

Reaching Out to Depressed Teens

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The New Orleans Children's Health Project, directed by Tulane pediatrician Dr. Alina Olteanu, is screening adolescents for depression aboard a medical mobile unit, offering increased access to mental health services for at-risk teens.



Dr. Alina Olteanu, assistant professor of pediatrics, (center) leads a team of mental health professionals who are screening New Orleans-area teens for depression. Team members include social worker Ruth Arnberger, left, and mental health coordinator Donna Usner, right. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

While national data estimates that 14 percent of adolescents experience depression, Olteanu says close to one in four (23 percent) of 11 to 18-year-old patients at the mobile unit have some degree of depression.

"The population we serve is not only faced with a multitude of challenges typical of an inner-city population — including poverty, exposure to community violence and drug use, lack of access to healthy leisure activities and obesity — but they are also faced with living in a city that still is recovering," says Olteanu, assistant professor and chief of [community pediatrics and global health](#) in the Tulane Department of Pediatrics.

If screening tools indicate that a teen is depressed, the adolescent also will be screened for suicidal thoughts and referred to the mental health unit to see a therapist and child psychiatrist.

Olteanu and her team also are on the lookout for high-risk behaviors, such as smoking, drinking alcohol, use of illegal drugs, violence and sexual activity.

The project came about through the collaboration between the Children's Health Fund and the Tulane School of Medicine. The New Orleans [Children's Health Project](#) has two state-of-the-art mobile medical units, one of which offers primary care services for children and teens while the other offers mental health services to children and their families.

"The depression screening program is one of our initiatives that illustrates our enhanced medical

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home model and continuous efforts to integrate mental health services into pediatric primary care," Olteanu says.

The mobile clinics are the only ones in New Orleans to be officially recognized as a "medical home" by the National Committee for Quality Assurance.

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