

BUILDING MOMENTUM

2025 ANNUAL REPORT



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA MEDICAL CENTER
MUNROE-MEYER INSTITUTE



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 2025 Annual Report

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

Photography: Kiley Cruse, UNMC Strategic Communications

Design: Tom Waples, UNMC Strategic Communications

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A MESSAGE FROM THE DEAN AND DIRECTOR



Growth sometimes creeps up on us. It seems to happen overnight. The child who just started kindergarten is now leaving for college. The garden you've been laboring over is suddenly in glorious bloom. The institute once called "the best-kept secret in Omaha" now has a national and international reputation and footprint.

At the Munroe-Meyer Institute, we continuously witness this change on our journey to extraordinary: we build on the strong foundation laid by those who came before us to launch ever-more transformational programs and initiatives.

The dictionary definition of momentum is strength gained by a series of events. More precisely, Newton's second law of motion states that the rate of change of a body's momentum is equal to the net force acting on it.

And we have plenty of force behind us to build our momentum — providers, patients and their families, philanthropists, elected officials, university leadership, foundations and our community all fuel this momentum. The past year was a story of an institute gathering momentum as it continues to transform lives.

It has been an exciting year, and I am happy to share a few stories with you. We look forward to an equally impactful year ahead, as the best is yet to come!

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Karoly Mironics".

Karoly Mironics, MD, PhD
Dean and Director
Hattie B. Munroe Professor
Munroe-Meyer Institute
University of Nebraska Medical Center



Primary care to be offered at MMI for patients across the lifespan

Ear infections, broken arms, immunizations and school physicals. Soon, individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities will be able to visit the Munroe-Meyer Institute for these and other primary care medical needs.



Families often have asked for MMI to consider offering primary care services, said Amy Nordness, PhD, associate dean and director of MMI. It can be challenging, she said, for families to find a physician who understands individuals with IDD.

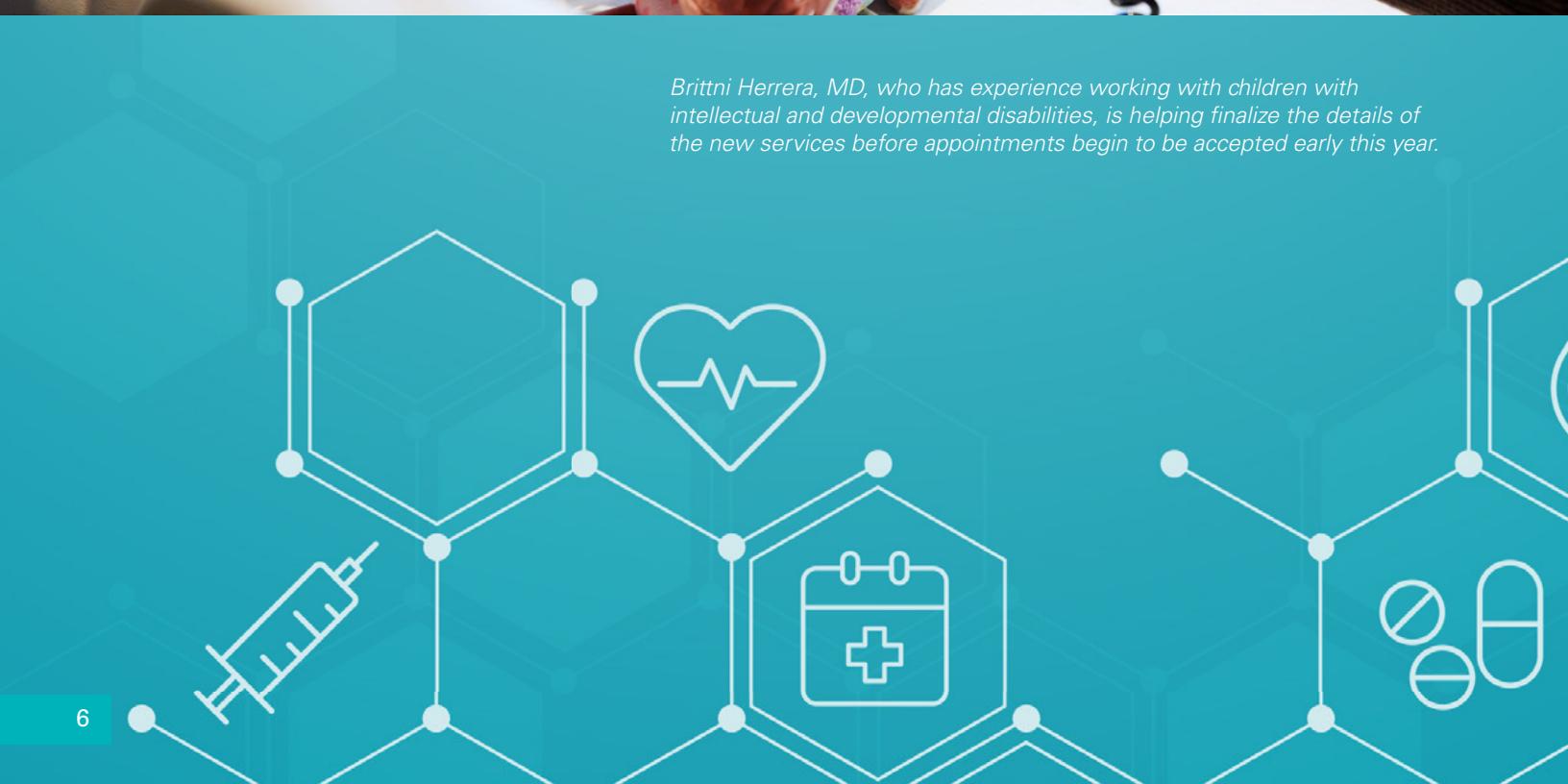
"Our primary care clinic will draw on MMI's long history with the IDD community to provide that specialized primary care for individuals with IDD and their families," Dr. Nordness said.

Although bringing primary care services to the institute has long been the plan, it has been actively in the works since January of 2024.

The plan is to have two pediatricians and two adult providers to start. As of November 2025, one pediatrician, Brittni Herrera, MD, already is on staff. Dr. Herrera has been helping to finalize details of the new services before appointments begin to be accepted sometime in spring of 2026.



Brittni Herrera, MD, who has experience working with children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, is helping finalize the details of the new services before appointments begin to be accepted early this year.



Melanie Welsh, MMI director of community engagement, said the primary care effort was essential to the institute's core mission.

"Everyone deserves access to high-quality health care," she said. "This effort not only demonstrates our commitment to our families, but it provides a foundation for the provision of all of our other services across the lifespan."

Six rooms on the third floor will be dedicated to pediatric primary care and six rooms to adult care. Some construction is underway to expand lab space and add an X-ray suite, Dr. Nordness said.

While the clinic's primary focus is on individuals with disabilities, neurotypical and typically developing children and their families can be seen at the clinic, too.

But doctors employed at the clinic have a special interest in caring for individuals with disabilities and complex health care needs, Dr. Nordness said.

"They will know the ins and outs of the care. They will understand the complexities and the need to give patients appropriate time and attention," she said.

Kim Anton spent nearly eight years finding a physician who was the right fit to treat her two adult children, both of whom have a rare genetic condition.

She encountered several hurdles, such as finding promising physicians in each son's preferred health system, only to find that they weren't accepting new patients. Meanwhile, other physicians didn't seem to have a good understanding of her sons' condition.

"We want to be a one-stop shop, a medical home for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities."

— Amy Nordness, PhD

Finally, her older son's ENT suggested a physician. He's been seeing that doctor for two years now. "It was chance," Anton said.

The struggle to find a primary care physician is disheartening, Anton said. "I'm a firm believer that you get better quality of care with consistency. When you switch doctors back and forth, you don't get the same care."

A primary care program at MMI, where Anton's oldest son Robbie has received services, is a great idea, she said.

"I would not want anybody to have to go through everything we've had to go through," Anton said.

Because the medical staff at the MMI clinics will understand disabilities and impact across the lifespan, appointments may take longer. Extra time will be built in to allow for communication differences and physical challenges.

Patients can be connected to other MMI services through the clinics as well, including dentistry, audiology and multiple therapies. Families also can find integrated clinical support through social workers, interpreters, registered dietitians and psychologists.

"We want to be a one-stop shop, a medical home for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities," Dr. Nordness said.

The emerging program goes hand-in-hand with MMI's new Transition to Lifespan Care Clinic, which aids individuals with intellectual or developmental disabilities as they transition to adulthood.

While patients will have the choice to use an MMI provider, the clinic also can help connect them to other physicians in the area.

The primary care program will elevate the importance of MMI's care coordination efforts across all disciplines, Dr. Nordness said.

"MMI is a home away from home for our patients," she said. "They're comfortable coming here, and we can put them at ease and take care of their medical needs."





Andrew Sodawasser with MMI's Severe Behavior Department demonstrates behavioral de-escalation approaches during a training session with staff members. MMI has created a standardized, inclusive approach to behavioral crisis response.

In-house program to offer standardized approach to crisis response

At the Munroe-Meyer Institute, an effort is underway to create a standardized, inclusive approach to behavioral crisis response, one that prioritizes safety and empathy for both staff and patients during times of escalation.

Andrew Sodawasser, licensed behavior analyst and mental health provider in the Severe Behavior Department, is spearheading the development of a comprehensive de-escalation and crisis management training program.

"Given the comorbidity of behavioral challenges within our patient

population at MMI, especially in individuals experiencing communication difficulties, cognitive differences or developmental delays, this program is designed to promote patient autonomy and give every staff member the tools to respond effectively, safely and compassionately," Sodawasser said.

What sets this program apart, he said, is the intent to include everyone at every level, from clinical teams to front desk staff and administrators.

"Anyone could encounter an escalated situation," he said. "It is about emotional regulation, clear

communication and building rapport. Additionally, these situations aren't isolated to patient interactions. Caregivers, community members or even colleagues in a workplace can experience stressors that may result in frustration and crisis situations. We want our staff to be prepared to de-escalate and respond effectively, regardless of who is escalated."

The training model is tiered, with core de-escalation and prevention strategies taught to all employees and more specialized safety protocols reserved for staff most likely to encounter aggression.

Sodawasser said this new program expands into proactive and preventative practices, including:

- Verbal de-escalation strategies;
- Prevention strategies;
- Responsiveness to unique patient needs;
- Trauma-informed care;
- Resiliency training, to mitigate burnout;
- Seeking support and triaging additional resources; and
- Formalized debriefing protocols, for after incident reviews.

"It's not just about reacting in the moment. It's about preventing escalation and learning from each event, so we're not repeating the same mistakes," he said.

Another major goal is to apply consistency and standardization. Currently, different departments use different systems, and some don't have formalized training.

"We want everyone responding to crisis in the same way, using the same language and procedures, prioritizing the use of least-restrictive/invasive procedures. That's especially important when patients interact with multiple teams," Sodawasser said.

"It isn't just about staff safety but also patient safety and treatment effectiveness. When staff and caregivers are trained well, they are more confident, prepared and consistent in their approach."

To ensure consistency, the team is developing:

- Standardized presentations and assessment tools;
- Training manuals and competency rubrics;
- Train-the-trainer modules with clear competency requirements; and

- Audit and evaluation measures to ensure trainees maintain high procedural fidelity.

While the current focus is internal, Sodawasser envisions a broader impact.

"Long-term, I'd love to see these supports embedded across UNMC and Nebraska Medicine services, such as emergency departments and inpatient units, and into community programs such as school districts," he said.

Sodawasser said he hopes future iterations will support the entire region, specifically:

- Family caregivers, many of whom face high costs and difficulty accessing private training;
- Community clinics and community service and support providers;
- Hospital facilities and pediatric care providers; and
- School districts, where responses to behavior vary widely.

"If we could help rural schools and smaller programs across Nebraska access consistent, evidence-based training, that would be a huge win," he said. "Additionally, we would love if every one of our patients' caregivers across the institute had access to this type of training."

In the final stages of development, Sodawasser has clear outcomes in mind. Potential metrics include:

- Fewer injuries and incident reports for staff and patients;
- Fewer patient appointment cancellations or discharges due to behavioral issues;
- Higher staff satisfaction and feelings of preparedness and safety;

- Higher caregiver and patient satisfaction; and
- Improved patient outcomes such as reduced patient incidents and reduced time to meet goals.

"Ultimately, it all comes down to improving patient care. If we can prepare staff to meet patients where they're at, even during behavioral crises, then we've succeeded," he said.

The program is being developed in collaboration with team members across MMI, including Rachel Norton-Turk in the department of severe behavior; Brenda Bassingthwaite, PhD, Marla Smith, Melissa Hunter, PhD, and Erika Franta Bretscher, PhD, in the department of psychology; and Emily Sullivan, PhD, formerly with the integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders.

The team also is working closely with other UNMC and the University of Nebraska at Omaha programs to prioritize safety and legal standards and push to innovate the program even more.

MMI Associate Dean and Director Amy Nordness, PhD, has been instrumental in championing the initiative.

"The goal is always to provide the best care and supports for our patients and families," Dr. Nordness said. "We are excited to have Andrew lead us forward to create a program that meets all our expectations."

Sodawasser said he is optimistic about piloting the program by early 2026. "We've been having conversations about the need for this for years. It's exciting to finally be moving forward."

NEW WAVE OF LEADERS STEPPING UP

As long-time administrators have retired from critical posts, a new wave of leaders has been stepping up at the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

In the last year, four major leadership changes were announced — Kerry Miller, PhD, Regina Carroll, PhD, Tara Fahmie, PhD, and Jennifer Burt, PhD, are shifting into new roles at the institute.

This new group of leaders follows a “generation of visionary leaders,” said Karoly Mornics, MD, PhD, dean and director of MMI.

“We expect great things from them, as they have already demonstrated a skill set and vision that will take MMI to new heights,” Dr. Mornics said. “I am very enthusiastic to see how MMI will further evolve under their leadership.”

Leadership changes include:



**Kerry Miller, PhD,
associate dean
and director of
academic affairs**

Dr. Miller took over the role from

Keith Allen, PhD, who stepped down at the end of June 2025.

The transition has been exciting and energizing, Dr. Miller said, although navigating the nuances of different training opportunities has been challenging.

“I have had the privilege of working alongside so many talented faculty, staff and trainees during my time at MMI,” Dr. Miller said. “Stepping into this associate dean role has given me a broader perspective on how all of these pieces fit together.”

One of her immediate goals is to create more consistent student onboarding across programs and disciplines, building on the already strong foundation of interdisciplinary training. She also hopes to strengthen academic partnerships and ensure educational programs are high quality and highly sought after.

Annually, MMI provides clinical training experiences to more than 300 students representing more than 40 colleges and universities. The institute also is home to the top-ranked applied behavior analysis PhD program in the country.

Being part of a new chapter at MMI is an honor, Dr. Miller said.

“We are at an exciting point where new leadership is bringing fresh ideas, while also holding tight to the

institute’s mission,” she said. “For me, being part of this new wave means embracing collaboration and innovation and ensuring that our academic programs prepare the next generation of professionals to lead with both excellence and compassion.”

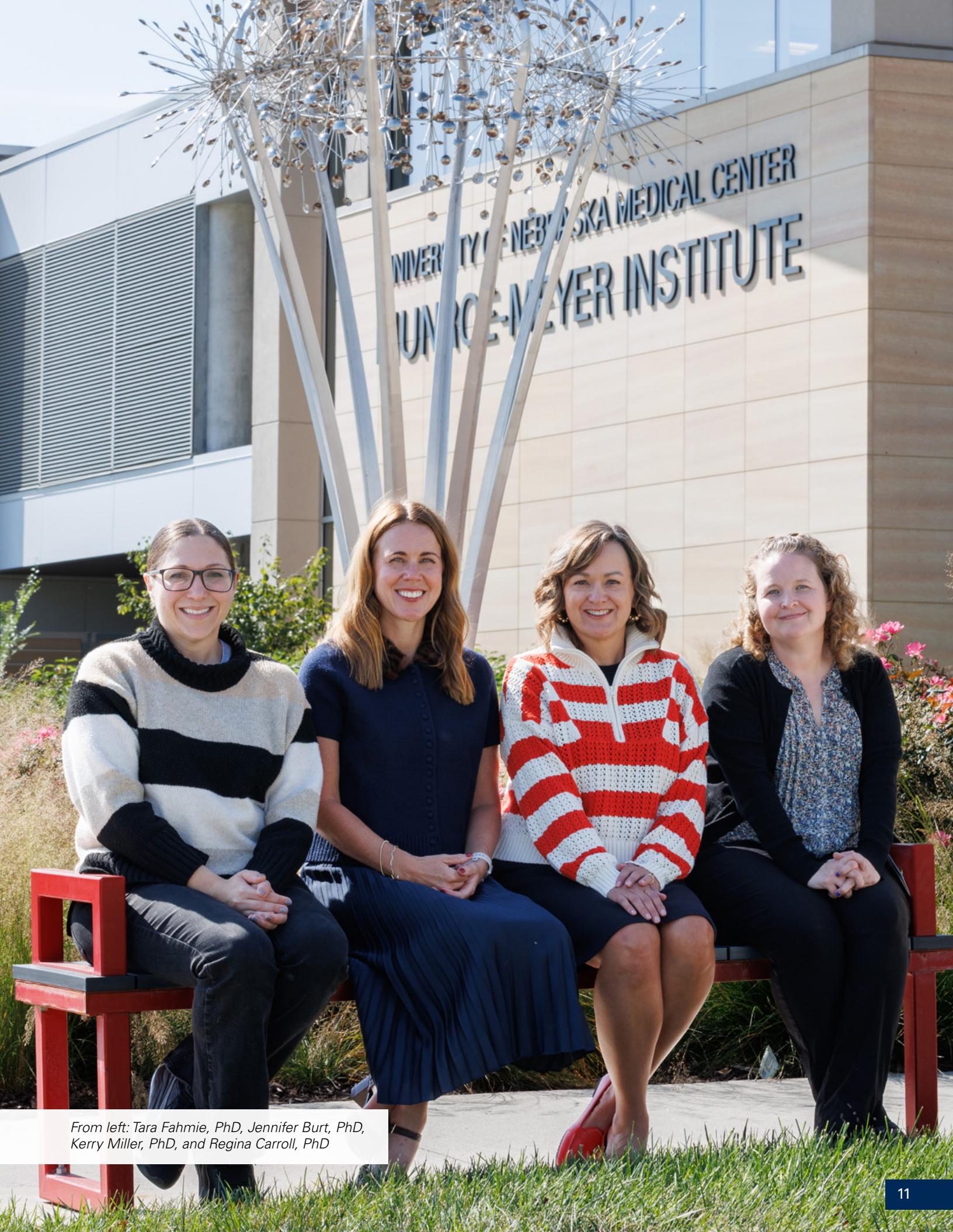


**Regina Carroll,
PhD, associate
dean and director
for clinical
services**

Dr. Carroll is inheriting this position from Amy Nordness, PhD. Dr. Nordness will continue serving as associate dean and director of MMI.

The transition has been energizing, Dr. Carroll said. She’s enjoyed getting to know the people in MMI’s different departments and learning more about the work happening across the institute. MMI provided approximately 130,000 clinical services in the last year, increasing clinical volume by more than 15%.

“Every conversation has given me a better sense of how to support our collective goals and strengthen the connections between programs,” Dr. Carroll said.



From left: Tara Fahmie, PhD, Jennifer Burt, PhD, Kerry Miller, PhD, and Regina Carroll, PhD

“We expect great things from them, as they have already demonstrated a skill set and vision that will take MMI to new heights.”

— Karoly Mirelles, MD, PhD

Dr. Carroll previously led and established MMI's ACT Clinics. She still serves as associate director of the integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders. In her new role, she will oversee how departments collaborate at MMI.

“Being part of this new wave of leadership means contributing to something bigger than any one program,” Dr. Carroll said. “It is about connecting the dots and helping all parts of MMI thrive together.”



**Tara Fahmie, PhD,
director of the
department of
severe behavior**

Dr. Fahmie is leading the department after the departure of Amanda Zangrillo, PsyD.

The challenges of learning the new role have been eased by heavy support from Dr. Zangrillo and upper administration at MMI, Dr. Fahmie said. That support has allowed her to focus on plans for the department's future.

The department is one of four academic centers of its kind across the country. Last year, they served more than 50 families in day treatment and intensive outpatient programs.

Dr. Fahmie's first goal is to address the department's waitlist and service capacity.

“We have incredible resources for supporting families, and I would love to promote better access in our community,” she said. “One step in that direction is welcoming a new clinical faculty member to our department in 2026.”

Stepping into her new leadership role has provided an opportunity to step back and reflect on past successes while also embracing opportunity for innovation.

“One of my favorite things about my new role has been working alongside talented colleagues to envision our future,” Dr. Fahmie said.



**Jennifer Burt,
PhD, associate
director of
Leadership
Education
in Neuro-
developmental
and Related Disorders (LEND)**

Dr. Burt will transition from associate director of the Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental and Related Disabilities (LEND) Program to director under the mentorship of Cindy Ellis, MD, and the leadership team.

The transition period has helped Dr. Burt reconnect with the program and deepen relationships with its faculty and trainees.

One of her early goals is to engage with each LEND faculty member to learn about their experiences and perspectives on the training program.

“These conversations are helping us identify opportunities for growth and innovation as we prepare for the next federal grant cycle,” she said.

“It's a meaningful way to honor the program's more than 30-year legacy while collaboratively shaping its future.”

MMI is one of 60 LEND programs in the country and falls in the category of LENDs with the highest tier of funding.

It's exciting, she said, to be surrounded by passionate, visionary colleagues who are committed to advancing care for individuals with disabilities and complex health needs.

“This leadership team brings fresh energy, deep expertise and a shared dedication to equity and innovation,” Dr. Mirelles said. “This team will ensure the mission continues to evolve to meet the needs of Omaha and communities across Nebraska as MMI expands into a lifespan model and integrates primary care.”

Supporting boards also seeing new generation of leadership

The Munroe-Meyer Institute's supporting boards also are seeing leadership changes.

The MMI Operating Board, Munroe Meyer Guild and Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska all welcomed new leaders in the last year.

MMI Operating Board

Patrick Cavanaugh stepped into the president role in January 2025, taking over for Brian McEvitt.

Cavanaugh, who has been on the board for about a decade, said he's enjoyed learning the ins and outs of MMI's services and the impact MMI has on the community.

"I'm honored to serve as president this term," Cavanaugh said. "Although there have been challenges in the last year, I'm impressed with the dedication of staff and leadership in facing those issues. Under the leadership of Dean and Director Karoly Mornics, MD, PhD, I am confident we will come through this period stronger and more resilient."

McEvitt served as president for two years and has been a board member since 2007. Having served on the board is an honor, he said. Serving as president offered insight into MMI's reach and allowed McEvitt to be an ambassador for the organization.

"MMI is an incredible organization that does so much for the disability community," McEvitt said. "It's been amazing to see its growth and impact over the last 18 years."

Munroe-Meyer Guild

Longtime guild president Luann Rabe stepped down from her post in September 2025. Replacing her is Jennifer Read, who has been a member of the guild for several years.

Rabe served as president for 13 years, helping to grow the guild to its current size of more than 25 members.

The guild's primary fundraiser is the annual Garden Walk. Funds raised are instrumental in supporting seed grants at MMI, Read said.

"I'm truly honored to serve as president, she said. "Every member plays such an important role in preparing for the walk and I'm deeply grateful for each and every one of them."

"The guild now has a very dedicated group of women who volunteer many hours to achieve the premier garden walk in the region," Rabe said. "The guild is in great hands."

Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska

David Greenberg replaced John Maxell as general secretary of Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska in July 2025.

Maxell served in the role for 10 years, although it took three asks before he agreed to take the position. Once he got involved and learned more about MMI, he was hooked.

"It was the most meaningful thing I did in my life," Maxell said. "I got to see the work the clinicians did and the quality of the clinicians. The care they offer is unbelievable."

Greenberg, who moved to Omaha from Illinois about three years ago, has been involved with Scottish Rite since 2009.

"Being able to sit on the board of MMI is one of those rare jobs where one gets to see the good works enabled through organizational donations, while applying one's talents and network connections to the benefit of MMI," he said. "I look forward to being able to help MMI grow and prosper for many years to come."



A camper plays virtual reality games during MMI's Hand Arm Bimanual Intensive Training Virtual Reality camp. The camp is designed to get children to use both hands while completing tasks in the form of play.

Virtual reality offers healthy challenge to camp participants

Entering his teenage years, Connor Strobel started to find traditional therapies for his cerebral palsy less and less appealing. The therapeutic tasks he needed to perform in those sessions seemed repetitive and boring.

But two years ago, Strobel found Hand Arm Bimanual Intensive Training Virtual Reality camp at the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

Traditional HABIT camps are designed to allow children with cerebral palsy and other conditions to use both hands while completing tasks in the form of play. MMI's camp adds in virtual reality gaming to net similar results while incorporating new technology.

Strobel, now 15, doesn't see the camp as just another therapy session.

"I feel like I'm in a dream," he said during his first session of camp. "I wake up every morning, and it's time for video games."

Over the summer, Strobel tackled another 10-day session at MMI — this time with an added element. Strobel was one of four campers to participate using brain-computer interface (BCI) at the Munroe-Meyer Institute's virtual reality lab.

The work builds on previous MMI work with VR games, which comprise the bulk of the VR activities at the camp, and it includes key contributions from Ryan Thomas, clinical research associate, and Elizabeth Fortin, DPT.

By wearing a sensor cap, camp facilitators could see the regions of Strobel's brain and could track the intention to move his upper limbs. They could then deliver gentle stimulation to Strobel's weaker arm, encouraging movement.

The stimulation is delivered as a tingling sensation, similar to the pins and needles feeling of your hands or feet falling asleep, said Ahad Behboodi, PhD, assistant professor in the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Department of Biomechanics, who designed and implemented the BCI aspect of camp.

To be effective, campers need to repeat the same motion over and over. The virtual reality element is key in helping them from getting bored or fatigued, Dr. Behboodi said.

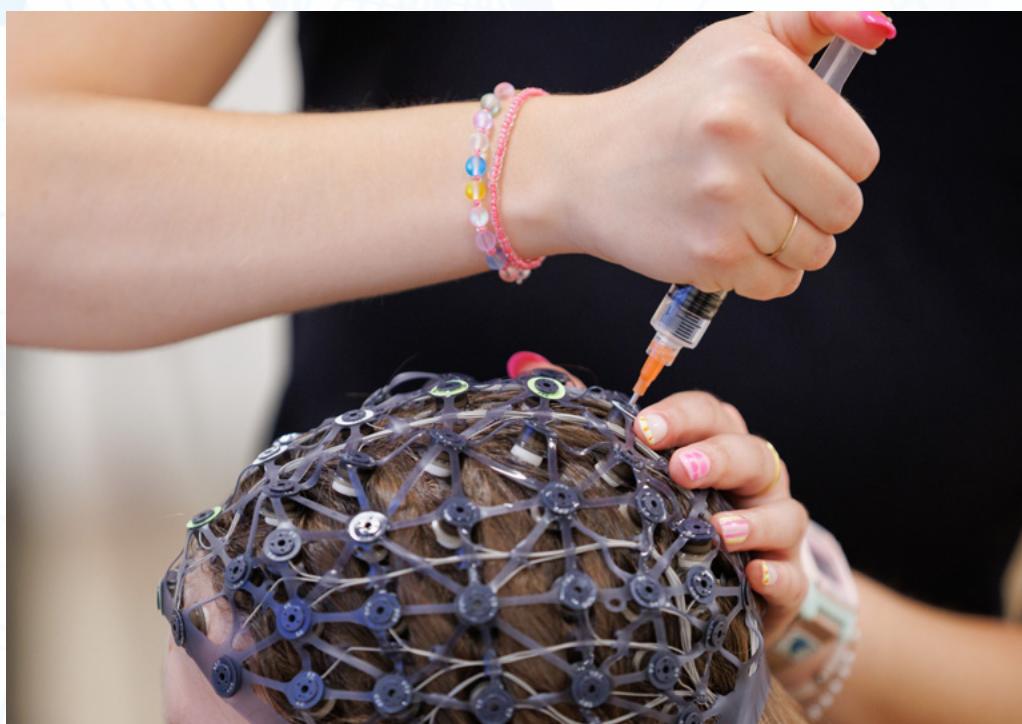
The goal of using BCI, he said, is to see better connection between the brain and the muscles.

"We want a healthy level of challenge — both physically and mentally — to get them to the next level from where they started at camp," Dr. Behboodi said.

The MMI team will compare results of campers during the BCI-VR camp and the VR camp alone, said Andrea Cunha, PhD, assistant professor in the MMI Department of Physical Therapy. They will measure and compare how both camps can help participants with the use of their arms and hands, such as bimanual coordination, dexterity and participation in daily activities.

"We use clinical measures to see how they use both hands together," Dr. Cunha said. "Our goal is not only to make sure we're getting similar or better results but also to understand how we can best support children."

Drs. Behboodi and Cunha received a three-year grant from the National Institutes of Health to continue the project.



Connor Strobel was one of four campers to participate in HABIT camp with brain-computer interface. Strobel sported a sensor cap designed to deliver gentle stimulation to his weaker arm, encouraging movement.



A camper receives a new trophy for completing goals during HABIT camp at MMI.

Individuals with cerebral palsy often have a weaker side. Camp is designed to get participants using both hands equally through the virtual reality games, but also in making snacks and playing on the playground.

"They get very good at doing things with one hand," Dr. Cunha said. "At the beginning of camp, we have to prompt them to use that non-dominant hand in the games. As time passes, you see the use of that hand coming naturally."

At his first HABIT VR camp in 2023, Strobel received plenty of reminders to use both hands as he played different video games.

Those reminders came fewer and farther between during this session. Strobel used both hands as he manipulated the handsets to shoot rockets at blocky looking aliens.

Strobel has gained more independence in the two years between HABIT VR camp sessions, his mother, Heidi Reagan, said.

Thanks in part to the innovative treatment at camp, he can tackle everyday tasks, such as using a shower chair or combing his own hair.

And during the last school year, he learned to use a power assist on his manual wheelchair to help him better steer through the halls. Now he's graduated to using a power chair.

While all of Strobel's therapies have helped with finding mobility in his weaker arm, HABIT camp helped to teach him how to better use his right hand, Reagan said.

"It gave him the ingenuity and totally boosted his confidence," she said. "It came at a time when he needed it. It's taught him how to benefit his daily life."

Camp also can provide respite for parents and caregivers. In addition to HABIT VR camp, MMI offers summer and winter camps through the recreational therapy, physical therapy and occupational therapy departments.

Reagan said she always hoped to give her son a typical summer camp experience. HABIT VR camp has given Strobel the opportunity to follow his interests and connect with his peers.

"Whether it's in the woods in a tent or here, this is Connor having a camp experience," Reagan said.

For fellow camper Vinny DeLuca, camp is a chance to spend time with kids just like him. Vinny took part in the traditional HABIT VR camp this summer.

"I get to interact with other kids who have cerebral palsy just like me," the 10-year-old said. "We get to play video games acting as therapy. We work hard, but it's very fun."

Strobel echoed DeLuca on the effort required.

"It's a good workout," Strobel said. "It's kind of its own therapy. They work my butt off 100%."

UNMC's Munroe-Meyer Institute: Changing Lives. Transforming Futures.



Watch our new video!

Children and adults at the Munroe-Meyer Institute aren't defined by their challenges. Instead, they're defined by their potential.

Scan the QR code to see how MMI is continuing to transform the lives of all individuals with disabilities and complex health care needs.



New program gets participants **ROAD READY**

Dilan Sorensen settled into the driver's seat, fastened his seatbelt and hit the road.

Well, the virtual road.

Through the Munroe-Meyer Institute's Foundational Driving Program and its driving simulator, clients like Sorensen can prep for on-the-road training programs.

MMI's program, which launched in September, is designed to equip individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities with skills they need before getting behind the wheel.





Thomas Keenan tests his driving skills on the simulator, as Sam Montemarano gauges his performance.

After completing the MMI program, therapists will refer clients to road-ready community programs, said Chelli Westengaard, director of occupational therapy at MMI.

Work on the program started in 2024. Feedback from several families and community partners highlighted the need to strengthen driving skills before individuals operate a real vehicle, Westengaard said. Many on-the-road programs have an out-of-pocket cost that can be wasted if the individual isn't prepared with the foundational skills needed to drive.

"We saw an opportunity to create a structured pathway in which participants progress through our program and upon completion are prepared to enter an on-the-road training program, or sit for their driver's exam," said Sam Montemarano, an occupational therapist at MMI.

The program uses multiple tools — a driving simulator, interactive light board and instructional materials — to get drivers ready for the road. The program can be personalized to the individual's needs. Evaluation sessions help gauge participants' skill level and driving readiness.

"We have found that most of our participants benefit from improving skills related to reaction time, divided attention, working memory and sensory processing," Montemarano said.

Funding to start the program came, in part, from a Munroe-Meyer Guild Impact Grant. Mark Shriver, PhD, director of the University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities at MMI, saw the need for a driving simulator and helped fund that component, Westengaard said.

During Sorensen's recent session, he started by working on the Dynavision, an interactive light board used to aid in hand-eye coordination, divided attention, and reaction time among other skills.

He quickly pressed buttons on the board as they turned red, quipping that a cat would love this sort of work. He had the added challenge of ignoring the green lights.

Eventually, his therapist Rachel Van Robays made words appear in the center of the screen before progressing to simple math problems. Sorensen continued hitting the red lights while reading out the words and doing addition.

Montemarano, who also works with clients in the program, said the Dynavision board can be individually programmed for each participant, allowing them to resume their training where they left off in previous sessions.

“We have found that most of our participants benefit from improving skills related to reaction time, divided attention, working memory and sensory processing,”

– Sam Montemarano

Learning materials, broken into modules, help participants prep for driver's license testing and strengthen their overall understanding of vehicle operations and driving concepts.

A highlight of the program is using the driving simulator. The device, built using the frame of a Ford Focus, features a driver's seat, steering wheel and a dashboard complete with blinkers, vents and a radio. Three screens above the dash show simulated driving sessions.

Sorensen spent his session practicing right turns and navigating around construction cones.

Following the computer's GPS-like directions, Sorensen carefully turned on his blinker, looked both directions and made his right turns. While he was driving, Van Robays would ask questions like, “Which side of the street is the barn on?” or “What's the speed limit?”

In a later simulation, Sorensen slowed down to navigate between orange traffic cones. During one stretch of road, which saw the cones creating a narrow, crooked lane, Sorensen clipped a cone. The simulator stopped, the screen went black and he discussed the mistake with Van Robays before starting up again.

“This one was a little bit tricky,” he said.

Learning continues beyond program sessions, Westengaard said. Participants receive worksheets designed to enhance their attention as passengers. Tasks include tracking the number of crosswalks or school zones they see. Sorensen's most recent task had him tracking every time he spotted a black vehicle — he was surprised by how few he saw during a ride on the interstate.

“Much of the project's success will depend on the effort invested outside of scheduled sessions,” Montemarano said. “Consistent daily practice is a crucial part of this program.”

Some individuals may not be destined to sit behind the wheel. If that's the case, they can take part in the program's community mobility track. It teaches individuals how to navigate ride-hailing services like Uber or Lyft, public transportation and large campuses in the community.

Both tracks of the program offer a sense of independence.

“Achieving this level of independence represents a significant developmental milestone,” Westengaard said.

Sorensen, who already has his learner's permit, was proud of recently being able to back into a parking space in a pickup truck.

He said earning a driver's license will give him the option to drive solo. He plans to just drive in the city, unless a road trip is on the table.

“It's best to have it in case I need it,” he said.

Having a license can improve quality of life and offer autonomy, Montemarano said.

“It lets you go buy a cheeseburger through a drive-thru or run an errand to help your parents out,” she said. “Their whole lives, their parents have driven them places. So having a sense of helping is a great feeling.”

The program, which currently has 10 participants, is designed to run for about 12 weeks. Upon completion, therapists will assess each participant to determine next steps, Westengaard said.

“This program alone will not teach someone to drive. Research indicates that developing driving skills requires multiple components,” she said.

“Foundational driving provides participants with the essential skills and preparation needed to succeed once they begin on-the-road practice.”

Patient VOICES

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

LUISA BRANDT

Emily and Henning Brandt thought they would live in Germany forever.

But when their daughter Luisa was born, they quickly realized that she wouldn't find inclusive education or programming in the country.

While Emily is from Nebraska, the Munroe-Meyer Institute is what drew the trio to Omaha.

Luisa, now 9, has been active in MMI programming since she was 3 years old. In addition to speech therapy, she participates in sports, camps and general recreation activities at the institute. In school, she feels fully included and has made friends with typical peers as well as her peers at MMI, Emily Brandt said.

"One of our relatives in Germany said they hoped we would find all the things we were looking for and that our dreams would come true," Emily Brandt recalled. "Not to be super sappy, but we did. This is exactly what we wanted for her. We see her, every day, living her best life and that really fills our hearts as parents."



ALEX MAU

Robbie Mau felt like his son had disappeared.

Alex, then 2, stopped laughing. He stopped speaking. He didn't acknowledge anyone or anything.

"He was kind of in his own world," Mau said.

The Munroe-Meyer Institute's Autism Care for Toddlers Clinic helped the Fremont boy learn to interact again. He started grabbing his parents' hands, asking for things and offering hugs.

And he recognized his family again. Mau still remembers when Alex saw him, laughed and said, "Dada."

"So many different things came back all at once. He saw me and recognized me. That didn't happen a year before," Mau said.



Alex went onto participate in pediatric feeding, early intervention and recreation programs at MMI. He attends Camp Munroe every summer.

Now 14, Alex is in his first year at a public high school. He's friends with his peers and honing skills such as math, spelling and reading.

It's hard to believe where Alex started before coming to MMI, his father said.

"They gave us more than we could ever repay," Mau said. "They gave us our son back. They gave a world to him that he can go out and play and enjoy."

HAIDEN BROOKS

Haiden Brooks didn't eat on his own. Instead, he used to spend an hour at a time hooked up to a pump for his four daily feedings.

Now, thanks to the Munroe-Meyer Institute's Department of Pediatric Feeding Disorders, the 5-year-old can eat hot lunch at school and share dinner with his parents and twin brother at home — without any device.

Born with lung and heart disease, Haiden lacked the ability and strength to eat, his mom Carrie Brooks said. His days revolved around eating his meals via a tube, which was time-consuming.

The family, who lives in rural Nebraska, tried therapies and specialists across the state. Finally, they landed at MMI.

The entire team was helpful, Brooks said, starting with an initial tour hosted by department director Amy Drayton, PhD, and with staff who scheduled appointments.

For eight weeks, the Brooks family moved to Omaha. It initially was hard to watch Haiden be pushed out of his comfort zone, Brooks said. But his therapist spent time learning how Haiden communicated his wants and needs.



"It's scary, but if you commit to the process and commit to knowing that the therapists have seen it all — from behavior to feeding issues to anatomy issues — you can start to see progress," Brooks said.

By the third week, Haiden cut an entire daily feeding by tube. By six weeks, he had cut all of his tube feeds.

Haiden continued with day treatment for another two weeks and has continued to do telehealth sessions from home weekly. MMI staff not only worked with Haiden but also with Brooks, her husband and her parents on how to help Haiden eat successfully at home.

By the time he left MMI, Haiden was no longer eating via tube. In October 2025, Haiden started eating hot lunch at school. At home, he eats meals with the family.





Recognizing Excellence

The heart of MMI is its people. In early 2025, 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:



Staff Clinical Services Phoenix Award: Laura Micek, MMI Department of Education and Child Development

Nominators described Micek as “the cornerstone” of the Tracking Infant Progress Statewide (TIPS) program. By collaborating with the medical team and managing patient scheduling efficiently, Micek ensures that the clinic operates at its highest capacity.

Micek goes above and beyond by meeting families in the NICU, explaining the program, and building trust and rapport.

“Through her exemplary leadership, unwavering commitment to family-centered care and efforts to enhance clinic efficiency, she has made a lasting, positive impact on MMI, our patients and the broader community,” a nominator wrote.



Faculty Clinical Services Phoenix Award: Melissa Hunter, PhD, MMI Department of Psychology

Dr. Hunter has been instrumental in developing systems for care and clinical training objectives. She strives to improve the system, so everyone meets the same high standard of training and trainees leave with a positive approach to mental health care.

Dr. Hunter has established after-school groups for children, including one for anxiety and another for executive functioning. She also collaborates with multiple community partners.

“I can’t stress enough how much I appreciate Dr. Hunter for her expertise, interpersonal style and collegial support,” a nominator wrote.



Support Staff Phoenix Award: Yuka Collison, MMI Department of Pediatric Feeding

Nominators recognized Collison’s commitment, professionalism and attention to detail. Collison’s dedication to her role goes above and beyond, demonstrated by her quick email responses, proactive problem solving and reliability. Her dedication is particularly evident in how she handles payroll for the department, a nominator said. She’s quick to address issues professionally, helping to foster trust and strengthen collaboration across teams.

“Yuka is a standout support staff member whose contributions often go unnoticed simply because she is so effective at keeping everything running behind the scenes,” a nominator wrote.



Community Engagement Phoenix Award: Cynthia Villanueva Castro, MMI Department of Education and Child Development

Villanueva Castro demonstrates a commitment toward working with children, families and underserved populations. She has nurtured relationships with community partners, especially those focused on supporting the Latino population.

“She approaches her work with a combination of professionalism, empathy and a constant positive attitude, which has had a lasting impact on all who have had the opportunity to work with her,” a nominator wrote.

Villanueva Castro also acts as a mentor to new team members, nominators said. She’s welcoming and offers guidance and understanding of the department’s intricacies.



Access and Engagement Phoenix Award: Sidni Trotter, MMI Department of Speech-Language Pathology

Trotter embodies this award, nominators said. More than two years ago, she created the Speech-Language Pathology Outreach Committee. The group filled a gap and has allowed for like-minded individuals in the department to create intentional connections with each other.

Trotter also promotes visibility. Her advocacy ensures that staff, students, caregivers and patients feel welcome. She is an avid volunteer, attending UNMC and community events while representing MMI, and presenting to students across the metro.

“Sidni consistently advances her personal and professional growth at MMI,” a nominator wrote.



Research Phoenix Award: Nikki Zabik, PhD, MMI Emotional Neuroscience Research Laboratory

Dr. Zabik has demonstrated exceptional contributions to the field of neuroscience. In 2024, she earned two grants and received three prestigious awards. In addition to her research contributions, she serves as a mentor to undergraduate and graduate students.

She also has delivered many talks and presentations. She serves as a mentor to undergraduate and graduate students in the lab and in the Summer Undergraduate Research Program at MMI.

“Dr. Zabik recognized for her rigor and informed approach to new methodologies in neuroscience,” nominators wrote.



Spirit Phoenix Award: Sam Montemarano, MMI Department of Occupational Therapy

Montemarano is always willing to offer her time and skills, leaving a mark on many of the institute’s departments. Nominators applauded the way her cheerful demeanor makes colleagues, families and patients feel welcome and comfortable. Montemarano is committed to making a difference and has been essential in maintaining a supportive team atmosphere.

“Sam is a tremendous ambassador through her work in the community, schools and with programs and departments throughout MMI,” one nominator wrote. “Her positivity and exceptional clinical skills are easily notable and respected by all with whom she works.”



Education Phoenix Award – Faculty: Jennifer Burt, PhD, MMI Department of Psychology and LEND

Dr. Burt has developed a structured and nationally recognized fellowship program in the MMI Department of Psychology. The program is individualized to each student's interests and goals.

A recent Behavioral Health Workforce grant will support training of behavioral health providers in rural and underserved areas.

"Her passionate commitment to training is confirmed not only by her taking and growing the fellowship program but also taking on grant writing fairly late in her career and securing an important federal training grant for our department," a nominator wrote.



Education Phoenix Award – Staff: Abby Crimmins, MMI Department of Speech-Language Pathology

Crimmins has pioneered several initiatives aimed at enhancing clinical education, creating innovative training sessions on complex topics. She uses a combination of hands-on learning, visual presentations and interdisciplinary collaboration.

"Abby consistently maintained a supportive and positive educational approach, fostering an environment that was optimal for learning," a nominator wrote.

In addition to working with UNMC students, Crimmins has worked with students at Creighton University, the University of Nebraska at Omaha and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Nominators said she goes above and beyond to equip students and peers with the skills for success.



Community Champion Award: Myrna Krohn

Former clinician and longtime supporter Myrna Krohn was the inaugural recipient of the Community Champion Award. It's designed to honor longstanding service, passion and commitment to MMI and the broader community.

2024 Gold U Awardees

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

April: Katelyn Kelley

2024 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.

January: Allie Kohl

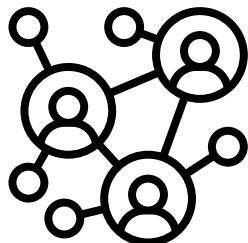
March: Chandler Pederson

April: Amanda Morris

June: Hanna Beck

August: Jill Bruner

MMI Facts & Figures



More than 18 disciplines

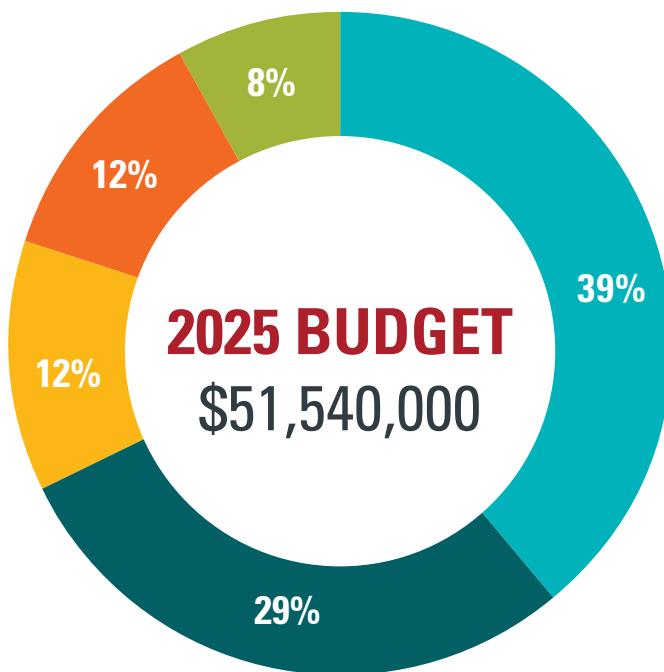
6 supporting boards

Approximately 550 employees



One of 68 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

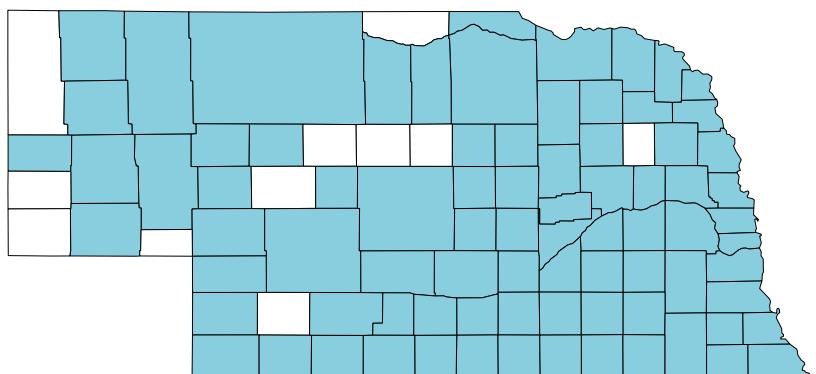
- Clinical service reimbursement
- State/local/school grants & contracts
- Philanthropic/other funds
- Federal grants & contracts
- State appropriation

Annually, a more than **\$51 million** budget, with more than **\$26 million** in federal, state and local grants and contracts and **\$6 million** in philanthropy.

CLINICAL SERVICES

MMI provides services in
82 of 93
Nebraska counties

*In addition to Nebraska, MMI
serves at least one county in
more than **25 states**.*



Approximately
130,000
Yearly Services



26% receiving services were 21 or older.

*In 2025, more than **313 volunteers** provided
approximately **10,576 service hours**.*

*Increased clinical volume by **15.7%***



MMI has more than **35 provider locations** with 17 outside Omaha and more than 120 types of services provided.

33 Recreational Therapy
Programs and Clubs

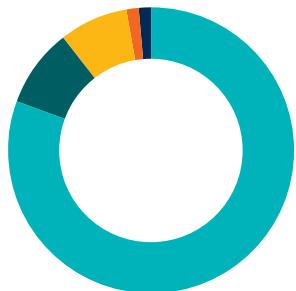
*Providing more than **35,350 hours of service**.*

New clinical services

- Development of **primary care**
- Opened the **Autism Care for Toddlers Clinic** in Fremont
- Development of the **de-escalation program** for MMI
- Developed **three new clinical services**, including a sleep clinic for individuals with autism spectrum disorder, a foundational driving program and neonatal mental health services within the MMI Psychology Department



Top 5 languages services provided at MMI



Spanish – 81%
Karen – 9%
Dinka – 8%
Somali – 1%
Arabic – 1%

Total: 4,430 sessions

Patients served by age group at MMI

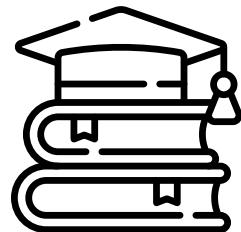


0-5 years – 21%
6-13 years – 38%
14-19 years – 14%
20-39 years – 10%
40-59 years – 6%
60+ years – 11%

Total: 6,810 patients

Satisfaction Survey data (FY25) (Scale of 1-5)

	Ease of getting appointment and available times = 4.4
	Friendliness and courtesy of staff = 4.8
	Satisfaction with provider = 4.7
	Likelihood of recommending MMI = 4.7
	Overall Rating = 4.7



EDUCATION

Major Education Initiatives

- The LEND Program graduated 42 long-term (more than 300 hours of leadership training) trainees and 65 advanced medium-term (more than 150 hours of leadership training) trainees.
- MMI secured a \$9.9 million federal grant through MMI to expand employment services across Nebraska for individuals with disabilities aged 14 to 24, enhancing training, assessment, and job-placement supports over the next five years.
- The APA-approved internship program at MMI (a site within the Nebraska Internship Consortium in Professional Psychology) matched all 23 psychology intern positions across all programs and tracks across the state, including three interns in rural areas of Nebraska. The program also re-established a partnership in Hastings to begin psychology internship training in 2026.
- The UNMC Master of Genetic Counseling Program, a partnership between the College of Allied Health Professions and the Munroe Meyer Institute, graduated its fifth class this year (2025) and now has 38 alumni.

Annually, MMI provides clinical training experiences to more than **300 students**, representing over **40 colleges and universities** nationally and internationally, spanning **17 distinct disciplines**.

With nearly **\$5 million in federal training grants**, MMI is expanding Nebraska's behavioral health workforce creating new interdisciplinary training pathways, and increasing employment opportunities for individuals with disabilities statewide.

Disciplines trained – Applied behavior analysis, dentistry, education/special education, feeding disorders, genetic counseling, integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorder, occupational therapy, physical therapy, psychology, recreation therapy, research, severe behavior disorders, speech-language pathology, social work.

Participants in workshops

- Provided community-based training to more than 7,000 family members/caregivers, adults with disabilities, children/adolescents with disabilities and public/community members.
- Provided approximately 990 hours of technical assistance to numerous individuals and agencies.
- Facilitated 182 continuing education/community training activities for community-based agencies (both general and disability-specific).



A trick-or-treater collects candy during MMI's annual Trick or Treat event. This year's event drew its largest crowd ever with nearly 750 guests.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH



MMI provided **50 continuing education events** to **2,744 participants**.



MMI provided **251 community trainings** for **10,190 participants**.



More than **700 people** attended MMI's annual **Trick or Treat** event in 2024.



Approximately **593 campers** at **MMI summer and winter camps**.



Approximately
1,048 Hours
of technical assistance through
221 activities.

MMI representatives staffed informational tables at **60 community partner events**.

282 adults with disabilities participated in community training.

RESEARCH

Core Initiatives



MMI receives approximately
\$8 MILLION
in federal research funding annually.

Nebraska EmployABILITY Project. Principal

investigator Rachel Ray will explore job placement strategies for adults with IDD in this grant, the largest in MMI history, funded by the U.S. Department of Education.

Addressing Student Mental Health in High Need Schools:

Nebraska Student Mental Health Training Program. Principal investigator Brandy Clarke, PhD, will grow the number of school health providers to better meet the mental health needs of Nebraska students with this grant from the U.S. Department of Education.

Investigating individual differences in alcohol abstinence associated anxiety and depression across the BNST network.

Principal investigator Jennifer Blackford, PhD, will use this grant funded by the National Institutes of Health, to use precision neuroscience methods in establishing brain circuits associated with anxiety and depression during early abstinence and to forward-translate findings from rodent model lab studies.

Doctoral Internship Training in Pediatric Integrated Primary Care:

Improving Access to Quality Behavioral Health Care in High

Need, High Demand Areas in Nebraska. Principal investigator Holly Roberts, PhD, aims to expand Nebraska's behavioral health workforce by increasing the number of well-trained, culturally competent psychology interns committed to serving high-need areas, including rural, Native and mental health professional shortage communities with funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Health Resources and Services Administration.

Reversing Disrupted Developmental Sterol Biosynthesis by

Prescription Medications. Principal investigator Karoly Mirmics, MD, PhD, aims to determine, with this grant from the National Institutes of Health, whether hydroxyzine (HYZ) can correct abnormal cholesterol metabolism in a mouse model of Smith-Lemli-Opitz syndrome (SLOS). By testing HYZ treatment after birth — when the brain produces the most cholesterol and when SLOS is typically diagnosed in humans — the study will evaluate whether HYZ can restore normal sterol levels and lay the groundwork for future clinical use in SLOS and related disorders.

Behavioral Health Workforce Education and Training (BHWET) Program.

Principal investigator Allison Grennan, PhD, plans to increase the supply of diverse behavioral health providers trained to provide integrated behavioral health care to children, adolescents and young adults, and who are committed to working in high-need and high-demand areas, including rural mental health service shortage areas. Funding comes from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services/Health Resources and Services Administration.

72 active projects

Funding type:

- 18 Federal
- 26 State
- 12 Foundation/ Non-Profit
- 4 External University/Hospitals
- 12 Internal to UNMC/ NU Foundation



Karoly Mirmics, MD, PhD, dean and director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute, and Zeljka Korada, DVM, PhD, professor of pediatrics at UNMC.

Departments with ongoing research projects

- Administration
- Education and Child Development
- Pediatric Feeding Disorders
- Genetic Medicine
- integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders (iCASD)
- Physical Therapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Psychology
- Recreational Therapy
- Severe Behavior Department
- Speech-Language Pathology
- UCEDD Program

BOARD HIGHLIGHTS



The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities hosted its 21st annual Walk & Roll for Disabilities. The event raised more than \$42,000.

Hattie B. Munroe Foundation

The Hattie B. Munroe Foundation donated a record 177 gift cards, totaling \$26,550, to MMI client families facing specific challenges during the holidays. The foundation, which has been a mainstay of support for MMI for more than a century, provides a total of more than \$850,000 annually in funding to support mission-critical initiatives, including Camp Munroe and related programs, as well as two professorships — for the MMI director and the MMI director of research — among other efforts.

The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities

"The Walk & Roll continues to be an event where all attendees are aware of how important it is to have these programs for adults." — Mary McHale, president

The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities held its Walk & Roll for Disabilities on March 2, 2025, drawing more than 400 people and raising \$42,000. The foundation continues to work with the MMI Department of Recreational Therapy to provide opportunities for more adults to access social and recreational opportunities.

The Munroe-Meyer Institute Board of Directors

"When I joined the board in 2015, MMI was often referred to as 'the best kept secret' in Omaha for all the services they provide. It has been a joy to see MMI emerge as a well-known institution in Omaha. The profile of the institute has grown



and the services provided continue to be second to none." — Patrick Cavanaugh, president

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 also oversees the distribution of holiday gift cards to selected MMI families in need, as well as reviews, and it approves the MMI Department of Recreational Therapy budget before the budget advances to the Hattie B. Munroe Foundation Board.

The Munroe-Meyer Guild

"Funds generated from the Garden Walk are instrumental in supporting seed grants at the institute. These grants may be small initially, but they have the potential to grow into important programs. Our collective efforts help foster innovative programs that make a lasting impact at MMI." — Jennifer Read, president

The Munroe-Meyer Guild held its 56th Annual Garden Walk in June 2025. The tour of select neighborhood gardens raised more than \$40,000 to support grants for innovative projects and highly impactful training endeavors. Grants for 2024-25, for which funding was supplemented by the Ruth and Bill Scott Foundation, totaled \$70,000 and included projects such as the Pediatric and Adult IDD Swallowing Assessment and Resource Program, the Foundational Driving Program for Individuals with ASD, IDD, and ADHD, and the NICU Engaged Families Project: Addressing Disparities in Engagement Using Bedside Telehealth.



The Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska

"You get to see the good works enabled through organizational donations while also applying one's talents and network connections to the benefit of the institute." — David Greenberg, general secretary of Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska

Last year, Scottish Rite Masons and RiteCare clinicians hosted Walk for RiteCare at Crosier Park in Hastings, which raised \$6,000 for speech therapy services for children in Nebraska. In September, the RiteCare Classic Golf Benefit raised \$22,000 for speech therapy. In October, Kate Noble Weitz, was recognized by the Masons for her advocacy for children with autism. The Friends of RiteCare Dinner raised more than \$30,000 to support speech therapy services. In total,

Nebraska Scottish Rite Freemasons donated approximately \$850,000 for speech therapy through the UNMC Munroe-Meyer Institute and the University of Nebraska at Kearney for speech services.

The Community Advisory Board

The Community Advisory Board, which aids MMI's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities, is made up of individuals with developmental disabilities, family members of individuals with developmental disabilities as well as representatives of advocacy organizations. It allows individuals with disabilities and their families to be actively involved in decisions that may impact their lives. Members gather input from disability stakeholders across the state.



As we reflect on the past year, we are filled with deep gratitude for the extraordinary generosity and shared purpose that continue to shape the future of the Munroe-Meyer Institute. In 2025, we didn't just sustain our momentum — we accelerated it.

Thanks to the incredible support of our community, we were able to leverage new contributions to create several new endowments — each matched dollar-for-dollar through the remarkable generosity of an "angel donor." This matching opportunity has not only doubled the impact of several new endowments, but it also laid the foundation for long-term sustainability and innovation

at MMI. We are humbled by this donor's vision and deeply grateful for the opportunity to continue this transformative partnership into this next year.

The stories in this report reflect the power of that generosity — from expanding access to services across Nebraska to advancing groundbreaking research and training the next generation of leaders in developmental medicine and disability services. With your continued support, the future is brighter than ever.

Jessica Janssen Wolford
University of Nebraska Foundation



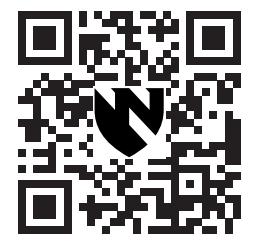
A Campaign for Our University's Future™

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.



For the people of the Munroe-Meyer Institute, serving individuals with disabilities and complex health care needs is a calling.

The MMI family stretches from our Omaha home across the state of Nebraska, meeting people where they need us through satellite offices, telehealth visits and offsite community outreach events. Our leaders, clinicians and support staff are proud to be part of MMI and part of your community. Thank you for letting us make a difference in your lives.



Scan to see more photos of our team.





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

6902 Pine St., Omaha, NE 68106

unmc.edu/mmi

