



THE MUNROE-MEYER INSTITUTE'S STATEWIDE IMPACT  
**2022 ANNUAL REPORT**





The Munroe-Meyer Institute is committed to transforming lives.

## 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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**On the cover:** *Sunset over Scotts Bluff National Monument*

**Munroe-Meyer Institute**  
2022 Annual Report

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## Director's Message

A family's ZIP code should not define the scope or quality of the health care services they can access. The Munroe-Meyer Institute is, first and foremost, a Nebraska institution. Doing things right at home shows the whole world how things should be done, and this is how we become international leaders.

We are one of the most comprehensive institutions in the world for individuals and families with intellectual and developmental disabilities. With the research that goes on here, with the programs that are created, we aim to find answers and create innovations that will have national and global impact.

But we also are Nebraskans. More importantly, we are the state's University Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities (UCEDD) Education, Research and Services, tasked to improve the lives of families from every corner of Nebraska.

It is a mission we take seriously. In this annual report, you will read about pioneering efforts such as the still-growing behavioral health-family medicine clinic network that MMI first began in the late 1970s, and the genetics clinics that started decades ago, as well. You will read about how MMI has leveraged the growing acceptance of telehealth – which we were using well before the pandemic – to expand our reach and offer even more clinical and therapeutic touchpoints for our Nebraska families.

The drive to reach out to our families “where they are” is hard-wired into MMI's DNA. You'll also read about our nearly 110,000 miles of in-state travel in the past fiscal year. MMI clinicians, staff and program leaders take to the highways to ensure the growth of the institute's statewide reach and serve those in need.

Our work is not done and will never be done. We continue to work to expand our statewide footprint. In 2022, MMI provided services in 74 of the 93 Nebraska counties, as well as services in 19 other states. Now, 74 is not 93 yet. But we continue to grow our outreach, and we are resolute in our determination to meet our families where they are.

The Munroe-Meyer Institute is a statewide institution. We are proud to be Nebraskans and proud to serve Nebraskans in all corners of the state. With the support of our state, our stakeholders and others, we will continue to grow in that mission.

I am proud to share with you some of the stories of our efforts, and humbled by this amazing community.

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



# BORDER TO BORDER *AND BEYOND*

## Being world leaders starts at home.

Like the University of Nebraska Medical Center and its 500-mile-wide campus, the Munroe-Meyer Institute spans Nebraska as it carries out the institute's programs and services.

From behavioral health services in South Sioux City to genetic and specialty clinics in Scottsbluff, MMI crosses the state with its world-class care for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

“MMI is one of the most comprehensive intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) care institutions in the world,” said Karoly Mirnics, MD, PhD, director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute. “We are also Nebraska's

statewide institute with an expertise in IDD. Being world leaders starts at home.”

The Munroe-Meyer Institute's physical home is its acclaimed \$91 million facility located near the University of Nebraska at Omaha's Scott Campus at 6902 Pine St. It's a unique center meticulously designed to meet the vast and varied needs of patients and the wider developmental disability community.

The central Omaha location serves as MMI's statewide hub for patient care, education and research, advocacy and engagement. From that hub, MMI's spokes fan out across Nebraska.

A prime example of the hub and spokes of service are the Munroe-Meyer Institute's

RiteCare Clinics – a 40-plus-year partnership with the Scottish Rite Masons of Nebraska to provide pediatric speech and language therapy around the state.

One clinic is housed at the Munroe-Meyer Institute in Omaha, where the core MMI Speech-Language Pathology Department is based. The other clinics are located in Lincoln, Kearney and Hastings.

Hastings native Sydney Norton, MS – one of two speech-language pathologists at the Hastings RiteCare Clinic – provides care that reflects the needs in her community.

She completed training in Project ImPACT – a program for parents and caregivers to support



**“Where someone lives should not define the quality of health care they can access.”**

– MMI Director Karoly Mirnics, MD, PhD

their child’s communication development at home. Now she trains others and is spreading these skills. She brought augmentative and alternative communication, or AAC, evaluations to the clinic to review ways to enhance a child’s ability to communicate using a variety of different tools. She is credited as a devoted provider who supports her patients, their families and the broader community.

Norton, who joined MMI and the RiteCare Clinic in 2019, said she knew she had to “step up big time” to meet MMI’s standards of care.

The Hastings RiteCare Clinic is a small operation – along with the two speech-language pathologists, there are two clinic rooms in the lower level of Hastings’ Masonic Temple. But the clinic also reflects the extensive experience of MMI’s full Speech-Language Pathology Department.

Norton said the clinic means a great deal to the families who connect with its care. Thanks to the partnership with the Scottish Rite Masons, families receive the services at no cost.

“Our state is so unique as far as RiteCare goes for the quality and the skilled aspect of our services and access to them,” Norton said. “If you talk to any of our families, this is everything to them.”

The impact of the institute goes far beyond the RiteCare Clinics.

Across Nebraska, MMI has 35 clinical provider locations – 17 of which are outside Omaha – that provide more than 50 types of services.

The MMI Department of Genetic Medicine has focused on providing clinics in western and rural Nebraska for decades, with efforts beginning in the early 1970s. The advent of telehealth and telemedicine only made the department more ambitious, said former director Omar Rahman, MD.

“We have always done a lot of onsite clinics,” Dr. Rahman said. “Of course, the logistics of that can be challenging. So we’ve pushed to develop an integrated model of telemedicine visits in conjunction with in-person visits. That has worked really well and allowed us to expand to more locations.”

The department currently holds clinics in Kearney, North Platte, Scottsbluff, Alliance, Lincoln and Norfolk.

“We’d like to expand into the panhandle and more northern parts of the state,” he said.

In psychology services, MMI established – and became the national model for – rural behavioral health.

In 1997, MMI established its first behavioral health clinic in outstate Nebraska. Today there are clinics in more than 30 communities.

Catherine Jones-Hazledine, PhD, who joined MMI as a trainee in 2002, now owns Great Western Behavioral Health in Rushville. She points to the efforts of the MMI Department of Psychology, pioneered by Joe Evans, PhD, in the late 1990s, to help establish her practice in the rural area she serves.

“As someone who grew up in western Nebraska, it feels like a different state much of the time,” Dr. Jones-Hazledine said. “We are always aware that most of the population and resources are centered in the eastern part of the state. It is very common in this part of the state to feel an afterthought because of that.”

In western Nebraska, Dr. Jones-Hazledine said, MMI is recognized for its specific effort to include the region in its services and provide resources that are needed. And that recognition goes beyond just behavioral health services, she said.

The plan of building outreach integrated care resources around Nebraska “would not have happened without MMI,” Dr. Jones-Hazledine said. “The obstacles to providing that kind of network, are just too large without the support of an institution like UNMC and MMI.”

Dr. Mirnics said the path that MMI started down some 30 years ago with the expansion of psychology services will continue. Dr. Mirnics said he sees an important ideal in that – where someone lives should not define the quality of health care they can access.

“For us, it’s important because it’s our mission,” he said. “We have to work diligently toward that.”

He added: “We are committed to serving the entire state. It is in our DNA, and we are always looking for new opportunities to better serve rural Nebraska.”



*Sydney Norton works with Hannah in front of a mirror as part of her vocal therapy.*

# ***Finding Hannah's Voice***

## **Hannah Buntin arrives in Hastings, all smiles and energy.**

She's got her voice communicator in hand from the car ride – the one she keeps pressing on repeat to express her excitement at going to see the speech therapist she loves.

*"Sydney. Sydney. Sydney."*

Hannah is an outgoing 5-year-old, a bubbly kid whose brightness lights up the world around her – but also a young girl whose voice is too often trapped inside her. She has childhood apraxia of speech, a neurological speech disorder in which her brain struggles to create motor plans for speech and can mask Hannah as a quiet kid, which she's not.

Hannah's attitude can't be contained when she flashes her bright smile and walks with a bop in her step. But her speech can.

It's all inside the little ball of sunshine. Now, the task is to bring it out.

She came to Hastings one wintery Tuesday to press toward the goal everyone has rallied around: Finding Hannah's voice.

This is the place where it's happening – the Munroe-Meyer Institute's RiteCare Clinic.

The Buntin family came a long way, from Ashby, in Nebraska's Sandhills, on a journey that started at 2 a.m. this day. So Hannah is raring to go when her grandmother's silver Ford Fiesta arrives at the clinic.

Today, Hannah's favorite blue T-shirt sprinkled with colorful stars says it all. It might as well be her motto:

I know  
more than I say

I think  
more than I speak

I notice  
more than you realize

Hannah communicates a lot – it just comes out in different ways.

She knows more about operating her touchscreen communicator than the adults who come across it. She mixes in sign language. Hannah has mastered the skill of flashing her smile to express what she's thinking.

The spoken words are coming out more and more, too.

This morning, when the family stopped at a Hy-Vee store on the way to Hastings, Hannah dropped a casual "excuse me" and "dirty" – both new words for her.

"Sydney" on Hannah's communicator is Sydney Norton, MS, one of two speech-language pathologists at the clinic.

When they get to the clinic's door, Norton steps out to greet Hannah and her family – grandmother Caleta Lewis, mom Ame Buntin and older sister Ashly. And Hannah loves it.

Today, Norton has something special planned for Hannah – an exercise with Bluey, a cartoon character that Hannah adores.

Hannah's voice can't be contained any more. No communicator. No sign language. No unspoken cues.

Hannah speaks.

*"Whaaaaat!?!"*

It's time to find Hannah's voice.



Hannah Buntin's day at the clinic includes work, high-fives and hugs as mom Ame Buntin looks on.



Hannah and her family may have a long journey, some 250 miles, to get to Hastings. But it's a trip they gladly make every Tuesday.

The clinic is located inside the Hastings Masonic Temple, a municipal-looking building that greets visitors with RiteCare's message once inside. Colorful wall paintings of animals and nature scenes draw people downstairs to the pediatric clinic.

It's a humble space – a small front office with desks for Norton and fellow speech-language pathologist Krislyn Althouse and two therapy rooms.

"Do you see Miss Sydney?" mom Ame asks Hannah.

"You get excited for your Tuesdays, don't you?"

Norton, part of the department of speech-language pathology at the Munroe-Meyer Institute, has been recognized for the care she offers at the RiteCare Clinic. She started her career working in rehab with nursing homes but joined MMI in 2019 after deciding she wanted to work with children.

Norton works with kids with severe speech disorders, often children diagnosed with autism. She brings a love for augmentative and alternative communication, like Hannah's touchscreen communicator.

Norton diagnosed Hannah last spring after the Buntins had met frustration elsewhere throughout Hannah's young life. Norton offered the game plan for Hannah's care – one visit to Hastings per week and two virtual sessions to train Hannah in the basics of speech.

On the surface, Norton plays with Hannah throughout her appointment. But it's also an intense, tiring speech therapy session.

Today, Norton will use blue tape to stick toy figures, including Bluey, on a mirror wall in the therapy room. If Hannah follows directions – and sounds out the words correctly and completely – she can take down the toys from the wall.

Norton gets down on the floor at eye level with Hannah so the little one can see every vocal movement and facial stretch, and the mirror is there to offer a complete view. To overcome Hannah's apraxia, Norton is teaching her brain the very mechanics of speech, the physical moves to sound out a word.

Woody and Buzz Lightyear are two of the toys taped up. And they need to get ...

"Out," Norton directs Hannah.

"Ou," Hannah tries, with only part of the word.

Norton urges her on, "Put your end on."

Hannah understands.

"OuT," she says, punctuating the "T": "OuT!"

Before long, the words are out, and the mirror wall is clear.

Norton cheers on Hannah, "Look, our basket is full!" So, then the toys need to ...

"Gooooo up," Norton says.

Hannah follows. "Go up."

"Tell me again," Norton says.



"Up. Up."

Hannah is talking.

In the hallway right outside, mom Ame is touched.

"I just want to cry because we're getting somewhere," she said.

Hannah and her family have had a difficult journey to get here.

Until they started at RiteCare last April, the Buntins had no diagnosis, no answers and no plan to help Hannah, grandmother Caleta Lewis said.

From the very first test after she was born, Hannah failed her hearing exams – and her speech lagged.

All along the way, Lewis said, the family received assurances about the failed tests. That's normal after a C-section, they were told, or it's because of fluid in her ears. Over and over, they were reassured, Hannah was not deaf and even had normal hearing in her right ear, Lewis said.

But Hannah's voice wasn't coming out.

After early speech therapy, a hearing aid and regular appointments at a clinic in Omaha, Hannah spoke only about 10 words, and fewer than that reliably. With kindergarten fast approaching, Buntin and her mom cried after one last appointment.

On the trip across Nebraska back to Ashby on that day last April, the family stopped in Grand Island at a Sam's Club for groceries, Lewis recalls.

As they walked through the aisles, they talked with Hannah using sign language. In the crowd of customers, a man who knew sign language noticed and stopped to meet the family.

He signed with Hannah and asked Buntin and Lewis if she was deaf.

Lewis recalls telling him that Hannah has normal hearing in one ear and a hearing aid for the other. Her issue is speech, she said.

"Oh, she has apraxia," the man said.

All this time, Lewis said, the Buntins had never heard a full explanation of childhood apraxia of speech, sometimes called CAS or verbal apraxia. Nor had they received that diagnosis for Hannah.

The visitor in Sam's Club told them he helped raise money for the Scottish Rite Masons and the RiteCare Clinic they support in Hastings. He wrote down the contact information, and moved along.

That was Hannah's first angel, as the family calls him now.

They consider Sydney Norton their second.

Norton grew up in Hastings and said it's an honor to serve the community.

"I know the people. I know the community. I know the culture," she said. "And it's just a great honor that they trust me with their children, especially with their children who are in such a time of crisis in their lives."

Norton knows the special importance of the RiteCare Clinic to Hastings and the broader community in outstate Nebraska.

Started in 1976, the clinic operates through MMI in partnership with the Scottish Rite Masons of Nebraska to provide pediatric speech and language therapy services. Thanks to the Masons' fundraising, families whose children get therapy there receive no bill.

The clinic represents one example of MMI's outreach across Nebraska – part of the hub and spokes of services that reach out to the state from the Munroe-Meyer Institute's main facility in central Omaha.

Norton calls the clinic "small but mighty."

Many families in the region drive hours to access the Hastings RiteCare Clinic's services, Norton said. Even though the services are so vital for the clinic's clients, she said, it's not feasible for those families to drive all the way to Omaha or Lincoln for regular appointments.

"It means everything to our area," she said. "Having an option here in central Nebraska just opens the door for all of these people."

After the Buntins got home from Sam's Club that day, Lewis said, she called the RiteCare Clinic and scheduled an appointment for Hannah later in April.

Norton gave Hannah her diagnosis of apraxia. Norton offered a way for Hannah to learn how to speak. Norton offered Hannah's family hope.

"We finally knew what was going on," Lewis said, "and we had somebody who was going to give us information on it."

Having seen – and heard – Hannah's progress, the Buntins believe the road ahead has opened for Hannah.

The words are adding up, and becoming phrases. Hannah speaks some "ghost words" – words that Hannah hadn't practiced before that just come out but maybe don't become regulars.

Norton said she knew from the moment she met Hannah that she would need to "be on my A-game to get this kiddo some help." Norton said she's proud to see Hannah's progress and grateful to be part of her journey.

"She's come an extremely long way," Norton said.

Hannah is happier now because people can understand her, her mom said. The outgoing young girl can go up to other kids – and not get strange looks when she doesn't talk.

Buntin said she considers RiteCare and MMI a blessing from God.

***"Sydney has opened several doors for us. Hannah's just blooming – just blooming so much."***

The hope is that Hannah's speaking skills keep growing, either through the RiteCare Clinic or a classroom or in her everyday life. In addition to her other therapy, Norton has taught Hannah's family direct therapy skills to carry on the learning at home.

Back at her grandma's house, Hannah often will sneak behind grandma's couch. In hiding, she'll practice the words she's been learning.

Hannah is finding her voice and learning the tools to use it.



**Scan the QR code to watch a video about Hannah's story.**



Rachel Ray travels extensively throughout the state as part of her work at MMI.

# Logging Miles, Changing Lives

**Rachel Ray, MA, used to travel 12 hours to get to the Munroe-Meyer Institute, from the North Dakota-Canadian border.**

She didn't work for the institute then. Like so many parents, she was seeking the best services for her son.

This past year, she traveled more than 230 hours for the Munroe-Meyer Institute to help ensure that other individuals with disabilities are getting the best possible state-supported services.

Ray, a member of MMI's University Center of Excellence for Developmental Disabilities, leads the team that administers the National Core Indicators survey for Nebraska.

The survey rates the state's services to members of the intellectual and developmental disability community, and Ray has traveled from Valentine to McCook to help respondents complete the questionnaire.

She is one of MMI's many staff and faculty road warriors. If the University of Nebraska Medical Center boasts a 500-mile-wide campus, MMI has traveled that campus and beyond many times over the course of the year. MMI's business services office estimates faculty and staff log nearly 110,000 miles

annually to provide information, services and support. Leaders such as associate director Amy Nordness, PhD, also travel to provide consultation and support to outstate locations such as MMI's RiteCare Clinics in Lincoln, Hastings and Kearney, while the psychology department offers support to behavioral health trainees embedded in clinics across the state.

Not that the impact comes only through travel. MMI representatives serve on boards and work with organizations throughout Nebraska, such as the state developmental disability advisory board, which makes state policy decisions. MMI parent resource coordinators sit on the developmental disability council within the Department of Health and Human Services, as well as the state education advisory council. This participation lets MMI have a strong voice in identifying the intellectual and developmental disability priorities that the state needs to address as MMI and its partners work to elevate the voice of families with intellectual and developmental disabilities across the state.

But MMI also puts boots on the ground. The MMI Department of Education and Child Development, led by Jolene Johnson, EdD, crisscrosses the state as it provides state assessments to schools, afterschool programs, early childhood interventions and other education and development related efforts.

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MMI's business services office estimates faculty and staff log **nearly 110,000 miles a year** traveling the state to provide information, services and support.



This past year, Rachel Ray traveled **more than 230 hours** for the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

Ray's core indicators team surveyed **more than 1,800 individuals** with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as individuals with aging-related and physical disabilities, and their family members.





MMI Department of Education staff members Sarah Baird and Kelly Jones in O'Neill.

"This year, just for the afterschool program, we traveled to South Bend, Crete, North Platte, Lexington, Kearney, Broken Bow and O'Neill," Dr. Johnson said. "One team goes to the Winnebago reservation two times a week."

"Each program we work with is different. Some are statewide and have specific site measures; some, we work with partners at the site to determine what information is most useful to them and helpful to the program."

The department helps assess programs that serve students throughout the state, as well as programs specifically serving students with IDD.

"Our mission is to help build quality early childhood programs of all kinds across the

state," Dr. Johnson said. "And as we do, we are teaching people more about MMI and the breadth of services the institute provides."

In 2021-22, Ray's core indicators team surveyed more than 1,800 individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities, as well as individuals with aging-related and physical disabilities, and their family members.

The results of the survey, which rates the state's Department of Health and Human Services on its programs to support individuals with disabilities, can have a huge impact on the IDD population in the state. It also provides information for MMI and other stakeholders to assess ongoing programs and target areas needing more resources.

For example, in 2016, the survey found that there were issues related to service coordination on the developmental disabilities waiver. Addressing those issues now is in the state plan for quality improvement.

"We now are at or above the national average in all categories of service provision," Ray said.

Ray has trained surveyors in nine locations statewide, including Omaha, Scottsbluff, Chadron, Nebraska City, Norfolk and Juniata.

"If an individual is living in these communities, there are relationships, which help," Ray said.

Nevertheless, she and her team are constantly on the move, in their regions or out across the state.

"It is critical to reach out to places we do not have surveyors – I want to make sure smaller communities have a voice," she said. "Also, I want to see how well rural communities are putting together their services – and we do well in Nebraska, we really do. When I go to national meetings and talk to other state directors and hear how services are operating, I think, 'We've got a way to go, but I'm glad we're here in Nebraska.'"

For UNMC's Department of Genetic Medicine, face time with patients also is important. In the initial meeting, a geneticist can pick up on diagnostic clues much more easily in person than via a telemedicine link, said Omar Rahman, MD, former director of the MMI Department of Genetic Medicine.

"The initial visit does involve a detailed physical examination," Dr. Rahman said. "There are indications that can be very subtle – you get a much richer examination in person."

MMI provides genetics clinics in Kearney, North Platte, Scottsbluff, Alliance, Lincoln and Norfolk. A geneticist and a genetic counselor travel out to the communities, where the partner clinic has booked several days of consultations with referrals from all over the region.

"What you can find in these rural communities is that there are genetic conditions that run from one generation to the next that have never been diagnosed," Dr. Rahman said. "When you get out there and see these people and you make a diagnosis, sometimes it impacts multiple generations in the family."

"That's the most rewarding aspect to putting in these outreach miles," he said. "People have gotten used to this and have just lived their lives – but I've seen where finally putting a name to a condition can bring tears to people's eyes."

MMI's parent resource coordinators often spend time on the road, although there also are PRCs embedded in locations throughout the state. The group – made up of family members of people with disabilities – works to help families at all levels, from the emotions of dealing with an initial diagnosis to helping wade through bureaucratic processes to accessing community resources and services.

"A lot of times, families might be blindsided by a diagnosis," said Sarah Swanson, MPH, a co-director of the UCEDD's parent resource coordinator program. "It's important to have someone there who can say, 'It's OK, there are people and programs in our state that will support you. You are not alone.'"

To provide that help, Swanson has a PRC who lives in Scottsbluff and travels to North Platte to support the Medically Handicapped Children's Program (MHCP) and works with behavioral health clinics in the western and northwest corridor of the state.

"We have a PRC in Kearney, and she not only works in that community, but also travels to planning region teams in Holdrege and Hastings to elevate the voice of families with IDD."

Swanson also is working with leaders at the Great Plains Health Center in North Platte to place a PRC in that network.

"Having boots on the ground or being embedded in these communities is important," she said. "That leads to robust relationships in the community and knowledge of the resources."

"We go to where we can find the kids and the families who need our services," Swanson said. "Like MMI itself, the PRC is there to support the families in our state."



MMI parent resource coordinators Jessica Gutierrez (standing, third from left) and Graciela Sharif (kneeling, second from left) in Schuyler, Nebraska, pose with community partners and families at an accessible Christmas event they helped organize in 2022.



# Statewide Wellness

Rushville, NE – 400 miles from MMI

**Catherine Jones-Hazledine, PhD, was looking to go home.**

It was 2004, and Dr. Jones-Hazledine had traveled to Chadron, near where she had grown up, with her mentor Jody Polaha, PhD, to meet with physicians at a family medicine practice. The purpose was to recommend they contract with Dr. Jones-Hazledine to provide integrated behavioral health services at the practice. Doing so would be advantageous when a child or family seemed to need such services. Dr. Jones-Hazledine would be right on the spot for what is known as a “warm handoff.”

This was a fairly new concept, and yet, it wasn’t. In fact, the Munroe-Meyer Institute’s demonstrated ability to help forge this type of collaboration was the reason Dr. Jones-Hazledine had come to MMI in 2002 as a behavioral health trainee. During her training, she worked in Columbus, Hastings and Kearney. Now, training was over, and she was ready to come home.

When MMI points to its history of serving the entire state – when it speaks of its “500-mile-wide campus” as part of UNMC – the pioneering efforts of the MMI Department of Psychology cannot be discounted. MMI has behavioral health professionals – usually focused on child and adolescent behavioral health – integrated into more than 30 medical homes throughout the



*Catherine Jones-Hazledine, PhD (left), and Jody Polaha, PhD*

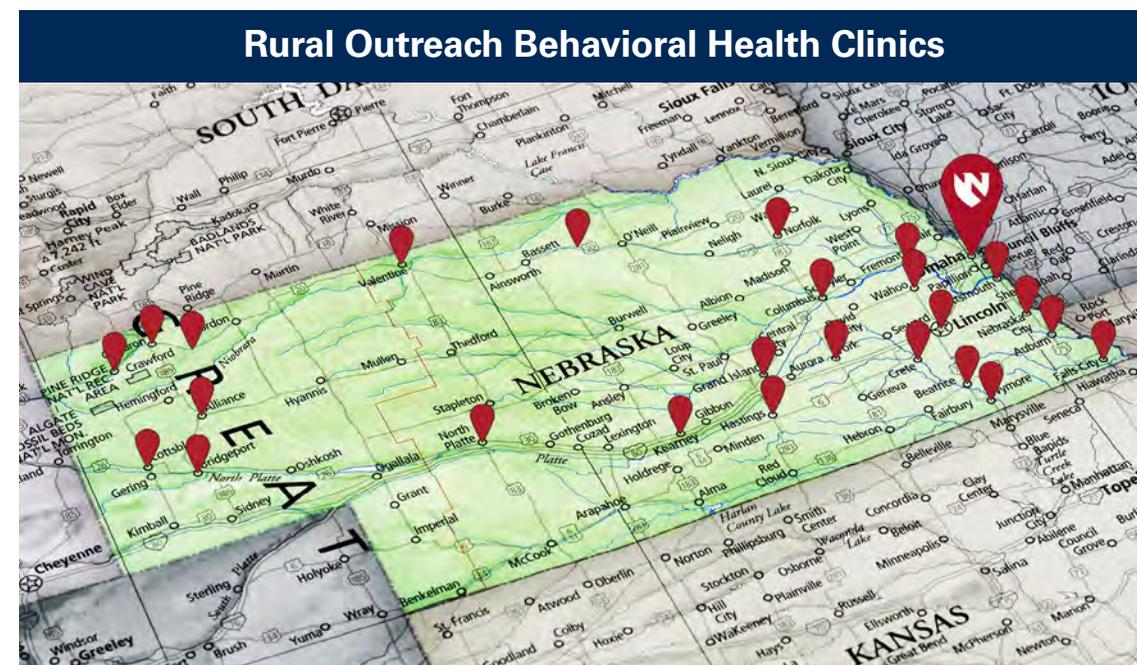
state. Today, MMI has created behavioral health partnerships in cities such as Alliance, Chadron and Scottsbluff, and just in the past three years added clinics in North Platte, West Point and York.

Keith Allen, PhD, director of the MMI Department of Psychology, points to the efforts of Joe Evans, PhD, who led the department in the 1990s and who was a driving force for a training model that would place interns and trainees in rural and underserved locations. Trainees who might then, as Dr. Jones-Hazledine had done, choose to stay in these areas.

“My first three clinics were Chadron, Gordon and Crawford,” Dr. Jones-Hazledine said. “MMI hired me as an assistant professor, and I took on the dual roles of providing clinical service while developing the clinics, and then also, shortly after, starting to train students from MMI, as well.”

Today, her practice encompasses several hundred square miles – she and her employees at Western Nebraska Behavioral Health, which she opened in Rushville, serve an area that stretches from Valentine to Crawford and from Bridgeport to Rushville.

“Jody Polaha and Joe Evans were instrumental in helping me develop a plan that would bring me back home and help me be of use to these communities,” Dr. Jones-Hazledine said. “The physicians we met had never had behavioral health services available within their practices. We proposed an arrangement that would provide them with behavioral health services, with MMI supporting me, and that was it.”



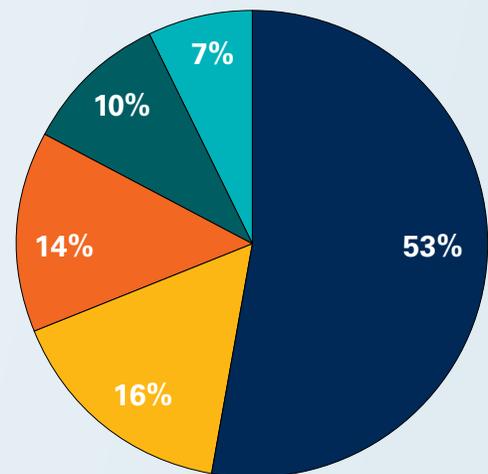
When Dr. Evans started the program in 1997, it was one of very few in the country, so it drew people from all over the U.S., many of whom took the strategy back to their own states. Part of the draw of the model is that integration with a family care clinic not only broadens the reach of the services but also allows families to circumvent any perceived stigma of going into a mental health clinic. Since the primary care provider knows the families, they are more likely to return, so the integration also helps clinical outcomes. Since its creation, the program has become a national model for rural behavioral health delivery, used in states including Tennessee, Michigan and Florida.

Brandy Clarke, PhD, is another example of the impact of MMI’s training programs.

“We attract a large number of people who come for training, but then stay – myself included,” Dr. Clarke said. “Between 30 and 40% of our trainees don’t leave. I’m not from here. I was going home to the mountains, that was always the goal.”

Once at MMI, though, she found she loved not only the work but the people, and Dr. Clarke remains part of the faculty today. “This is where I want to be.”

## 116 Former MMI Psychology Trainees Now Working in Nebraska in...



- Metropolitan Clinics
- Rural/Underserved Clinics
- Rural/Underserved Integrated Primary Care Clinics
- School Districts
- Integrated Primary Care Clinics

It helps that UNMC is one of the largest training sites nationwide for psychology interns, accepting anywhere from 15 to 20 trainees in a cohort where most sites accept two to four – meaning more behavioral health professionals who may decide to make their home in Nebraska.

Today, 116 former MMI psychology trainees are practicing in Nebraska, with 35 working in rural or under-resourced areas and 11 working in schools.

And the department continues to explore strategies to build capacity and improve access to behavioral health services throughout the region. In fact, Drs. Clarke and Allen say “capacity” and “access” are the driving motivators for all the department’s educational and clinical efforts.

Dr. Clarke is the director of the MMI-based Mid-America Mental Health Technology Transfer Center, part of a grant-funded national network. During the pandemic, the MHTTC held trainings that drew an international audience, further expanding MMI’s impact.

“We do a lot of workforce development and broader regional presentations. We do a lot of technical assistance, not only in how to implement integrated care but how to do training in integrated care. And through MHTTC, more people are hearing about our education of health care providers and the model,” she said.

During the pandemic, the Mid-America MHTTC collaborated for an eight-session series on telehealth – another area of longstanding strength for the department – that drew more than 5,000 participants internationally.

Yet the department has never lost its focus on access in the state.

“We cannot meet all the behavioral health needs out there – although we do meet some in the process of building capacity,” Dr. Allen said. “Our real focus is workforce development and building capacity for people to meet these needs and improve access in their own communities.”

He and Dr. Clarke are particularly excited about a relatively new emphasis on working with schools.

“That’s a natural extension of the integrated care clinics – moving from the primary care environment to the other place mental health problems show up first, the school setting,” Dr. Allen said. “We have been working with one of the local Educational Service Units to help them expand their behavioral health workforce. The MHTTC is looking at integrating behavioral health into schools in a multi-tier model, and we’ve expanded our own internship training in that area. This is blossoming currently; it’s one of the most exciting areas of future focus.”

Additionally, the department is expanding its reach by adding faculty trained to address adult behavioral health needs.

Already, one faculty member goes into community agencies and provides support for the work they are doing with adults in the larger metropolitan area, Dr. Allen said. “We’re not serving the entire state yet – Fremont is as far as we’re going right now – but I can see that growing. We have a track record of success, after all.”

# Growing Need Calls For ACTION

**As rates of autism in children grow into an epidemic, the UNMC Munroe-Meyer Institute is stepping forward with a vision to address the crisis in Nebraska.**

Building on a model of care it has established in Omaha, MMI envisions a network of Autism Care for Toddler clinics around the state. The goal is for 10 new clinics statewide to join the institute’s North Omaha and Central Omaha clinics in providing care for toddlers ages 2 through 5 with autism.

The need is great. According to the Centers for Disease Control, one in 44 U.S. children has been identified as having autism spectrum disorder or ASD. Two decades ago, the rate of autism diagnosis was much lower.

“If you look at the growing numbers and the need for services, it is simply astonishing,” said Karoly Mirnics, MD, PhD, director of the Munroe-Meyer Institute. “What we know is that the earlier you make the diagnosis and the earlier you start the intervention, the better the long-term outcome. That means you have to have early detection and early intervention.”



*One-to-one interaction between providers such as Kristie Velez and young clients is a major facet of the success of MMI’s ACT Clinics.*

MMI is putting forth a vision that would establish the Autism Care for Toddlers Network, placing clinics in regionally significant communities, in close driving range of families, with a trained workforce deliberately built to face the challenge.

A network of community-based care facilities is critical to the vision – enabling the institute to apply the standard of care that makes a difference when a child is diagnosed with autism.

That standard of care is called Applied Behavior Analysis, or ABA. ABA-based care is not done by

telehealth, but by intensive, in-person therapy, typically delivered in one-on-one sessions.

It is critical that the regional clinics are in close driving range of families. The goal is to provide access to all corners of the state, from rural to urban.

“This is where you provide service – where people live,” Dr. Mirnics said.

Applied Behavior Analysis care is widely recognized as the most evidence-based approach to working with individuals with autism,



*Bailey Andersen and others build play into therapies provided at the ACT clinic.*

said Alice Shillingsburg, PhD, director of the integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders (iCASD) at the Munroe-Meyer Institute.

Overall, ABA is a scientific approach to understanding human behavior, and it has a long history of promoting positive behaviors, Dr. Shillingsburg said. The broad package of ABA interventions allows therapists to tailor effective treatment plans to the individual child who has been diagnosed as having an autism spectrum disorder, she said.

“We do use a package of interventions that certainly have been shown to be effective,” Dr. Shillingsburg said. “But the way that those things might be utilized and focused is very individualized.”

MMI brings its three-pronged mission to addressing the challenge - not only expert clinical service but also cutting-edge research, along with a commitment to education and training. Through UNMC and MMI’s mission toward education and training, the institute has the opportunity to build a pipeline of future autism care providers in the state.

The institute also brings a long-established history of applying its expertise to face a similar challenge in psychology services.

Over the last 25 years, MMI established a series of rural behavioral health clinics across Nebraska. In establishing clinics in more than 30 communities around Nebraska, MMI became the national model for bringing that care close to home across a wide, rural area.

Dr. Mirnics said the ACT Clinic Network is an ambitious project needed to address a large-

scale issue. But he said MMI is experienced and well-positioned to address autism care into the future, as it did with rural behavioral health.

It will take funding to make the vision a reality - a \$2 million commitment to fully establish and staff each of the 10 clinics over the next five to 10 years, for a long-term \$20 million investment of outside funding to build out the network.

Having established the model clinics in North Omaha at 5050 Ames Ave. and Central Omaha at 9012 Q St., MMI is taking the next steps in creating the network.

**“What we know is that the earlier you make the diagnosis and the earlier you start the intervention, the better the long-term outcome.”**

In January, MMI and its integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders received a \$416,000 grant to establish an ACT Clinic in Fremont. The funding came through the Behavioral Health Education Center of Nebraska with American Rescue Plan Act dollars.

Regina Carroll, PhD, ACT Clinic director and associate director of iCASD, said MMI is planning meetings with community partners, making plans for the physical location itself and starting recruitment of the clinic’s initial trainees.

In Fremont, the clinic will partner with Midland University, which offers psychology students a major in Applied Behavior Analysis and has an established relationship with the Munroe-Meyer Institute and the integrated Center for Autism Spectrum Disorders. MMI also is seeking a regional partnership with Wayne State College.

The goal is to staff the clinic with 10 behavioral technicians, two board-certified behavior analysts and an ongoing group of students to train as technicians. At full capacity, the clinic would offer care for 20 toddlers with autism.

Said Dr. Carroll, “We are very excited. We can’t wait to get going.”

Dr. Carroll said the ACT Clinic model has proven successful in helping young children with autism. The model works by offering comprehensive but individualized care, using evidence-based therapy, calling upon the multi-disciplinary fields

at MMI including speech-language pathology and occupational therapy, in accessible locations and by passing on the skills to parents and caregivers to continue the progress at home.

Institute officials say it is critical that Nebraska finds a way to increase the care for children with autism.

For its part, the Munroe-Meyer Institute is ready to face this emerging challenge with innovation, passion and commitment.

Said Dr. Carroll, “That’s MMI - we’ve been doing this for years and years and years.”



# Recognizing Excellence

**The heart of MMI is its people.** These people were recognized at a ceremony in early 2022 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** **Amanda Barton, MS**

Barton has participated in the three-part “Erasing Cultural Indifference” series educating on the impacts of microaggressions and privilege offered through UNMC; organized a group within the speech-language pathology department to purchase more diverse therapy materials; and always ensures an interpreter is present in-person or via phone when needed. She also used her knowledge of EPIC to update SmartPhrases to include patient’s preferred name, gender identity and preferred pronouns.



### **Community Service Award** **Liz Konopasek, DPT**

Dr. Konopasek advances the health and physical activity levels of students with disabilities in the community through many efforts, including: coordinating the Fellowship Games, a district-wide fitness and competitive games event for middle-school children with disabilities or mobility restrictions; directing Fun Fitness, an MMI partnership with Special Olympics Nebraska; developing and teaching an adaptive physical education curriculum at Midlands Lutheran College; and many other initiatives.



### **Spirit Award** **Beth Hughes, MS**

Hughes is a staple at MMI community events such as WalkRite for RiteCare. She always makes the time to welcome new people to MMI and lend an ear to a friend as well. As the chair of the MMI Quality Council, Hughes works tirelessly to elevate spirit and appreciation within the MMI community. She is thoughtful and motivates all as she diligently welcomes all contributions of ideas and participation within Quality Council members. She truly represents the spirit of MMI.



### **Educator Award** **Brandy Clarke, PhD**

Dr. Clarke has mentored faculty across disciplines in their grant writing, resulting in millions of dollars in new funding at MMI for training and research. She leads a team of experts in development and disseminating information on key mental health topics, which have been provided to approximately 9,500 educators, health care professionals, psychologists and rural populations. Since the onset of COVID-19, Dr. Clarke and her MHTTC team have garnered national attention in their innovative work to address the need for improved mental health training and education.



### **Researcher Award** **Jessica Gormley, PhD**

Dr. Gormley has received multiple grants for her research related to augmentative and alternative communication. Her efforts allowed MMI to join the premier national AAC research consortium. She also has developed additional interdisciplinary research relationships at MMI and UNMC. She is a member of the TIPS research group, a design thinking research collaboration with UNMC College of Medicine, and early research collaborations with the College of Nursing. She helped lead a nationwide Patient-Provider Communication COVID-19 Taskforce to develop communication tools that have been used internationally.



### **Support Staff Award** **Latrice Bond**

To support MMI’s move towards centralized scheduling, Bond not only made sure the entire department was templated, but she also worked to develop specialized blocks to allow the staff flexibility in their schedules that reflect their unique clinical specialties. In addition to maintaining speech-language pathology database tracking in excel, Bond also worked to learn how to make pivot tables to manipulate the data to meet the needs of the department.



### **Staff Clinical Provider Award** **Carol Gaebler, MS**

Gaebler is MMI’s leading expert in modified barium swallow studies and fiberoptic evaluation of the swallow (FEES) studies to provide either the gold standard radiologic assessment or the newer anatomic and physiologic assessment. She also has demonstrated expertise in swallowing, cognition, and head and neck cancer evaluation and treatment. She is highly skilled and is highly sought after by patients and providers.



### **Faculty Clinical Services Award** **Nancy Foster, PhD**

Dr. Foster stands out as an accomplished provider capable of conceiving and implementing systemic-level ideas that have helped improve services across that state of Nebraska. She was critical to building capacity to meet mental health needs in central Nebraska, helping to establish MMI’s presence in Kearney, York and North Platte.

## 2022 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:** Maggie Neujahr

**May:** Deb Brumley

**July:** Sydney Norton, MS

**September:** Marley Brown and Holly Schlautman, MS

**November:** Regina Carroll, PhD

# MMI Facts & Figures

More than

## 17 Disciplines

## 5 supporting philanthropic boards

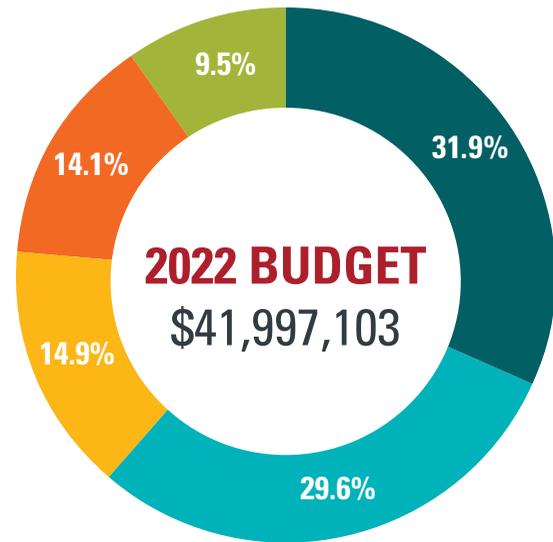


Approximately

## 520 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.

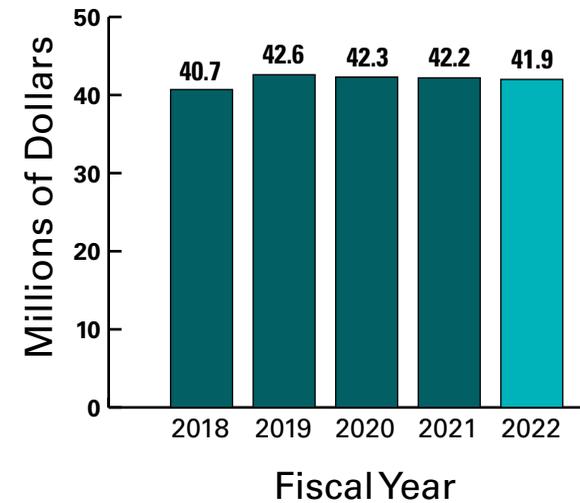


### Revenue Sources

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

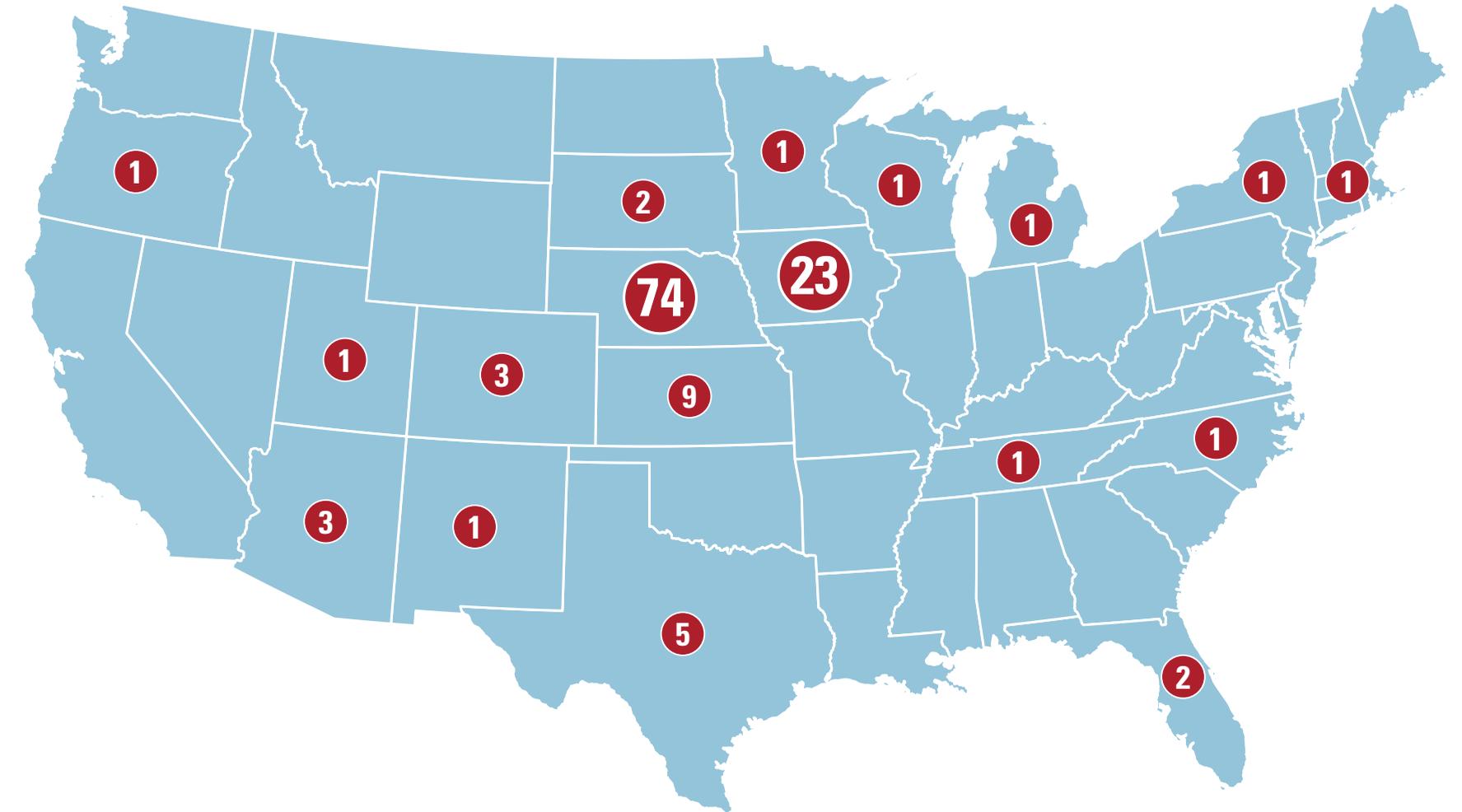
Annually, more than **\$41 million** budget, with more than **\$18 million** in federal, state and local grants and contracts and **\$6.2 million** in philanthropy.

### MMI Budget 2018 – 2022



## Where we provide services

Represented by number of counties serviced in each state.



## CLINICAL SERVICES

Approximately

**90,000**  
Yearly Services



*serving clients across the lifespan with 54% taking place in the community.*

*In 2022, more than **353 volunteers** provided approximately **13,000 service hours**.*

## COMMUNITY OUTREACH



*More than **140** community service activities provided to **7,166 participants**.*



MMI has more than **35 provider locations** with 17 outside Omaha with more than 50 types of services provided.

**30** Recreational Therapy Programs and Clubs

*Serving approximately **535 families and participants** annually.*

*Providing more than **25,100 hours of service**.*



Approximately

**2,880** Hours

*of technical assistance.*

## EDUCATION & RESEARCH

More than

**8,800** 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

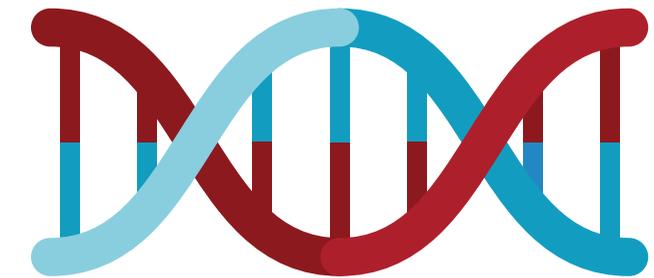
**Disciplines trained:** applied behavior analysis, counseling, child development, dentistry, education, family medicine, genetic counseling, law, medical genetics, nursing, occupational therapy, pediatrics, physical therapy, psychology, public health, recreation, social work and speech-language pathology

Long-term trainees served: 407  
Short-term students served: 1,500  
Federally funded core training programs: 4  
Graduate programs: 2  
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** *federal research funding annually.*

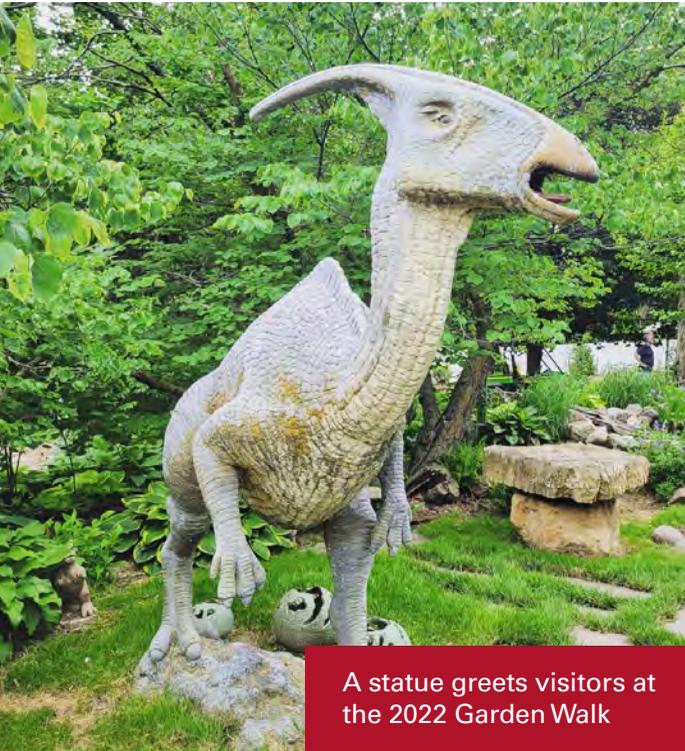


**56 Active Projects**

|                     |                                    |
|---------------------|------------------------------------|
| <b>Funding Type</b> | 12 Federal                         |
|                     | 14 State                           |
|                     | 10 Foundation/ Non-Profit          |
|                     | 10 External University/ Hospitals  |
|                     | 10 Internal to UNMC/ NU Foundation |

**77 Applications**

57 External, 20 Internal  
38 Funded (49% Success Rate)



A statue greets visitors at the 2022 Garden Walk

### Hattie B. Munroe Foundation

The Hattie B. Munroe Foundation donated a record 140 gift cards totaling \$21,000 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.

# Board Highlights

### The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities

The Meyer Foundation for Disabilities held its Walk & Roll for Disabilities on March 6, drawing approximately 250 people and raising \$25,000. The foundation worked with the MMI Department of Recreational Therapy in 2021-22 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 53rd Garden Walk in 2022. The annual tour of select neighborhood gardens raised \$30,000 to support grants for innovative projects and highly impactful training endeavors. Grants for 2021-22, for which funding was supplemented by the Ruth and Bill Scott Foundation, totaled \$65,833, and included projects such as “Physiological Recordings to Quantify Patient Comfort,” “Impact Play: Providing Play Opportunities for All Abilities,” “Teaching Acceptance and Building

Comfort with Health and Self-Care Routines for Your Children with Autism” and “Virtual Parent Series: Partnering with Parents to Support Youth Development.”

### The Scottish Rite Foundation of Nebraska

In June, RiteCare clinicians hosted WalkRite for RiteCare at Lake Zorinsky, which raised about \$8,300, and in August, the Scottish Rite hosted the RiteCare Classic at Dodge-Riverside Golf Course, drawing 20 teams and raising \$21,250. All funds go to support speech and language therapy for Nebraska children. In October, Tony Green, director of Nebraska’s DHHS Division of Developmental Disabilities, received the 2022 Friend of RiteCare Award at a dinner that raised a record \$56,500. In total, Nebraska Scottish Rite Freemasons have donated about \$844,246 for speech therapy through the UNMC Munroe-Meyer Institute and an additional \$53,827 for speech services through the University of Nebraska at Kearney.

### The Community Advisory Committee

In 2021, 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.

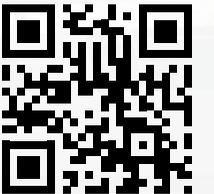


To say that the Munroe-Meyer Institute is a special place is an understatement. Every time I walk through the doors of MMI, I’m struck by the vibrancy and joy of patients, families and the MMI team. In my role with the University of Nebraska Foundation, I also enjoy the distinct privilege of hearing many unique stories from grateful patients and their families about the care and support they’ve received at MMI – and how, in many cases, their experience has been life-changing.

These efforts aren’t confined to the MMI building itself, of course. One of the best parts of my work in philanthropy and development is seeing the direct impact a charitable contribution can make on families across the state. Whether it’s a gift made to build a GoBabyGo! vehicle, a donation designed to expand autism services into under-resourced areas, a contribution given out of gratitude to further research at MMI or a memorial to honor a loved one who lives on through a recreation therapy program, every dollar given to MMI is felt, needed and greatly appreciated.

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.

**Jessica Janssen Wolford**  
*University of Nebraska Foundation*



**To learn more about how to make a gift to MMI, please go to [nufoundation.org/mmi](https://nufoundation.org/mmi), or contact Jessica Janssen Wolford at [jessica.janssenwolford@nufoundation.org](mailto:jessica.janssenwolford@nufoundation.org) or 402-504-3327.**

UNIVERSITY OF  
**Nebraska**  
Medical Center



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