

National Institute on Aging (NIA)/National Institutes of Health (NIH): Exemplary Research Conducted through the Edward R. Roybal Centers

Investigators at the Edward R. Roybal Centers for Translational Research in the Social and Behavioral Sciences are working to improve the health, quality of life, and productivity of middle-aged and older people by translating findings from the social and behavioral sciences into practical outcomes.

Lead Agency:

National Institute on Aging (NIA)
National Institutes of Health (NIH)

Agency Mission:

- Support and conduct genetic, biological, clinical, behavioral, social, and economic research related to the aging process, diseases and conditions associated with aging, and other special problems and needs of older Americans.
- Foster the development of research and clinician scientists in aging.
- Communicate information about aging and advances in research on aging to the scientific community, health care providers, and the public.

Principal Investigators:

Tamara Jones, Ph.D.

National Institute on Aging
7201 Wisconsin Avenue
Bethesda, MD 20892
NIA Legislative Officer

General Description:

The Edward R. Roybal Centers for Translational Research in the Social and Behavioral Sciences, first authorized by Congress in 1993, are designed to improve the health, quality of life, and productivity of middle-aged and older people by facilitating the translation of knowledge learned in the social and behavioral sciences into practical outcomes. Investigators at the Roybal Centers have made a number of key discoveries in the emerging field of translational behavioral and social research. For example:

- The Roybal Center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham has developed tools and technologies for identifying older adults at risk for automobile crash involvement, and is working with industry partners to develop and disseminate products based on these tools.
- The Roybal Center at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has developed two evidence-based interventions from its in-depth work on physical activity for

older adults. One program, Fit and Strong!, is targeted to older adults with lower extremity osteoarthritis, and one is targeted to older adults with developmental/intellectual disabilities (primarily Down syndrome). Both programs are currently being used in several states; in addition, the Center has partnered with the National Arthritis Foundation (NAF) to replicate Fit and Strong! through NAF chapters nationwide.

- Another investigator at the UIC Roybal Center has developed instruments for self-efficacy appropriate for use with older adults with developmental/intellectual disabilities, and these have been adopted internationally.
- The Oregon Center for Aging and Technology (ORCATECH), a Roybal Center, has developed a “living laboratory” model methodology for in-home assessment of activity to facilitate early detection of changes in health or memory. This new technology provides a continuous data stream, which provides a more complete view of real-world function and an improved understanding of the variability of in-home activity. Other companies have used the ORCATECH model to develop related products, and the model has spurred several new grant-funded research projects, including the development of a new medication tracker for older adults.

Excellence: What makes this project exceptional?

As recent years have seen an explosion of fundamental insights in the basic social and behavioral sciences, translating this knowledge into practical advances to benefit the health and well being of older Americans has increasingly become a priority for the NIH. Since 1993, the Roybal Centers have been at the forefront of the NIH’s efforts in translational behavioral and social science aimed at older Americans.

Significance: How is this research relevant to older persons, populations and/or an aging society?

The development and testing of interventions that will benefit the health and well being of older Americans, and the effective translation of these interventions into routine practice, is becoming increasingly important: Between now and 2030, the number of individuals age 65 and older will likely double, reaching 71.5 million and comprising a larger proportion of the entire population, up from 13 percent today to 20 percent in 2030.

Effectiveness: What is the impact and/or application of this research to older persons?

Because the mission of the Roybal Centers is the translation of scientific and technological findings into practical applications for older adults, their findings may be expected to have a widespread impact. For example, the tools for identifying at-risk older drivers (referenced above) are currently being translated into practice in several states, and the Roybal-developed instruments for self-efficacy among intellectually disabled older adults (also referenced above) are being used internationally.

Innovativeness: Why is this exciting or newsworthy?

By identifying ways to move interventions from the clinic to the mainstream, the Roybal Centers are poised to make a real-world difference in the lives of everyday Americans.