. Cunha gets to work directly with patients and their families while also diving into research that could directly improve their lives.

Dr. Cunha, who hails from Brazil, has nearly 15 years of experience in teaching and researching clinical pediatrics.

"There's no other place like MMI where you can do research and also have these opportunities for engagement with families, with children," Dr. Cunha said. "I've always wanted to work in a place where I can do clinical work, too. I have all that here."

Over the past year and a half, she's brought her experience to the MMI Department of Physical Therapy as an assistant professor. Dr. Cunha specializes in play intervention, in particular.

Play offers a way for parents and kids to interact, while also helping kids to learn and develop, she said. Dr. Cunha and her colleagues make appointments as play-based as possible.

"We want to incorporate play for them to do as a part of their daily routine. This ensures that therapy is looked upon as fun and can be sustained, which is essential to the success of the intervention," she said.



Andrea Cunha, PhD, works with Maggie Boyer in an adapted toy car at the Boyer family's home.



Amy Boyer, left, and Andrea Cunha, PhD, work with Maggie Boyer, center.

Right now, the department has three play-based research projects underway:



1 GoBabyGo! Nebraska!

The program outfits children with mobility issues with modified ride-on cars at no cost to families. It has been a huge success at MMI since it started in 2016, Dr. Cunha said. It's now shifting into a one-year research project. Researchers are tracking how often the toy cars are used, as well as barriers in the environment. They're also tracking whether more use of the adaptive toy cars leads to better cognitive or social skills. "We believe social skills will improve, as well as language and cognition, while they are playing," Dr. Cunha said. The project is supported by the MMI Guild, the Child Health Research Institute of UNMC and Children's Nebraska, and philanthropic support through the University of Nebraska Foundation.



2 HABIT Camp

The annual Hand Arm Bimanual Intensive Training summer camp is designed to help children with bilateral, or one-sided, weakness due to cerebral palsy to use their hands and arms for daily tasks. MMI's project compares a standard HABIT camp, with traditional exercise and games designed to engage children as they do therapeutic movements, to one done with the same movements but in virtual reality. Dr. Cunha is a collaborator on the study, which is led by James Gehringer, PhD. "Teenagers like the games and it's motivating. But it is actually advanced therapy. You think it's all fun, but you need strategies to keep engaging," Dr. Cunha said. Some children find a challenging game motivating and may be bored by an easy game. Others might be discouraged if a game is tough. Dr. Cunha said they have to find a balance to challenge and engage camp participants. The project is supported by the National Institute of General Medical Sciences and the IDEA Clinical Translatable Research Technology Transfer Pilot Grant.



3 SIT-PT

The project is designed to compare effectiveness of two physical therapy interventions to improve infants' motor and cognitive skills – MORE-PT and START-Play. The SIT-PT program is designed for infants between 8 and 24 months, with or at risk of having cerebral palsy and showing readiness skills for early sitting and reaching. Staff assess children by looking at motor abilities, thinking skills and communication through games and play. Children are then assigned randomly to one of two intervention groups. Children assigned to the MORE-PT group will focus on movement orientation and maintaining an upright body posture through repetitive exercises to enhance overall motor abilities. The START-Play group will concentrate on motor-based problem solving with the goal of improving motor and cognitive skills. SIT-PT is supported by the National Institutes of Health's Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.



NOURISHING OUR CLIENTS

Jonah Wells carefully pierced a bite-size piece of carrot with his green fork. After a few cautious chews, he swallowed the veggie.

The 9-year-old proudly slapped a paper token onto a red game board and announced, “Three more tokens.”

With a glance at his plate, Mom clarified: “Three more bites first.”

The rules: For every bite Jonah eats, he earns a paper token as a reward. Once the board is full and his plate is clear, he gets a short break before clearing the board and eating another plate.

Jonah speared each piece of food before carefully – and correctly – swallowing. He added three more tokens to the board before doling out high-fives.

Jonah was visiting the Munroe-Meyer Institute. He and his mother come to MMI once every two months for appointments with staff in the pediatric feeding department.

In the couple of years he’s been going to MMI, Jonah has progressed from a diet of mostly baby food and other purees to trying pretty much any food that’s offered to him – although chicken nuggets reign supreme.

MMI’s Pediatric Feeding Department is one of only three academic centers of its kind in the country, said Amy Drayton, PhD, director of the department.

The department treats about 100 patients, ranging from infancy to early adulthood, every year. Providers at MMI use applied behavior analysis to find the most effective ways to treat patients, Dr. Drayton said.

“The young adults and adolescents we treat had pediatric feeding disorders throughout childhood but never received effective treatment,” Dr. Drayton said. “We treat the feeding problems almost exactly the same in young children and early adults.”

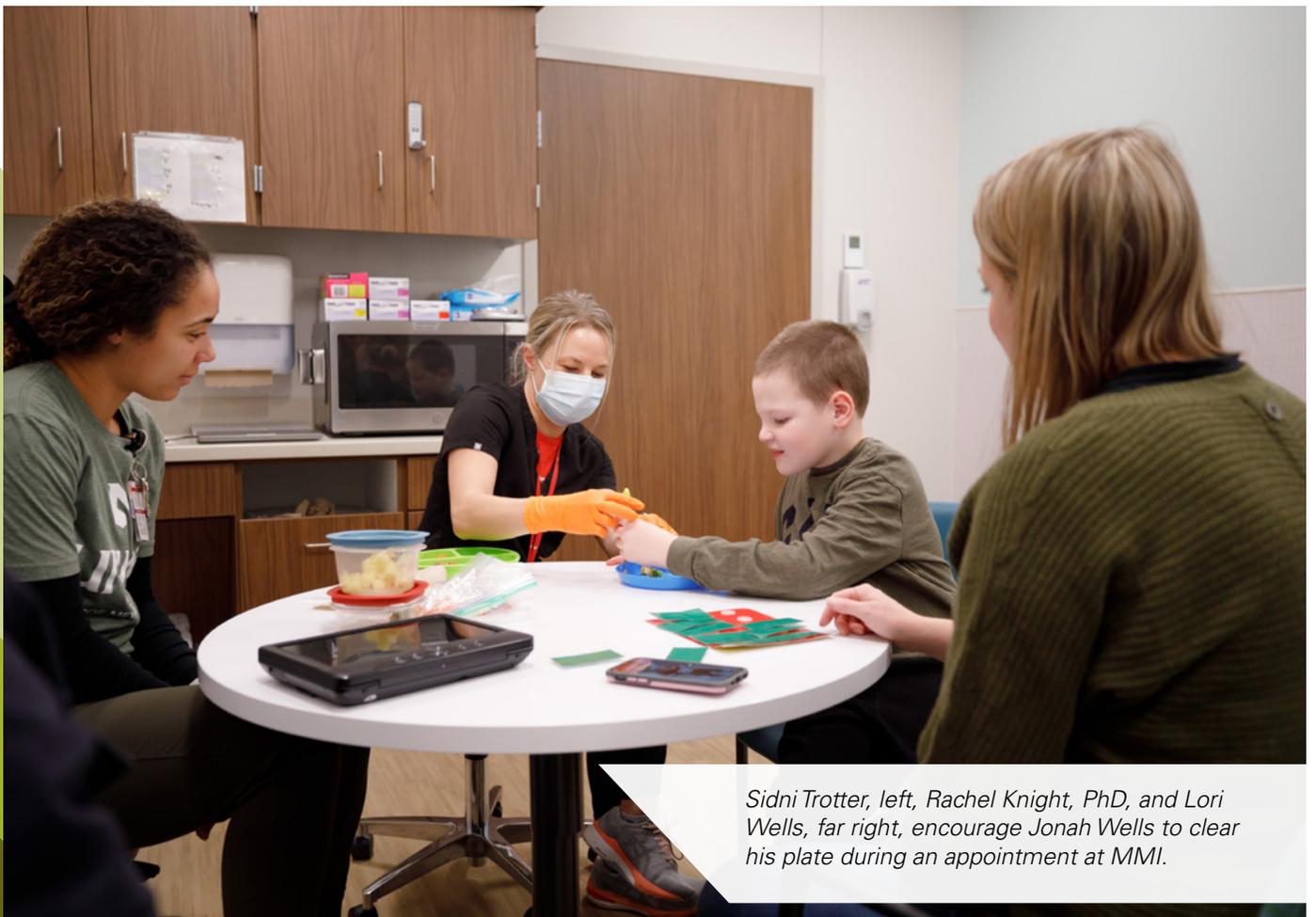
To address feeding disorders, which can present in many ways and across many different ages, MMI takes an interdisciplinary approach using the expertise of other MMI providers.



*Rachel Knight, PhD, watches as
Jonah Wells eats a bite of carrot.*



Jonah Wells carefully pierces a piece of food onto his fork during an appointment with the pediatric feeding team at MMI.



Sidni Trotter, left, Rachel Knight, PhD, and Lori Wells, far right, encourage Jonah Wells to clear his plate during an appointment at MMI.

- Speech-language pathologists watch for proper chewing and swallowing techniques, ensuring there are no safety issues with the swallowing process and helping to teach the necessary oral and motor skills for eating.
- A dietitian helps to make sure nutritional needs are met. Dietitian involvement also has allowed for a wider variety of food being offered to children in the program.
- A gastroenterologist screens for medical issues that might make eating unsafe or uncomfortable.

“We need a really integrated team approach to tackle these problems,” Dr. Drayton said. “These patients have medical issues, nutrition issues and swallowing or oral motor problems. If you try treating only one challenge without addressing those in other disciplines, you’re only looking at one part of the problem.”

Treatment often is tailored to get a child comfortable eating what might be served for breakfast and lunch at school. Other times, families set a goal so that, for example, their child can partake in pizza parties or eat cake on their birthday.

In recent years, Dr. Drayton said, the department has expanded its offerings. More patients are enrolled in the more intensive programming, including one designed for children on the autism spectrum. This new outpatient program is now open to all patients.

“Everyone at MMI cares deeply,” Dr. Drayton said. “They want to impact individuals with disabilities. We want to help kids meet their potential. And as part of that, we also want to help train future leaders in the pediatric feeding field, future clinicians, future researchers.”

Jonah has had difficulty eating for most of his life, said mom Lori Wells. As a baby, he could handle very smooth purees. But thicker purees or puff snacks would make him gag.

Jonah underwent multiple evaluations, and doctors told his parents to keep practicing.

However, nutrition became a concern when, eventually, the only solids he would tolerate were chicken nuggets, Goldfish crackers and bananas. Mom tried blending spinach and mixing it into chocolate milk, with only limited success.

“Nothing seemed to change until we started working with the feeding specialists at MMI,” Wells said.

When Jonah first started the program, he would refuse new foods. When he would eat, he wasn’t chewing or swallowing correctly, said Rachel Knight, PhD, who treats Jonah.

To get him to accept new foods and use the correct oral-motor skills, Jonah had to become comfortable with Dr. Knight feeding him with utensils.

From there, he started eating rice-sized bites of food. That opened the door to introducing Jonah to new foods and practicing proper chewing and swallowing with him.

In addition to working with Dr. Knight, Jonah also met with a speech-language pathologist and dietitian at his appointments.

Speech-language pathologists look at the way patients are chewing and swallowing. They look for kids chewing with just their front teeth instead of their molars or for kids doing hard swallows, which is an indication that they aren’t chewing enough before swallowing, Dr. Drayton said.

Dietitians look at the nutrition kids are getting from foods they currently eat. Then they help the rest of the team prioritize which foods to introduce and in what order based on what the family eats and what foods are needed to fill nutrition gaps.

“We really had to break things down for him in small, manageable steps,” Dr. Knight said. “People are familiar with individuals who have a fear of spiders.

But our kids are afraid of food. Our kids look at food the way people with a fear of spiders look at tarantulas.”

Jonah now has appointments every two months to be sure he’s still on track. In addition to mastering a variety of foods and textures and being able to feed himself, he’s found a new favorite in cauliflower.

Another victory: Jonah can better tolerate dental appointments.

Other families also experience success at the dentist after feeding therapy.

“A fair number of our kids can’t get dental care because they don’t cooperate or have to be under anesthesia,” Dr. Drayton said. “During feeding treatment, they get used to different flavors and sensations and people working in their mouths.”

“MMI has been really life-changing for our family and for Jonah. It’s bringing me to tears. The people really care.”

– Lori Wells

At a recent appointment, Dr. Knight and Sidni Trotter, speech-language pathologist, offered occasional reminders for Jonah to “chew, chew, chew” and slow down between bites.

During one of his one-minute breaks between bites, Jonah had the entire room mimicking a dance as he played a song on his mom’s phone.

After several rounds of successfully clearing the tiny bites from his blue plate, Jonah yelled, “I did it!” He was met with hearty applause and high-fives to celebrate his success.

“MMI has been really life-changing for our family and for Jonah,” Wells said. “It’s bringing me to tears. The people really care.”



From left, Paige O'Neill and Nicole Rodriguez, PhD

CREATING A NEW GENERATION OF ABA LEADERS

Nicole Rodriguez, PhD, became interested in behavior analysis while still an undergraduate psychology student at the University of Florida, but she really fell in love with it when she began to better understand its application while at John's Hopkins' Kennedy Krieger Institute where she worked on an inpatient unit for the assessment and treatment of severe challenging behavior.

Applied behavior analysis, which has proven effective when treating symptoms associated with autism spectrum disorder is a scientific approach to understanding behavior.

"It looks at what influences certain behaviors and uses this information to develop strategies to enhance learning and reduce challenging behaviors. What is so elegant about behavior analysis is that you can apply the same principles to any issue," said Dr. Rodriguez, who today is the director of the PhD program in Applied Behavior Analysis at the

University of Nebraska Medical Center and the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

And at MMI, there are services that incorporate behavior analytic principles into clinical work, where it can apply to situations as varied as the assessment and treatment of severe behavior to pediatric feeding to early intervention with children on the autism spectrum.

“It really is client-centered in terms of looking at each individual and figuring out their specific needs and then tailoring treatment around that,” Dr. Rodriguez said.

While ABA has become the clinical standard of care for treating individuals on the autism spectrum disorder, the Munroe-Meyer Institute is one of only nine accredited PhD programs nationally. Since it was created in 2007, the PhD program has graduated 48 students, and more than 80% of these doctoral graduates have had their dissertations published in peer reviewed, scholarly journals – a testament to the quality of the work being done at MMI.

“The need for behavior analysts has grown exponentially in the field.”

– Nicole Rodriguez, PhD

Last year, students in the doctoral program received multiple national and regional awards, including the Association for Behavior Analysis International Award for Scholarly Contributions to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; a UNMC Graduate Studies fellowship; and multiple travel awards for dissemination of research at conferences across the United States. The Applied Behavior Analysis Programs Guide recently rated the program the top ABA PhD program in the country. In the most recent accreditation report, the ABAI accreditation board called the program “particularly outstanding” in the areas of student achievement, program design, faculty (including a “skilled and tireless program director”), administration and facilities.

The program’s prominence is one reason why it was the only ABA PhD program to which Paige O’Neill applied.



O’Neill, with a master’s degree and clinical experience in ABA, wasn’t interested in leaving her native Ontario for anything except her top choice – MMI.

“I told them during the interview that they were the only program I was applying to,” she said. “I don’t know if that was the best strategy, but it worked out for me.”

O’Neill had worked in various ABA positions after graduating from McMaster University and while getting her master’s degree at Brock University, both in Ontario, and she enjoyed the work. But she also “caught the research bug,” as she explains it.

“I was looking for ways to get more research experience in ABA, and most of the doctoral programs are in the United States. I found I really enjoyed doing research. The fine-grained analysis, being able to look at data ‘under a microscope,’ figuratively, and taking a precise approach to measuring the effects of our interventions – it was a lot of fun.”

At MMI, PhD students do clinical work as part of their practicum, which meant O’Neill didn’t have to give up the joy of directly serving families while working toward her PhD, either.

“A lot of our research questions and ideas actually come from what we see in the clinic,” she said.

Among the research O’Neill is working on is a program to explore avenues of teaching imitation to young children

with autism who haven’t yet acquired that skill, but her dissertation project involves an analogue model looking at how learners respond when errors are made during treatment.

“It’s been awesome,” she said. “Friends and family are always concerned about us as students. The work is hard, but it’s great. It’s awesome to be here.”

“The need for behavior analysts has grown exponentially in the field,” Dr. Rodriguez said. “Yet there is still such a need across the country, across the world as well. A lot of what we do and the designs that we use allow us to embed research into our clinical work in a way that lets us really evaluate if we’re being effective as clinicians and also contributes to the literature in ways that then help other clinicians be more effective.”

Problems are tackled in creative ways, and when published, other people can use that research as a tool on how to approach that same problem and translate that new knowledge into improved clinical practice, she said. The Munroe-Meyer Institute is known for making big contributions to the research bases, even within its very clinically focused work. Representatives of MMI can be found in many flagship journals.

“While attaining that PhD, you are refining your skills and broadening the skill set in ways that make you more effective across different realms, whether that be as a clinician or in academia, as a teacher or researcher,” Dr. Rodriguez said.

Patient VOICES

We value feedback from our patients and their families. Here's what they're saying:

Jennifer Borer was at a loss when her daughter **Maria** started scratching and biting at school. Those behaviors showed up at home, too, leaving Maria aggressive and angry if she didn't get her way.

Having previously worked with an early intervention team at MMI, Borer reached out for help. The care team helped the family learn to communicate and worked with the family to address their concerns.

"From the very beginning, it was apparent that the team loves what they do and believes in their work," Borer said.

Now the family can go to stores, family gatherings and have friends over without worrying about how anyone will react. The MMI care team also prepared Maria to go back to school, which included helping her teachers learn to work with her.

"Every day Maria was with the team, they came with the attitude that she would be successful. I knew if anyone could help her, it was this team," Borer said. "I love them for loving my child when she was at her worst. I love them for seeing the potential in her that others did not see. I love them for teaching us how to communicate again. Most importantly, I love them for giving me my little girl back."

Garrin Fiala spent nearly the first 18 months of his life in the hospital after being born prematurely.

His mom **Maryjan Fiala** wanted to share her experience with other families going through similar situations. That's when she discovered MMI and landed a part-time job at the institute.

"It was an eye-opening experience to see the breadth of services offered at MMI but also to see firsthand the incredible quality of services," Fiala said.

She quickly realized that Garrin could benefit from some of the services.

Garrin started in RiteCare, which offers traditional speech and language therapy, among other services, including some parent training.

"It was really challenging. He didn't want to be there, and he was going to let them know about it," Fiala said.

The patience of his care team paid off. Garrin, now 5, is a whiz at using his augmentative and alternative communication device, often answering questions on it before the teacher has finished asking.

He also participated in the institute's intensive feeding therapy. He's been taking all his food orally since 2022, and this summer he had his feeding tube removed.

"Our experience at MMI has been remarkable," Fiala said. "We are so proud to be connected to MMI."

Fiala likened her son's journey with MMI to a flower blooming. When he first started programming, he was closed off to the world around him.

"His personality has been able to shine so much with the advancements he's made in communication," she said. "It's been so meaningful as his parent to know that we have found services that were right for him. They worked to meet him where he was at and provided him with the individualized care and support he needed to really come into his own."



Maddy Jensen’s smile says it all.

The 13-year-old sported a grin from ear-to-ear after leaving a session of winter camp hosted by MMI’s Recreation Therapy Department.

Maddy has been going to summer and winter camps at MMI since she was 4, said her mother **Jessica Jensen**. While there for other therapies, a staffer asked why Maddy hadn’t signed up for summer camp.

“We debated if this place could handle her complex health needs,” she said. “But if she was going to go to school, she could go to camp. Now every single year we get deeper into camp.”

Camp has become “everything” to the Jensen family. It’s given Maddy both therapeutic and social opportunities, said her father, **Matthew Jensen**.

“It’s given her the opportunity to experience things we can’t do at home,” he said.

Maddy’s camp experiences led to her involvement in other MMI programming – Girls Group and the After School program.

Maddy and her family have found a sense of community at MMI through recreation therapy programming.

“I love camp. I love MMI,” Jessica Jensen said. “If we ever need something, we know we can call here.”

Matthew Jensen added, “MMI is a family. I can’t imagine our lives without it.”



Maggie McGlade didn’t think she’d see her son **Garrett** gleefully participating in arts-and-crafts projects wielding adaptive scissors.

She certainly didn’t expect to see Garrett, 3, playing soccer with his peers on a YMCA team.

Garrett is where he is today because of his care team at the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

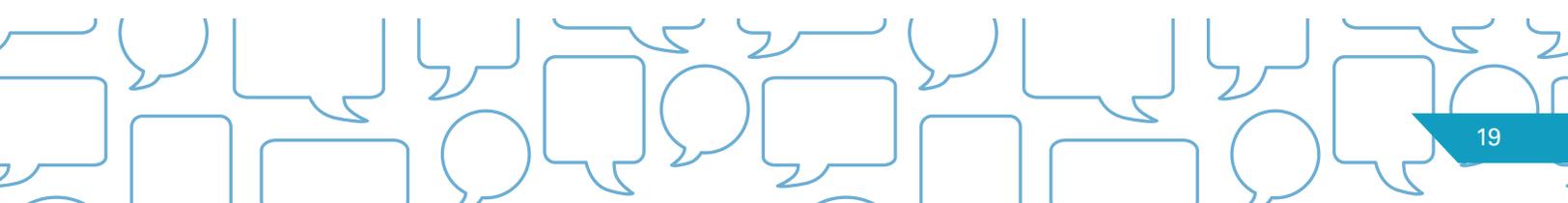
“It’s a really great community. They’re like a family,” McGlade said. “It’s so special to have these health care professionals who care for your child and want your child to succeed. It’s not a business. It’s care.”

Garrett has been going to MMI weekly since he was 17 months old, McGlade said. He’s received speech services, as well as physical therapy and occupational therapy.

When he started, Garrett knew about three words and signs. Now, McGlade said he’s a regular chatterbox.

Because of vision challenges, Garrett was behind on his gross motor skills, including sitting and walking. He spent his early days in physical therapy practicing walking up and down the third-floor halls. In occupational therapy, he’s worked on his “pincer grasp,” which is using the forefinger or middle finger and thumb to pinch or grasp objects.

“For a parent who’s anxious or uncertain about their child’s abilities, you know you’re welcome at MMI,” McGlade said. “Everyone is accepted. Inclusion is burned into the culture. It’s an example everybody can learn from.”





Building a playbook for expansion

The Munroe-Meyer Institute's goal: 10 Autism Care for Toddlers (ACT) clinics within 10 years in the state of Nebraska, each serving approximately 20 toddlers with autism at any given moment.

First opened in 2013 in Omaha near 90th and Q streets as a small, 700-square-foot facility, the original ACT Clinic has grown to almost 10,000 square feet in 2017. The Autism Care for Toddlers Clinic playbook is a simple one: to deliver evidence-based, applied behavioral analysis health care to children ages 6 and younger diagnosed on the autism spectrum.

It's a strategy that has served more than 100 families in the years since the first clinic opened, followed by a second, 8,000-square-foot clinic on Ames Avenue in North Omaha,

which opened in 2021. Now, ACT leaders are working to create a third location in Fremont in partnership with the community, projected to open in 2024.

ACT Clinics Director Regina Carroll, PhD, is excited about plans for the Fremont community partnership, funded in part by a grant from the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska (BHECN).

"The American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding granted by BHECN will help establish a partnership with Midland University and autism services in the Fremont area," Dr. Carroll said.

The space for the clinic has been identified, and we are in a final stages of signing a long-term contract with the landlord. "Our ultimate goal would be to start providing services in the Fremont area by the fall."



The Austim Care for Toddlers Clinic in Omaha North, above and at right, is the first of a proposed 10 offsite and outstate ACT Clinics.

The location also will serve as a training site for Midland University students majoring in applied behavior analysis.

Dr. Carroll said the Fremont clinic will be a good gauge of how easily the expansion of ACT Clinic services can happen in more rural areas.

“In addition to funding the centers, we need the clinical personnel to provide the services,” she said. “But the Fremont clinic will be a good test, because, although we have established the North Omaha ACTion (Autism Care for Toddlers in Omaha North) location as the second ACT location, that clinic still is in Omaha. Fremont’s clinic will be the first one outside of Omaha and in a more rural under-resourced area.

“Once Fremont succeeds, we’ll have the playbook for future expansion in other areas of the state.”

The ACT Clinics are designed to provide services to children on the autism spectrum as early as possible.

“We take children on the autism spectrum as young as 2 years old, some as soon as they’re diagnosed. But we could potentially serve children even younger than that,” Dr. Carroll said. “There’s other work going on at MMI’s integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders to get into earlier diagnostics.”

The ACT Clinics are what Dr. Carroll calls a “proven concept.” The interventions provided are evidence-based and have shown documented success in positively impacting a child’s development.

“Once Fremont succeeds, we’ll have the playbook for future expansion in other areas of the state.”

– Regina Carroll, PhD

And then, there are the personal stories.

“Parents consistently telling us that they like what we’re doing, they consistently say that they they’re seeing great improvement,” Dr. Carroll said. “They are excited by the progress, and we want to make that happen for families throughout the entire state with clinics as close as possible to their homes and communities.”

Karoly Mirnics, MD, PhD, director of MMI, said:

“Access to high-quality autism treatment and care should not depend on where you live in our state. These are continuous, long-term services that are life-changing and must be available within a reasonable distance.”

The clinic expansion, he said, will help parents avoid what he called an “impossible choice – uproot your family and move to an urban center with the available ASD services, or stay in your community and have no services for your loved one.

“No family should face this decision,” Dr. Mirnics said.



Recognizing Excellence

The heart of MMI is its people. In early 2023, the following individuals were recognized by the institute and the university for sustained efforts and excellence above those required by daily job functions in service of MMI and its clients.

Celebration of Excellence winners:



Diversity and Inclusion Award

Jackie Hankins-Berry, MMI Community Engagement

Hankins-Berry works tirelessly to promote diversity, equity and inclusion at MMI. She co-chaired the inaugural MMI DEI Committee and has worked to promote DEI initiatives at MMI. Hankins-Berry has offered an important lens in the recruitment and retention of staff and faculty. Nominators described Hankins-Berry as a quiet force who is determined to make MMI the best place to work and the best place to receive services for individuals of diverse backgrounds.



Community Service Award

Graciela Sharif, MMI University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Nominators noted that Sharif is widely recognized by families and community partners across the state for her work in making systems more inclusive and accessible. She works to increase awareness of MMI to members of all communities. Often representing MMI at public-facing events, she shows respect for all groups as she advocates for their care and inclusion. Her connections enhance the reputation of MMI and helps in the institute's ability to connect, collaborate and serve those who are marginalized and underserved.



Spirit Award

Kim Falk, MMI University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Falk brings a positive attitude to MMI and connects with her peers on a caring, human level, her nominators said. She's shown the ability to maximize collaboration and partnerships with work on events with HETRA and Hispanic Little Angels. She also has a long history of advocating for inclusivity within area schools. Falk brings an enthusiasm to her work that gets others excited to be involved. She lives the tenet of MMI's mission to build an inclusive community for all people with disabilities.



Educator Award

Rachel Ray, MMI University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service

Ray has worked on many transition programs, including Opportunity Brew, the MMI-University of Nebraska at Omaha Trailblazer program, the College and Career Exploration program, and her publication of "Seeds of Sustainability – Partnerships for Successful Transition Programs." Ray works long hours to get the jobs done. When her students and interns have extra time, she offers their support to other MMI projects and stays on board to help with the mentorship during the tasks.



Researcher Award

Javid Rahaman, PhD, MMI Department of Severe Behavior

Dr. Rahaman initiates research projects through the lens of enhancing the autonomy of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Nominators applauded his passion for collaboration and compassion, noting his projects cut across disciplines, MMI departments and all levels and backgrounds of fellow researchers. Dr. Rahaman often is sought out for mentorship by junior researchers and has successfully led clinical teams in collection of pilot data to support future research grant applications.



Support Staff Award

Christi Ives, MMI Department of Psychology

Ives has shown innovation in identifying more efficient procedures that minimize the administrative burden on providers, creating improved collaboration between the psychology department and the patient information office, and improving the patient experience. Nominators and others call her an advocate for the training program and trainees, often providing additional support. Ives keeps the department running smoothly while also going to considerable lengths to keep the department inclusive.



Staff Clinical Provider Award

Amy Volkman, MMI Department of Pediatric Feeding

Volkman was recognized for a variety of efforts, including her work creating nutrition-dense recipes for families, developing strong relationships with patients and families, sparking initiatives for new programs and planning for future nutritional program growth at MMI. Volkman connects with families in individualized ways, taking whatever time is necessary to understand a family's thoughts, feelings and circumstances in order to deliver the highest quality care.



Faculty Clinical Services Award

Patricia Zemantic, PhD, integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders

Nominators praised Dr. Zemantic for improving the service provision of the Autism Diagnostic Clinic by streamlining assessment processes, increasing client capacity while maintaining high standards of practice and fostering the development and retention of trainees. She also works with the LEND program, spearheaded development of the BLINK program and works to keep the iCASD compliant with all regulations. Dr. Zemantic also is actively engaged in outreach with community stakeholders.

2023 Gold U Awardees

The Gold U is a UNMC-wide award, given to employees who consistently deliver outstanding performance and service.

April: Paul Laikko

2023 Silver U Awardees

The Silver U is a UNMC-wide award, given to employees whose overall performance is above and beyond the scope of their position. Recipients are nominated by co-workers or supervisors, and awardees are selected by a panel of judges led by the UNMC Department of Human Resources.

January: Amanda Morris

May: Katelyn Kelley

July: Alyssa Payton

September: Michelle Kelly, Kerry Miller, PhD

November: Samantha Montemarano

MMI Facts & Figures

More than

17 Disciplines

5 supporting philanthropic boards

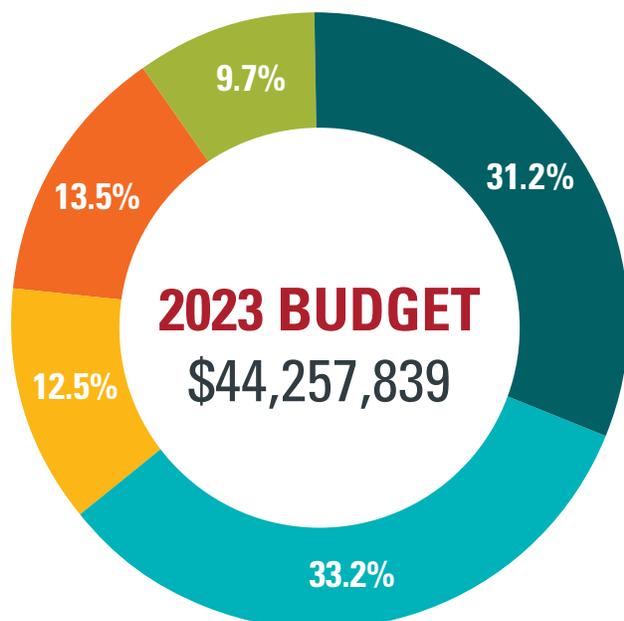


Approximately

540 Employees

One of 67 federally designated University Center of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities Education, Research and Service (UCEDD).

One of 60 Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and related Disabilities (LEND) programs.



Revenue Sources

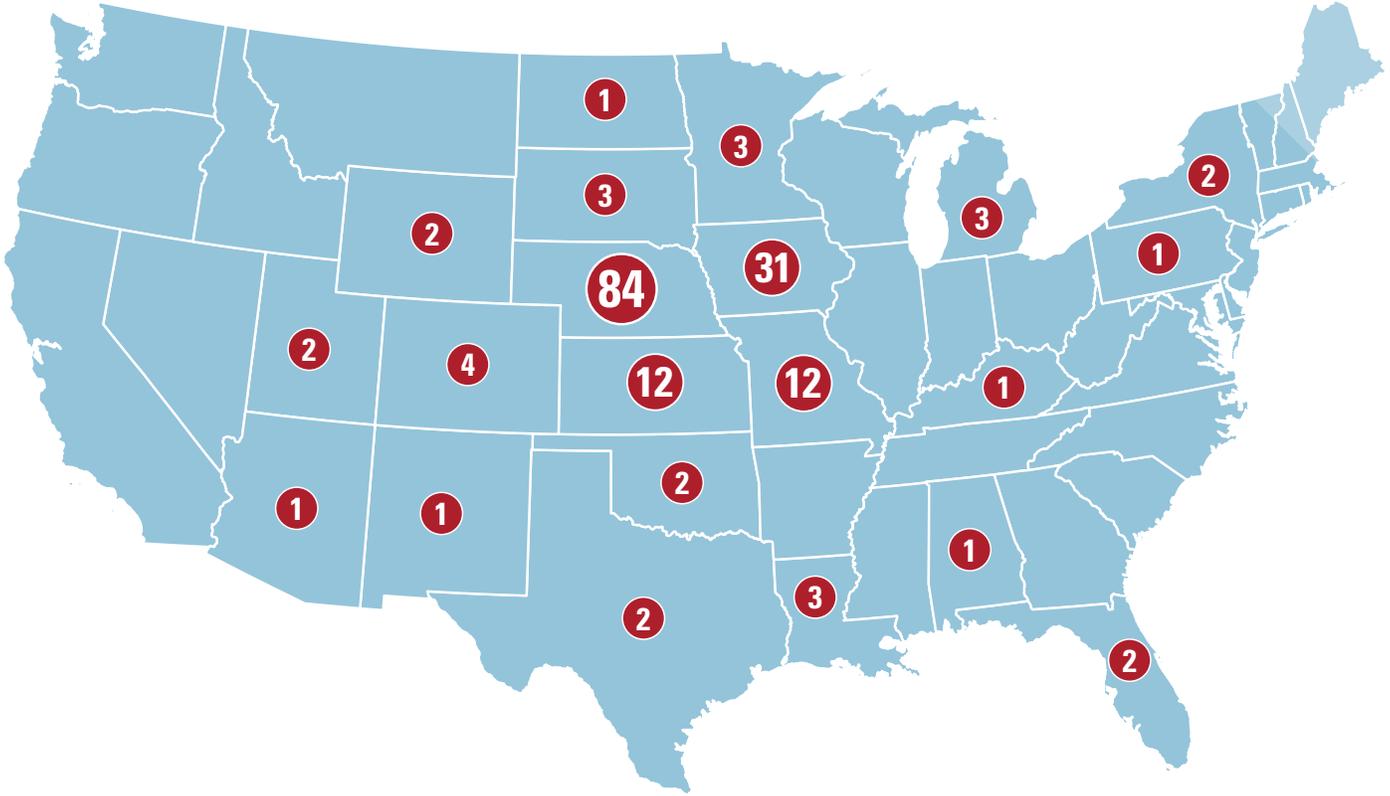
- Clinical service reimbursement
- State/local/school grants & contracts
- Philanthropic/other funds
- Federal grants & contracts
- State appropriation

Annually, more than **\$44 million** budget, with more than **\$20 million** in federal, state and local grants and contracts and **\$5.5 million** in philanthropy.

CLINICAL SERVICES

Where we provide services

Represented by number of counties serviced in each state.



Approximately

95,000

Yearly Services



serving clients across the lifespan with 55% taking place in the community.

In 2023, more than **298 volunteers** provided approximately **9,430 service hours**.



MMI has more than **34 provider locations** with 15 outside Omaha and more than 90 types of services provided.

31

Recreational Therapy Programs and Clubs

Serving approximately **600 families and participants** annually.

Providing more than **27,500 hours of service**.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH



We provided **66** continuing education events to **4,222** participants. MMI UCEDD provided **195** community trainings for **7,387** participants



Approximately

1,517 Hours
of technical assistance.

EDUCATION & RESEARCH

More than

11,000 Participants

in workshops, conferences, teleconferences and other community education activities in domestic and international forums.

Types of students trained: high school, undergraduate, graduate, predoctoral interns, post-doctoral fellows/residents, family advocates, self-advocates, first responders, IDD and community service providers and educators

Disciplines trained: applied behavior analysis, counseling, child development, dentistry, education, family medicine, genetic counseling, law, medical genetics, nursing, occupational therapy, pediatrics, physical therapy, psychology, public health, recreation, social work and speech-language pathology

Professional clinical training students: **409**

Medium- and long-term students: **154**

Federally funded training programs: **6**

Graduate programs: **3**

Certification programs: **20**

Noncertification training programs: **13**

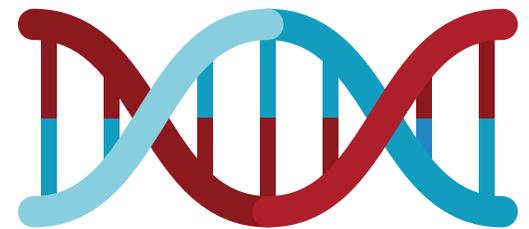
Research training programs: **2**

Continuing education programs: **5**

Professional in-service training programs: **5**

MMI receives approximately

\$5.9 MILLION
in federal research funding annually.



57 Active Projects

Funding Type

20 Federal

20 State

10 Foundation/ Non-Profit

4 External University/Hospitals

3 Internal to UNMC/ NU Foundation

102 Applications

72 External, **30** Internal

51 Funded (50% Success Rate)



BOARD HIGHLIGHTS

Hattie B. Munroe Foundation

The Hattie B. Munroe Foundation donated 115 gift cards totaling \$17,250 during the holidays to MMI client families facing specific challenges. The foundation, which has been a mainstay of support for MMI for more than a century, provided a total of more than \$818,000 in funding to support mission-critical initiatives, including Camp Munroe and related programs, and two professorships – for the MMI director and the MMI director of research, among other efforts.

The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities

The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities held its Walk & Roll for Disabilities on March 5, drawing approximately 325 people and raising \$38,000. The foundation worked with the MMI Department of Recreational Therapy in 2023 to increase programming for adults with developmental disabilities.

The Munroe-Meyer Institute Board of Directors

The board works closely with MMI leadership to inform the public of the breadth and quality of MMI's programs. The board annually awards the Rhoda Davis Blatt and Hattie B. Munroe Foundation scholarships. The board oversees the distribution of holiday gift cards to selected MMI families in need, as well as reviews and approves the MMI Department of Recreational Therapy budget before it advances to the Hattie B. Munroe Foundation board.

The Munroe-Meyer Guild

The Munroe-Meyer Guild held its 54th Garden Walk in 2023. The annual tour of select neighborhood gardens raised \$30,000 to support grants for innovative projects and highly impactful training endeavors. Grants for 2023-24, for which funding was supplemented by the Ruth and Bill Scott Foundation, totaled more than \$70,000, and included projects such as "Expanding Intensive ABA Intervention to Group Settings for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder," "More Than a Feeling: Integrating Biofeedback Into the Treatment of Pediatric Feeding Disorders" and "ABLE: Accessible Basic Life Education.

The Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska

Last year, Scottish Rite Masons and RiteCare clinicians hosted WalkRite for RiteCare at Zorinsky Lake, which raised about \$6,200 for speech therapy services. In September, the RiteCare Classic drew 23 teams and raised \$20,000 for speech therapy. In October, Joan Marcus was recognized for more than 50 years advocating for services for Nebraskans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The Friends of RiteCare Dinner raised nearly \$50,000 to support speech therapy services. In total, Nebraska Scottish Rite Freemasons donated about \$786,583 for speech therapy through the UNMC Munroe-Meyer Institute and the University of Nebraska at Kearney for speech services.

The Community Advisory Committee

The MMI Community Advisory Committee continued to provide critical input on MMI initiatives such as the building project, programmatic planning and organization in preparation for MMI's transition to the new building. The committee serves as a valuable working partner in guiding the institute's activities by representing the voice of the community and its local participants. They have provided a critical sounding board in shaping both the current and future path of MMI.





University of Nebraska FOUNDATION

Here at the University of Nebraska Foundation, we believe that philanthropy is an expression of that part of ourselves that cares and believes in the potential for change. This is especially true of those individuals and families who choose to contribute to the mission of the Munroe-Meyer Institute. Whether investing in transformational research, supporting a program that's dear to their hearts, or honoring a beloved provider; each time someone gives, they are changing the world for the better.

The University of Nebraska Foundation is honored to support the Munroe-Meyer Institute through our "Only in Nebraska" campaign, and we look forward to partnering together with you to sustain the legacy of care and transformation at the Munroe-Meyer Institute. Thank you for caring!

Jessica Janssen Wolford

University of Nebraska Foundation

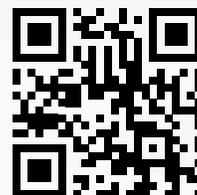




ONLY 
in **NEBRASKA**

A Campaign for Our University's Future™

To learn more about how to make a gift to MMI, please go to nufoundation.org/mmi, or contact Jessica Janssen Wolford at jessica.janssenwolford@nufoundation.org or 402-504-3327.



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**UNMC Munroe-Meyer Institute
for Genetics and Rehabilitation**

6902 Pine St., Omaha, NE 68182

unmc.edu/mmi