Genia Taitano explains how people with disabilities experience increased food insecurity

A native of Rota, the southernmost island of the United States Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Genia Taitano observed significant health disparities as she grew up. “Access to health care continues to be an issue throughout the region. The chronic shortage of health care providers not only affects availability of services, but in a small insular community, creates difficulties with establishing trusting doctor-patient relationships. There is a deep need to close culture gaps held steady by differences in language, education, and custom.” The thesis she chose for her Masters of Public Health degree reflected her concern for the disadvantaged and vulnerable.

“I decided to study the relationship between food insecurity and hunger among people with disabilities in Oregon,” she said. As well as being a social concern in its own right, hunger plays a significant role in the body’s ability to combat and recover from disease. “We already knew from prior studies that people with disabilities were more likely to experience food insecurity than those without disabilities,” she said. “What we didn’t know was whether having certain disabilities placed people at greater risk for either food insecurity or hunger.”

The study, which she designed herself, was based on data gathered through phone interviews by the Oregon Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System. Her analysis showed not only that people with disabilities were twice as likely to have experienced food insecurity than those without disabilities, but also that those with psychiatric and cognitive disabilities had much greater odds of experiencing food insecurity compared to those with physical disabilities.

“There is a paucity of research on the health issues of persons with physical and developmental disabilities,” said William Lambert, PhD, Associate Professor and Head, Division of Epidemiology, Department of Public Health and Preventive Medicine. “I hope that Genia publishes this work.”
Having earned her MPH from OHSU, Genia now plans to attend medical school and has been conditionally accepted into the John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawaii. “I am taking part in the Imi Ho'ola Program,” she said. “It’s a 12-month post baccalaureate program that selects students from disadvantaged backgrounds and prepares them for matriculation into medical school.” The program favors students with a strong interest in practicing in Hawaii and elsewhere in the Pacific. “I feel medical school will bring me closer to returning to the CNMI, to friends, family, and my culture. I am very excited to join the ranks of those who provide care for Pacific Island peoples.”