



“IOC GETS AN A” - by Kim Spinelli

Jolie Conley, an adult on the autism spectrum, was demonstrating challenging, dangerous behaviors. Like many families and caregivers of individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), her parents researched where to turn. Fortunately, they discovered the [Intensive Outpatient Clinic \(IOC\)](#), the newest unit in the Rutgers Center for Adult Autism Services (RCAAS). They're very grateful they did. With evidence-based interventions, Jolie's challenging behavior decreased by 97% (17% above goal!) after using IOC's concentrated behavior-analytic support services.

The secret to this success? “It is the combination of science, service, and resources to enable best practice. The intensity of support provided and the behavioral treatment tailored to the patient based on assessment phase results yielded this gratifying outcome,” said **Dr. Julia Iannaccone**, IOC Director and Assistant Professor of Clinical Practice at GSAPP. Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) is the application of behavioral science to improve socially important behavior; through its [Department of Applied Psychology](#). GSAPP offers multiple educational pathways in ABA.

The Back Story

The IOC was established as a community-based resource for adults with autism that have complex, crisis-level support needs, what is known in the field of behavior analysis as “severe challenging behavior.” Examples include, but are not limited to, self-injury, aggression, property destruction, pica (ingesting inedible objects), elopement (leaving caregivers), and problematic ritualistic behaviors.



Continuing its alignment with GSAPP's mission to serve underserved populations, and the RCAAS's staunch commitment to being a change leader in supporting autistic adults, the IOC was founded to meet a growing need. It fills the gap between regular service provision and in-patient and development centers. Dr. Iannaccone was hired in late 2022, and the clinic took its first patient in early 2023.





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The Structure

Each patient in the clinic is assigned three behavior technicians, with one serving as lead and the other two serving as designated backups. The Lead Technician oversees the daily activities of the IOC patient. The three technicians are supervised by Behavior Analyst, Matthew (Matt) Lucciola, MAP, BCBA, who is supervised by Director and Senior Behavior Analyst, Dr. Iannaccone. In addition, she manages all clinic operations and patient care.



Explained **Dr. SungWoo Kahng**, Chair, Professor, Department of Applied Psychology at GSAPP, “We hold a weekly peer review session, during which a lead behavior tech presents their cases to the other technicians, behavior analysts, and faculty. This is an opportunity to share what they’ve been doing, receive feedback, and ask questions. It was here that we discussed Jolie’s remarkable outcome.” Demonstrating GSAPP’s commitment to providing practical, hands-on learning experiences, “Peer review is a great opportunity for clinical improvement and a wonderful learning opportunity for the staff, students, and faculty,” said Dr. Kahng, adding, “This is probably the only clinic that focuses on supporting adults with ASD who engage in severe problem behaviors in the country, and likely the world.”



The Process

The waitlist for admission into the IOC’s innovative program begins with a patient referral form that Dr. Iannaccone closely reviews with Matt using a proprietary severity indicator tool. Most referrals come from psychiatrists or attorneys, as was the case with Jolie; the admissions time frame is approximately 12 weeks. Once accepted, a patient in-take is completed, and the admission begins. After extensive clinic assessments, a comprehensive, tailored Behavior Support Plan is created. Progress is closely monitored until discharge, and, to a lesser extent, afterward during follow-up.

“We take a holistic approach by including caregivers in the admission process and by training them on how to perpetuate the treatment plan. Continued success is only possible if the prescribed treatment plan is implemented correctly and consistently,” said Dr. Iannaccone. She added, “In Jolie’s case, and her caregivers and post-discharge service providers were trained to execute her plan properly, which ultimately adds to her sustained success.”





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The Staff

Speaking of her team, Dr. Iannaccone describes them as “highly motivated to learn, determined to find solutions that generate the best outcomes, and extremely professional and compassionate towards the patients and their families.” All nine full- and part-time IOC staff members are GSAPP-Master of Applied Psychology (MAP) students or graduates. In fact, two of them, Sydney Hall and Kiet Tran, are grateful, worthy recipients of the [Autism MVP Foundation Award](#), established to encourage more GSAPP students training at the RCAAS to pursue this noble work and careers in this in-demand field.

Sydney served as Lead on Jolie’s case, emphasizing how implementing a prescribed treatment makes the world of difference for patients and that consistency is key. She feels her success as a clinician is due to having Dr. Iannaccone as her supervisor and professor. “I appreciate her pushing me and instilling confidence in me. She is incredibly inspiring, encourages and instructs us to be the best clinicians possible,” said Sydney.



The Future

Dr. Iannaccone said that in the short-term, she’d like the IOC to achieve full capacity, serving as many adults with crisis-level ASD as possible. Longer term, she’d like to continue to conduct more research and be a resource to the community at large, training a wider network of behavior analysts. “I would like the IOC to become a model for future programs, and I would love for people to open more clinics, which are direly needed. With crisis-level behavior, options are scarce,” she said.



As with most programs for adults on the autism spectrum, funding is complicated and essential to sustain this level of support. To make a financial gift to the IOC, please visit:

<https://rcaas.rutgers.edu/IOC/donate>.

