

# BOYS TOWN

Center for Perception and  
Communication in Children

2025 | ANNUAL  
NEWSLETTER



NOV 2024 – NOV 2025



## From the Program Director



Welcome to the 2025 edition of the annual newsletter for the Center for Perception and Communication

in Children (CPCC). The past year has been one of growth, innovation, and continued commitment to improving the lives of children and families through research, collaboration, and community engagement.

Across the CPCC, our scientists and staff have contributed to impactful work focused on children's speech, language, hearing, and cognitive outcomes. In this issue, we highlight notable accomplishments, including awards, research publications, and presentations given at national and international conferences. You will also find updates on new initiatives, exciting partnerships, and the efforts of our core teams who make this work possible.

We remain grateful for your continued interest and support. As we look to the future, we are energized by the momentum of the past year and inspired by the shared mission that unites us.

With appreciation,



**Lori Leibold, Ph.D.**

Program Director  
Center for Perception and Communication in Children

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Boys Town National Research Hospital established the **Center for Perception and Communication in Children (CPCC)** in 2014 with support from a Centers of Biomedical Research Excellence (COBRE) grant from the National Institute of General Medical Sciences (NIGMS) under Award Number P20GM109023.

*We're proud to share our research team's progress and highlights from this last year!*



# RESEARCH Core Updates



**Admin Core, L to R. Angela Collins, Lori Leibold, Sara Hansen, Christine Hammans, Nina Hjermstad (Randi Knox, not pictured)**

## ADMINISTRATIVE CORE

The Administrative Core (Admin Core) is led by Lori Leibold, Ph.D., and facilitated by an experienced project management team. The Admin Core provides the project management, resource allocation, evaluation framework, and scientific oversight required to successfully run the CPCC. The Admin Core also allocates resources, and coordinates with institutional leaders to ensure long-term sustainability.

The Admin Core runs the Pilot Project Program. This program is designed to give early career investigators the opportunity to expand their areas of research, increase research participation among all CPCC scientists, and develop new technologies.

Over the past decade, the CPCC recruited many new and established researchers. This recruitment effort has been supported by the Admin Core and Boys Town Hospital. The research being performed in the CPCC is nationally recognized for improving the lives of children with communication disorders.

The Admin Core also works with other local Institutional Development Award (IDeA)-funded programs to increase efficiency, share resources, and disseminate knowledge across the region. The IDeA program is a congressionally mandated program that builds research capacity in states that historically have had low levels of NIH funding. It supports competitive basic, clinical, and translational research, faculty development, and infrastructure improvements.

The program aims to strengthen an institution's ability to support biomedical research, enhance the competitiveness of investigators in securing research funding, and enable clinical and translational research that addresses the needs of medically underserved communities.

## RESEARCH PARTICIPANT SERVICES CORE

One of the primary goals of the Research Participant Services Core (Participant Core) is to support labs at Boys Town Hospital in conducting research that is robust and unbiased. These efforts include providing services directly to labs via the effort of the Participant Core staff, which includes recruitment coordinators, community engagement specialists, research audiologists, and research speech-language pathologists.

### **The Participant Core has three areas of expertise:**

- 1 The Clinical Measurement Program provides expertise and services to ensure clinical measures used in research protocols are implemented with high levels of fidelity, to provide the most accurate data possible. The CMP can support measurements in speech, language, cognition, hearing and vision.
- 2 The Recruitment Program provides expertise and support for labs to recruit specific populations including typically developing children and adults who have or have concerns of hearing loss, hard of hearing or hearing aids, cochlear implant, developmental language disorder, Down syndrome and more.
- 3 The Community Engagement Program builds stronger connections between researchers and communities that have not often been closely involved in research activities. By forming partnerships rooted in mutual respect and trust, the program supports research that is relevant, accessible and responsive to the real-world needs of individuals and communities.



**Participant Core, L to R. Natalie Mason, Jamie Petersen, Krystal Werfel, Sophie Ambrose, Susan Sarver, Trinity Williams**



**Tech Core, L to R. Won Jang, Seth Bashford, Raj Persaud, Chris Stecker, Adam Bosen (Denis Fitzpatrick, not pictured)**

To support these efforts, the Participant Core established two groups, the Research Assistant and Lab Staff (RALS) Connections Group and the Research Speech-Language Pathologist and Audiologist Alliance (the Alliance). These groups provide research employees with the opportunity to share best practices, open communication, multi-lab collaborations, and a sense of belonging.

Additionally, these meetings provide an opportunity for the Participant Core and the Administrative Core to discuss topics that are relevant to each group's unique expertise and skillset, with the groups providing input on a variety of topics ranging from selection of clinical test batteries for research protocols to procedures for hearing, speech, and language screenings. Both groups are a win-win for all involved, with research staff members building stronger relationships with one another, while developing professionally and providing the department with valuable input based on their experiences.

## RESEARCH TECHNOLOGY SERVICES CORE

The Research Technology Services Core (Tech Core) team consists of core lead Chris Stecker; the research engineering supervisors, Denis Fitzpatrick and Raj Persaud; the research technology engineers, Seth Bashford, Adam Bosen and Won Jang; and the technology project manager, Christine Hammans. Our team consists of engineers, programmers, scientists, and staff with experience in software applications development, signal processing, digital media design, research hardware, and data acquisition and analysis.

We have developed research technology for laboratory, web-based, and at-home testing with human research participants, machine learning, database integration, and virtual reality. Currently, the team continues to develop and maintain access to a wide array of shared facilities for spatially interactive research that combines hearing, vision, balance, and action, for high-performance computing, and for delivery of web-based experiments to remote participants.

## The key goals of the Tech Core include:

- 1 Providing state-of-the-art support for laboratory computing, engineering, and data acquisition to aid research.
- 2 Developing and deploying technology in emerging areas like high-performance computing, remote testing, open science, and multisensory/virtual reality paradigms.
- 3 Distributing and commercializing research technology by identifying and protecting intellectual property, cataloging research tools, and exploring opportunities for open sharing or commercial licensing.



**Members of RALS and the Alliance**



**Members of RALS and the Alliance**

# INSIDE THE LAB

**Justin Kueser, Ph.D.** ///////////////

## EMERGING LANGUAGE KNOWLEDGE LAB

Justin Kueser is a speech-language pathologist trained in linguistics and child language development and disorders. When he joined BTNRH in 2023, he started the Emerging Language Knowledge (ELK) Lab. The lab focuses on children with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) and those with early language delays, exploring how their developing knowledge of language supports comprehension and communication.



***"One of the most rewarding parts of research with children is seeing them grow and learning new things that could help them succeed later in life."***

Children with DLD often experience difficulties learning, understanding, and using language, even when their hearing and exposure to language are typical. These challenges can make communication and classroom learning more difficult. The ELK Lab seeks to answer one of the field's central questions: what are the factors that support language comprehension in children with DLD?

To answer this question, the ELK Lab is currently conducting a project funded by a new grant from the National Institutes of Health. The team will study how 5- to 7-year-old children with DLD understand verbs in sentences, a critical skill that supports fluent comprehension. The project explores how this skill is affected by language factors like how complex a sentence is and child factors like memory.

***"We keep everything very fun for children in the lab during a research study. We play fun games but all the while we're collecting our research data."***

BTNRH provides a rich environment for collaborative research in hearing and language development. Justin and his team are currently collaborating with Dr. Krystal Werfel and the Community Engagement Program on another project focused on understanding how to support caregivers of children with early language delay and their pediatricians.

***"It's really exciting to wrap your mind around a research project. It provides the opportunity to solve problems that matter to people."***

Being able to work with the community has a big impact on research. By engaging children and their families, Justin's team is building a more complete understanding of how language develops and how to better support children with DLD and early language delay.



# Kaylah Lalonde, Ph.D. ///////////////

## AUDIOVISUAL SPEECH PROCESSING LAB

Originally from Breaux Bridge, LA, Kaylah Lalonde, Ph.D., went to school to study communication sciences disorders. She knew she wanted to work with children to help them learn and grow. During this time, Kaylah attended a presentation about research having a broader impact on children and families. From this presentation, she realized her passion was in audiology and research and received her Ph.D. in speech and hearing sciences.



Kaylah started at Boys Town National Research Hospital in 2017 where she established the Audiovisual Speech Processing (AV Speech) Laboratory. The AV Speech Lab focuses on how people understand speech when they can both see and hear a talker. Both background noise and hearing loss make it more difficult to understand speech. This is a bigger issue for children who are still developing listening and language skills. One thing that helps to compensate for noise and hearing loss is seeing the person that you are listening to or talking with.

***“Being in research means solving different problems every day.”***

Many people noticed how helpful this is during the pandemic when face masks were covering our mouths, and we couldn't rely on lipreading to help us understand what people were saying or on facial expressions to understand their emotions. Kaylah's lab focuses on audiovisual speech perception that differs between children with typical hearing and children who are deaf and hard of hearing, and how audiovisual speech perception varies among children who are deaf and hard of hearing depending on the amount and type of hearing loss and their language skills.

***“We have found that children who are hard of hearing benefit up to twice as much from these visual cues than children with typical hearing, which tells us how important it is to make sure these cues are accessible to children who are hard of hearing.”***

Even though most of our speech interactions include access to visual speech cues, clinicians and researchers primarily assess the impact of hearing loss and the benefit of hearing devices by measuring how much someone can hear and by using one-person listening tasks with no visual cues. These measures provide information about how much auditory speech a child can access, but they do not sufficiently predict hearing abilities and hearing device benefits in everyday conversations. Hearing devices were also designed to improve auditory-only listening.

***“Through our research, we hope to provide the evidence base to better predict hearing abilities and hearing device benefits in everyday conversations,” Kaylah said. “We also hope to inform the design of hearing devices to better support face-to-face communication, such as eye gaze and hand gestures.”***

### From Kaylah's participants:

I look at people's mouths when I first meet them because I have to. But once I get used to someone, I can use my peripheral vision to help me lipread so that I can make eye contact with people I know.” -Adult CI user

I think I had mastered lipreading by 4th grade.” -Adult CI user

I don't look at my teacher while she's talking. I do other things like... [slouches in chair and look at the ceiling.]” - School-aged child with normal hearing being asked to look at the screen during the experiment.

# MY RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

## MEET RESEARCH ASSISTANT

### Borin Chep

Language, Adversity and Stress Laboratory  
Research Assistant

Originally, from Kansas City, MO, Borin Chep was in marketing and communications looking for a change in profession. Recognizing his passion for research, he attended a local Boys Town career fair, where he met Claire Selin, Ph.D., the director of the Language, Adversity and Stress (LAS) Laboratory.

The LAS Lab focuses on physical trauma in language acquisition in youth. Borin quickly realized his graduate program philosophical work with trauma in media may be a good fit for his search in a research career. He has been at Boys Town Hospital for about two years now.

*“Being in the lab has taught me patience,”  
Borin said. “The research process can take time,  
but regardless of the outcome, you will  
learn along the way.”*

Being in the lab has taught Borin that research requires wearing many hats. Some days it's all about science, collecting and analyzing data. Other days it is about recruiting participants, tracking the status of projects, or learning techniques.

*“You have to have a drive for knowledge and  
a drive for wanting to help people.”*



## MEET LAB MANAGER

### Amanda Knihal

Auditory Perception and Cognition Laboratory  
Lab Manager

Amanda Knihal is from Omaha, NE, and she knew about Boys Town's history with youth care. Before Amanda came to Boys Town, she had been providing in-home adult care in her own home.

About two years ago, she started as an administrative assistant, primarily coordinating travel for those in research. During this time, she found herself formatting abstracts for announcements, learning about their work and their presentations. Her passion for helping others and drive to learn more has led her to managing the Auditory Perception and Cognition (APC) Laboratory, directed by Ryan McCreery, Ph.D., the vice president of research.

*“I love inviting people into the lab,”  
Amanda said. “I love having my own children  
participate. I believe in what we are doing. I believe it  
will make a difference for children who are hard  
of hearing-whether it is developing better hearing aids  
or learning new ways to help them thrive in  
their classrooms.”*

Currently, the APC Lab is working with Central Michigan to see if head circumference and height can predict ear growth. This project would greatly help in fitting hearing aids. Additionally, The APC Lab has personnel that spend part of their time in the Audiology clinic. These collaborations bring the physician's office and the lab together to provide outcomes that will benefit children that are hard of hearing.

*“I think my story demonstrates that there are many  
pathways into research,” Amanda said. “You don't  
have to follow a traditional route.”*



# AWARDS & ACCOMPLISHMENTS



## Angela AuBuchon, Ph.D.

Dr. AuBuchon became a fellow of the Psychonomic Society.



## Kristen Janky, Au.D., Ph.D.

Dr. Janky received the Champion of Vestibular Medicine Young Investigator Award from the Vestibular Disorders Association.



## Gabrielle Merchant, Au.D., Ph.D.

Dr. Merchant received the 2025 Early Career Research Award from the American Auditory Society.



## Ryan McCreery, Ph.D.

Dr. McCreery was appointed to Oberkotter Foundation Scientific Council for Childhood Hearing.



## Heather Porter, Au.D., Ph.D.

Dr. Porter received the Bernthal-Beukelman Memorial Service-Leadership Award.



Kristen Janky, Au.D., Ph.D., stands with Heather Porter, Au.D., Ph.D., to celebrate Dr. Porter's Bernthal-Beukelman Memorial Service- Leadership Award.

## 2025 RETIREMENT



### Denis Fitzpatrick, RESEARCH SOFTWARE SUPERVISOR

Denis is trained as an experimental psychologist and has collaborated closely with researchers to develop software for a range of lab experiments, including specialized peripherals for auditory, visual, electrophysiological, mechanical, and vestibular testing.

Denis has contributed to over 40 publications throughout his career at Boys Town. We're eternally grateful to Denis for his commitment and contributions to our research program and wish him all the best in his retirement!



# FEATURED NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRESENTATIONS

## **Society for the Scientific Study of Reading, Calgary, Alberta, Canada**

Kristen Janky, Jessie Patterson, Kayla Skaggs, Krystal Werfel, Denis Fitzpatrick

## **ASPO Pediatric Balance and Vestibular Disorders Symposium, Montreal, Quebec, Canada**

Kristen Janky

## **Association for Research in Otolaryngology, Orlando, FL**

Kristen Janky

## **American Speech-Language-Hearing Association Annual Convention. Washington DC**

Claire Selin, Ryan McCreery, Nicole Corbin, Kathryn Wiseman, Gabrielle Merchant, Melissa Henry, Dawna Lewis

## **Acoustical Society of America and Japan, Honolulu, HI**

Chris Stecker, Lori Leibold, Grace Rowland (T35), Ellen Peng

## **Conference on Implantable Auditory Prostheses, Lake Tahoe, CA**

Ellen Peng, Victoria Sweeney, Darby Durbin

## **Symposium on Research on Child Language Disorders, Madison, WI**

Justin Kueser, Karla McGregor, Tim Arbisi-Kelm, Ron Pomper, Nichole Eden

## **Psychonomic Society, Denver, CO**

Ron Pomper, Karla McGregor

## **Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, MN**

Katherine Gordon

## **Association for Research in Otolaryngology, Orlando, FL**

Chris Stecker

## **International Congress on Acoustics, New Orleans, LA**

Chris Stecker

## **Symposium on Individual Differences in Cognition, Denver CO**

Angela AuBuchon

## **Canadian Academy of Audiology Conference, Collingwood, Canada**

Ryan McCreery

## **Cincinnati Children's Hospital, Cincinnati, OH**

Ryan McCreery

## **Virtual Podium Demant Brain Hearing Network, Copenhagen, DK**

Ryan McCreery

## **American Academy of Audiology Convention, New Orleans, LA**

Ryan McCreery, Nicole Corbin

## **Scientific Meeting of the American Auditory Society, Scottsdale, AZ**

Ryan McCreery, Gabrielle Merchant, Monita Chatterjee, Kaylah Lalonde, Kathryn Wiseman, Ellen Peng, Heather Porter, Stephen Neely, Chris Stecker, Maggie Miller, Sarah Harris, Victoria Sweeney, Joshua Hajicek

## **International Symposium on Hearing, Vienna, Austria**

Stephen Neely, Sara Harris

## **Donald G. Doebring Memorial Lecture, Montreal, Canada**

Lori Leibold

**To view our recent publications, scan the QR code.**

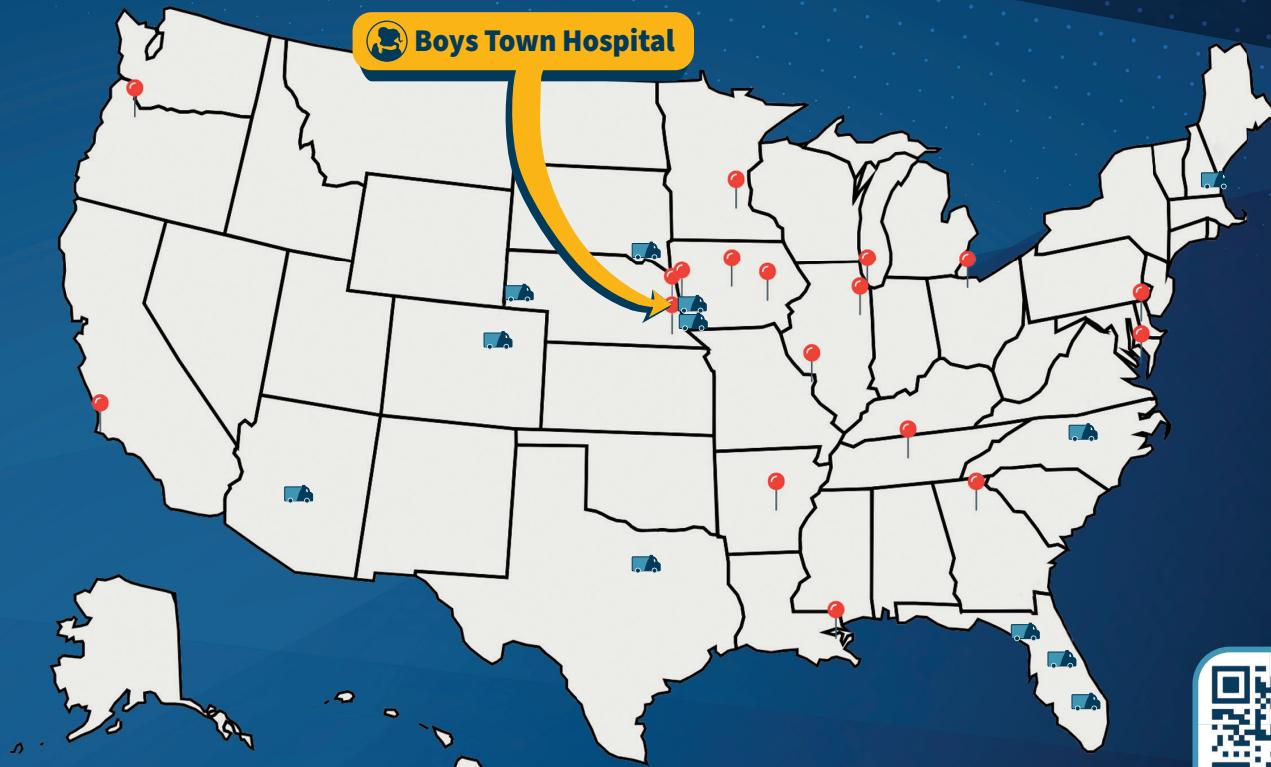


 Scan Me

# Mobile Research: Research on the Road

## Boys Town Research Partner List

Throughout 2025, our researchers traveled across the country for data collection and presentations. Below is a map of the places we traveled to with a few key locations and partners highlighted.



Scan the QR code to see the BTRV head out east.



### 2025 BOYS TOWN RESEARCH VEHICLE SITES

Denver, CO	West Palm Beach, FL
Des Moines, IA	Dallas, TX
Omaha, NE	Providence, RI
Grand Island, NE	Sioux Falls, SD
Norfolk, NE	
Boca Raton, FL	
Orlando, FL	
Tallahassee, FL	



### FEATURED BOYS TOWN RESEARCH PARTNERS

- BC Early Hearing Program  
Victoria, BC, Canada
- Canadian Hearing Services  
Toronto, ON, Canada
- The House Institute Hearing Health Centers  
Los Angeles, CA
- M.I.N.D. Mentorship Program at the  
Emory School of Medicine  
Atlanta, GA
- Shriners Hospital  
Minneapolis-Saint Paul, MN

# Clinical and Research Collaborations with Heather Porter, Au.D., Ph.D.

Heather Porter first came to Boys Town National Research Hospital in 2007 from Pittsburgh, PA to complete a one-year audiology externship. Ten years later, Heather returned to Omaha as a clinician scientist. Splitting her time between the audiology clinic and conducting research provides Heather with an opportunity to see first-hand the challenges patients face and conduct research to improve clinical outcomes.

Heather's passion for hearing research started at a young age. Her sister was born with a rare disorder, Goldenhar Syndrome. Goldenhar Syndrome affects the development of the face and skull, which often results in hearing loss. Today, Heather's passion is to improve hearing healthcare for people with Down syndrome, who also tend to have anatomical features that often result in hearing loss.

Heather is the co-director of the Human Audiology Development Laboratory, working closely with her collaborators Lori Leibold and Emily Buss (University of North Carolina). Heather's research is focused on improving audiometric assessments for individuals with Down syndrome across the lifespan and understanding how the ability to hear and understand sounds in the presence of competing background sounds develops. Their team utilizes the Boys Town Research Vehicle (BTRV) to take research on the road in communities across the Great Plains and the United States. The BTRV includes a sound booth, a wheelchair lift, and the full

complement of equipment used in the audiology clinic and the laboratory.

"With the BTRV we are able to see far more families than we would if they had to come to us," Heather said. "We can go to the National Down Syndrome of Congress with hundreds of people that wouldn't be able to travel to Omaha. This not only provides us with a broader sample for research but provides us the opportunity to help families across the country."

Being part-time in the clinic provides the opportunity for Heather to see what patients need in real-time. Clinicians have to be able to provide services quickly, and while we want research to affect change rapidly, research can take time to study the outcomes. When researchers and clinicians work so closely together, translational research is developed by blending real-time needs for patients with questions researchers are seeking answers for. Clinicians can also advocate for patients to enroll in research studies.

"By taking the BTRV, people are excited for us to be there. They often ask, is this the same Boys Town as the one in Omaha?" said Heather. "This is a great way for us to teach them about the research component at Boys Town."

Between being in the clinic, researching, and utilizing the BTRV, Heather has noticed one common theme; people want to help other people. People in the clinic learn about research, and those that participate in research learn about how they are not

only progressing science but helping others. The public is appreciative when the BTRV arrives to provide resources and support services that they may not have had.

## • SPEECH • LANGUAGE



**“Being in research has made me a better clinician,” Heather said. “I have a better understanding of what families need and the issues they face on a daily basis.”**

Pictured L to R: Kristen Janky, Heather Porter, Research Participant, and Gabrielle Merchant

**Interested in making a difference in Down syndrome research? Contact the Human Audiology Development Laboratory at [HADL@boystown.org](mailto:HADL@boystown.org).**

# Collaborating with Boys Town Grand Island Foster Families

Boys Town Researchers took the BTRV to Grand Island, NE to conduct research, provide hearing screenings, and participate in the 83rd Harvest of Harmony Parade. Lori Leibold and Natalie Mason conducted research for the INCLUDE Project. Project INCLUDE is an ongoing research project focusing on understanding how speech, language, and hearing develop across the lifespan for individuals with Down syndrome.

The parade is an annual event that brings thousands of visitors from across Nebraska for the pageant, parade, and field competition. Over the years, Harvest of Harmony has grown into one of Nebraska's largest events. In 2025 there were over 80 marching bands from across the country.

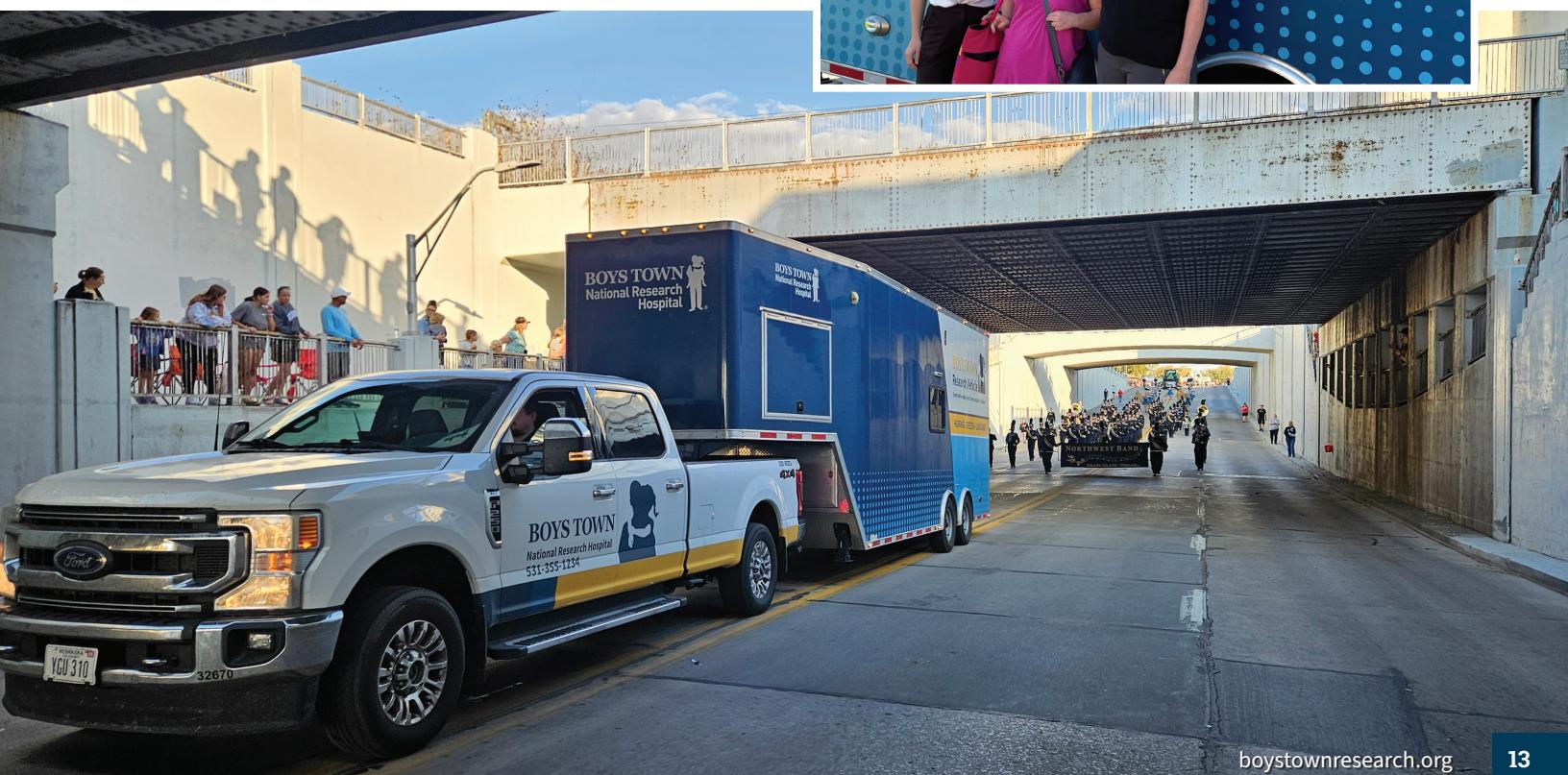
Researchers and the BTRV joined the Boys Town Jr. Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) to walk in this year's parade. The research group was so excited to be walking with kids from Boys Town's home campus. They had the honor of walking with the Village of Boys Town's own mayor, Evan.

"Having the opportunity to go to Grand Island with the BTRV was a highlight because of the opportunity to connect with Grand Island and nearby community members in different ways: research visits, hearing screenings, a local Boys Town event, and even getting to participate in the Harvest of Harmony parade with Boys Town JROTC," Natalie said. "Going to Grand Island with our amazing team allowed me to experience first-hand the

wide variety of services and programs that Boys Town offers in contexts that are personally meaningful to me: rural health and language access for those who speak English as a second language."

After the parade, the research team went back to the Central Nebraska Foster Families office where we hosted an open house. Lori and Natalie provided free hearing screenings in the BTRV. The UNL 4-H Extension Office brought rabbits for attendees to pet while they learned about 4-H opportunities. The office in Grand Island was previously a shelter for local community members. Today, it is used as a behavioral health office.

This project was a first for Boys Town Hospital, Boys Town Jr. ROTC, and Boys Town Central Nebraska to come together and collaborate on such a special weekend. We were able to combine our various skill sets and resources with one goal in mind, the mission of Boys Town.



# The Mini-RV: Helping Kids Find the Right Words

Imagine yourself in grade school. While other kids learn new words quickly, you struggle. The right words just don't come easily.

Before researchers uncovered a possible cause, you might have been told to just try harder.

"Sometimes people think these kids are being naughty or lazy," said Karla McGregor, Ph.D., Director of the Word Learning Laboratory at Boys Town. "Once you know that they're probably doing their best, but language is a true challenge, that helps everybody."

From our first "mama" or "dada," we spend a lifetime learning language. But for about 1 in 14 children, words and sentences don't come easily. These children may have Developmental Language Disorder or DLD. This means their brains have a harder time with language.

DLD isn't new. "For at least 100 years, there have been case studies of children who struggle learning language," Dr. McGregor said. "The condition has always been with us. What we call it and how we diagnose and treat it is always improving."

Today, researchers have agreed on the name "developmental language disorder" instead of older names like "speech and language impairment" or "expressive-receptive language disorder."

Dr. McGregor has been studying DLD for 33 years. One of her research projects, the Children's Vocabulary Project, has found key differences in children with DLD, such as:

- It's easier to learn a word if they hear it before or after seeing a picture of it.
- The sounds of a word can be harder to learn than what the word means.
- Saying the word out loud helps more than just hearing it.

Now, the project is looking at how DLD affects other parts of language and learning — such as how these kids understand full sentences.

A lot of this work happens at Boys Town. Some of it takes place in a special van that goes to families within 100 miles. "We need good recordings of children trying new words, and that's best

done in person," Dr. McGregor said. "The kids love the van."

Children and families are also asked about what's hard, what helps, and how they felt when they first got the diagnosis. This helps researchers learn what works best.

Another research project, Language and Me, looks at how DLD might be different for boys and girls — including how they work around or mask their struggles. The goal is to make sure boys and girls get the help they need.

"Working on these boy and girl differences has been fascinating because it's a relatively new question," Dr. McGregor said. She also interviews adults who have DLD to learn how their challenges change over time — and how they deal with them.

While more people know about DLD, a lot of kids still go undiagnosed. "About half of the cases are missed," Dr. McGregor said. "There are many reasons why. You need a complete evaluation to know for sure someone has DLD."

For more info, Dr. McGregor suggests visiting [DLDandMe.org](http://DLDandMe.org). This free website is supported by Boys Town. It has information for kids, parents, teachers and speech-language pathologists.

"Our mission is to put out information that's evidence-based, accurate and easy to understand," Dr. McGregor said. "We want everyone to be successful — at school, at work, and in life. That's why this research is so important."

**To learn more about  
Dr. McGregor's  
research,  
scan the QR code.**



Scan Me



Boys Town National Research Hospital has been a leader in research and clinical services for children who are deaf or hard of hearing for more than 40 years.



“

Our mission is to put out information that's evidence-based, accurate and easy to understand. We want everyone to be successful – at school, at work, and in life. That's why this research is so important.

- Karla McGregor, Ph.D.



# Research CAMPS

The Community Engagement Program hosted its week-long Summer Research Camp in August. The Boys Town research camps create value by advancing scientific research and deepening community connections. By involving children and families who may not typically participate in research, the camps expand the reach and relevance of studies focused on hearing, speech, language, and balance.

In August, 22 children between the ages of 6 to 13 from the Omaha area participated in 139 research sessions across 12 research studies. The campers also participated in a variety of interactive arts, dance, music, theater and virtual reality workshops, and engaged in STEM activities designed to inspire creativity and foster a love for learning.

"My daughters had a wonderful experience at the week-long BTNRH summer camp," one parent said. "While they enjoyed participating in the hearing and language research studies, they were equally excited about the engaging activities offered each day. The fact that they looked forward to attending camp rather than staying home during summer break speaks volumes about how fun, meaningful, and enriching the program was."

This engagement fostered trust, increased awareness and encouraged future involvement in research studies, ultimately contributing to more representative research studies which will lead to comprehensive and inclusive findings.



Research Camp photos of youth from the Omaha, NE area.





# School Screenings

Boys Town Hospital provided hearing, speech, and language screenings to Nelson Mandela Early Childhood Development Center and Elementary School scholars. This event has been the largest endeavor executed by the Community Engagement Program to date, involving six separate visits, with a total of more than 200 children screened.

“The mission of Nelson Mandela Elementary is to provide quality instruction that demonstrates ALL scholars can learn and develop academically, emotionally, socially, and physically.” – Nelson Mandela Elementary

More than 20 Boys Town Hospital personnel contributed to the screenings, including research audiologists, research speech-language pathologists, and team members from the Community Engagement Program, Clinical Measurement

Program, and Administrative Core. Nelson Mandela teachers and family volunteers also played a key role. Coordinated leadership from Trinity Williams (who leads the Community Engagement Program) and Natalie Mason (who leads the Clinical Measurement Program) ensured the success of this initiative.

Boys Town Hospital personnel were excited to be able to interact with the scholars and complete the screenings at the schools. The school environment helped the scholars feel more comfortable during screenings. BTNRH provided and transported all necessary equipment, making it possible to conduct screenings outside the hospital.

“Some of the scholars had previously participated in Research Camp, so being able to see those kids again, and seeing how excited they were to see us, was very special. Doing hands-on work in the community is also a great reminder of why we are doing the research we are doing. We are getting this chance to make an impact in our communities.” -Angela Collins, Research Program Manager.

# Boys Town Hosts Pathways to Progress Conference

In January, Boys Town National Research Hospital hosted the inaugural Pathways to Progress Conference. Through interactive presentations, and an ethics panel, the two-day conference provided American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) continuing education credit for speech-language pathologists (SLPs) working in the Omaha Metro area.

More than 60 SLPs attended in-person and virtually. Participants received the opportunity for professional development and networking and had the chance to learn about the research being conducted at the Boys Town Hospital.

We had the honor of hosting keynote speaker, Kia Noelle Johnson, Ph.D., an expert in developmental stuttering with a focus on culturally and linguistically diverse individuals and communities. The second keynote speaker was Karla McGregor, Ph.D., a senior scientist and an expert on developmental language disorder.

Additional research and clinical SLPs presenters included: Scott Busteed, M.S., CCC-SLP; Tiana Cowan, Ph.D., CCC-SLP; Natalie Mason, M.S., CCC-SLP; Lisa Goffman, Ph.D., CCC-SLP; Krystal Werfel, Ph.D., CCC-SLP; Abby Bogatz, M.A., CCC-SLP; Benjamin Harder, M.S., CCC-SLP; Allyssa LaRose, M.S., CCC-SLP; Kate Shuster, M.A., CCC-SLP; and Amy Tyler Krings, M.A., CCC-SLP.



# Boys Town Hosted 2025 Pediatric Audiology Translational Research Conference

Boys Town welcomed over 130 in-person and virtual attendees to the 2025 Pediatric Audiology Translational Research Conference on Friday, May 30 and Saturday, May 31. Professionals came from 5 countries and 18 states to attend sessions from leading translational researchers on best practices and strategies for audiology care across all pediatric ages and abilities.

Michael Gorga, Ph.D., opened the conference with a dedication to the conference's namesake, Pat Stelmachowicz, Ph.D., an influential translational researcher at Boys Town National Research Hospital. Dr. Stelmachowicz was a pioneer in translational pediatric hearing research. She set the standard for laboratory research supporting clinical practice. Her work was informed by the questions that clinicians and families have about children who are deaf or hard of hearing and has had a lasting impact in both clinical and research spheres.

Keynote speaker Susan Scollie, Ph.D., audiologist and professor of audiology in Western University's School of Communication Sciences and Disorders, then kicked off the conference sessions with her presentation on "translational progress made in pediatric hearing aid research [that] has thrived on integrating basic science with engineering against clinical experience."

Additional presenters included: Carlos Benítez-Barrera, Ph.D.; Monita Chatterjee, Ph.D.; Nicole Corbin, Au.D., Ph.D.; Tiana Cowan, Ph.D.; Kristen Janky, Au.D., Ph.D.; Ashley Kaufman, Au.D.; Elizabeth Kelly, M.D.; Lori Leibold, Ph.D.; Dawna Lewis, Ph.D.; Ryan McCreery, Ph.D.; Karen Muñoz, Ed.D.; Jessie Patterson, Au.D., Ph.D.; M.D.; Krystal Werfel, Ph.D.; and Kathryn Wiseman, Au.D., Ph.D.

This is the second PAT Conference to be held at Boys Town. The inaugural conference was held in 2023.

To learn more about the  
**2027 PAT Conference**, visit:  
[boystownhospital.org/PAT](http://boystownhospital.org/PAT)



## Join the Boys Town T32 Program

**Providing postdoctoral fellows an opportunity to develop and broaden their research capabilities in one or a combination of scientific disciplines related to human communication and its disorders.**

A number of exceptional features associated with the program are particularly advantageous to trainees, including:

- A training faculty of full-time scientists to serve as sponsors
- A staff of research-oriented clinicians with access to a large and varied patient population
- Modern, well-equipped laboratories and diagnostic clinics
- A stimulating mix of fundamental and clinically relevant research projects
- A strong core support staff

The T32 program encourages interdisciplinary approaches, providing an opportunity for the trainees to gain at least some research experience in disciplines not directly related to their area of interest. Additionally, the program encourages the trainees to become familiar with communication disorders and with the primary clinical procedures used in their assessment and treatment.

**Individuals interested in learning more SCAN the QR code below.**

**Become a Boys Town Postdoc**



# Postdoctoral Research Symposium

## Training Future Researchers

In spring of 2025, Boys Town hosted the third annual Postdoctoral Research Symposium with 111 attendees at the Scott Conference Center. Researchers and staff from across Boys Town's five research centers gathered to celebrate and showcase the achievements of our postdoctoral trainees, including those supported through our long-standing T32 training grant.

At the 2025 symposium, seven postdoctoral trainees provided podium presentations on their research and training progress, with each presentation followed by a Q&A with the audience. The presentations concluded with a discussion on federal funding. The afternoon included a poster session with presentations from a diverse group of students, junior-level lab members, and early career scientists.

Topics included novel methods of testing speech perception and comprehension, effects of hearing loss among monolingual and bilingual children, factors influencing use of mnemonic strategies for memorization, effects of gait training for individuals with cerebral palsy, outcomes for alumni of Boys Town's youth service programs, and more.

The 2025 postdoctoral podium presentations were provided by, Drs. Brittany Williams, Erica Lescht, Sara Momtaz, Attakias Mertens, Ilenia Salsano, Jessica Mattingly, and Lee Evans.



# Join the Boys Town T35 Program

The purpose of the T35 training program is to provide a short-term, intensive research experience related to hearing, vestibular, cognition, and/or speech/language sciences for audiology doctoral (AuD) students. The overarching goal is to provide AuD students with the experience and encouragement to consider a PhD or otherwise pursue clinical/translational research careers to address the shortage of clinician-scientists in the field. Regardless of the trainees' eventual career choice, the research experience obtained through this training program will enhance clinical service delivery to individuals in the United States with hearing and/or vestibular loss.

Students will be matched with a mentor according to the students' interests and mentor availability. Other benefits of the T35 traineeship include:

- Weekly journal groups
- Local seminars and workshops
- Colloquia presentations by national and international experts in communication disorders
- A course on responsible conduct in research
- Access to all hospital faculty for informal discussions and consultations
- Technical and computer support
- Travel stipend to present the T35 research project during the Mentored Research Poster Sessions at the American Auditory Society meeting in sunny Scottsdale, Arizona the following spring



Pictured L to R: Selena Hopkins-Morand, Grace Rowland, Leila Moore, Hannah Wittenback, Trisha Saxena

*"I would highly recommend applying for the Boys Town T35 to anyone thinks they may be interested in research or are curious what research entails," said a previous T35 participant. "Boys Town is a highly collaborative institute and everyone is more than happy and willing to answer your questions.*

*I have loved meeting so many students and researchers from all over the country and across different interests. Plus, Omaha is a fun place to spend time and has so many different events and activities to do!"*

*"I was able to explore a very different area of research than I have worked in before, which has encouraged new career goals and endless ideas for future research questions.*

*I have made lifelong friends in my T35 peers and mentors and look forward to staying connected and collaborating with them in future endeavors."*

Individuals interested in learning more about the T35 program and eligibility **SCAN the QR code**.



# Boys Town National Research Hospital Expansion



## SQUARE FOOTAGE

**Clinical Expansion**  
**117,800**

**Research Expansion**  
**81,600**

With the turn of a shovel, Boys Town ushered in a bold new chapter for Boys Town National Research Hospital.

“The expansion builds on a legacy that began more than 100 years ago with our founder, Father Edward J. Flanagan,” said Rod Kempkes, President and CEO of Boys Town. “He knew that healthcare was vital to the lives of those he served. Ultimately, this mission led to the creation of the Boys Town National Research Hospital, which not only continued his efforts, but reinforced the importance of research. It has been at the core of Boys Town programs since day one.”

This 254,000-square-foot project will meet an urgent and growing need at Boys Town Hospital for additional patient beds, more surgical suites, and expanded research space. The goal is to create a future where every child has access to life-changing care, driven by groundbreaking research.





## Life Changing Care, Driven by Research

“Families come to Boys Town to get answers and the most advanced care for their children,” said Jason Bruce, M.D., Executive Vice President of Healthcare and Director of Boys Town Hospital. “This transformation of our health and research facilities will allow us to continue delivering innovative research and treatments for pediatric patients here and around the world.”

Boys Town Hospital is already home to Nebraska’s first Level 4 pediatric epilepsy center, one of the country’s most advanced pediatric rehabilitation facilities, and the most comprehensive mental health continuum in the Midwest.

“This expansion will strengthen our ability to deliver cutting-edge medical care and research for some of the most medically complex patients — children with hearing and communication disorders, epilepsy, Down syndrome, autism and so many other conditions,” said Dr. Bruce.

A unique aspect of the project’s design is how it brings researchers and clinicians together, working side by side in clinics and labs. At Boys Town, clinical specialties are directly aligned with research areas, making it possible to:

- Research the neurological sources of addiction, anxiety and depression in teens
- Formulate new and cost-effective genetic tests that offer life-saving results for children worldwide
- Conduct clinical trials for childhood illnesses right here in Omaha

During the groundbreaking on November 12, Boys Town announced that The Ryan Foundation is contributing a transformational gift toward the creation of the Dr. Wayne L. Ryan Clinic and Research Center. This state-of-the-art facility will be dedicated to advancing scientific discovery and improving the lives of children for generations to come.

A visionary in his field, Dr. Ryan founded Omaha’s Streck Laboratories and was a lifelong champion of scientific discovery until his passing in 2017 at age 90.

“Always an innovator and researcher at heart, I think that Dr. Ryan would be excited about how the groundbreaking work done here will influence clinicians across the globe,” said Dr. Bruce.

## The Next Chapter

The impact of this expansion reaches far beyond bricks and mortar. It represents a commitment to innovation, collaboration, and the future of pediatric care.

“This will allow us to expand our world-class specialty services, enhance the patient and family experience, and ensure that every child receives the most advanced, compassionate and personalized care possible,” said Kempkes. “As we move forward, our mission remains clear: to heal children and families in mind, body and spirit.”



Change begins with research.  
Change begins with you.



SCAN THE QR CODE  
FOR MORE INFORMATION

BOYS TOWN  
National Research  
Hospital

