

Cape Town, Tulane center works to improve the lives of at-risk children

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At the Highly Vulnerable Children's Research Center, located in Cape Town, South Africa, and run by the Tulane School of Social Work, the research team conducts rigorous studies that they hope will lead to a better quality of life for struggling children worldwide.

As director of Tulane School of Social Work's Highly Vulnerable Children's Research Center in Cape Town, South Africa, research associate professor Tonya R. Thurman and her team conduct rigorous studies that they hope will lead to a better quality of life for struggling children worldwide.

The center is located in South Africa because that country is home to the world's largest HIV epidemic; much of the center's work is evaluating social programs that target the millions of children orphaned as a result of AIDS, as well as other children affected by the disease.

"Rigorously evaluating real-world interventions for vulnerable children and families poses a lot of challenges but is critical to identifying effective programs. By sharing our lessons, we hope to support continued international efforts to strengthen the evidence base," Thurman said.

Thurman, who earned a master's degree and a PhD from the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, writes about the center's initiatives as the first chapter in *Getting to Zero: Global Social Work Responds to HIV*, a joint publication of UNAIDS and the International Association of Schools of Social Work. The book describes the innovative efforts of social workers around the world and how those efforts can be adapted to other countries in order to end the AIDS epidemic by 2030, as set forth in the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals.

Titled “Best practices for evaluating care and support programs for HIV-affected families: Lessons learned from South Africa,” the chapter provides practical guidance to strengthen the quality of evaluation research to more effectively guide social work practice.

It describes lessons learned from five program evaluations, including how to collaborate with service providers, strategies for enhancing the relevance and use of evaluations, and the ethical issues involved in conducting research with vulnerable children and families. The evaluated programs included home visits and structured group interventions, HIV prevention and support services, parenting and psychological well-being.

Thurman’s co-authors on the chapter are all affiliated with the center and Tulane and include Brian Lockett, Tory Taylor, Johanna Nice, Melissa Carnay and Alexandra Spyrelis.