OUR STRATEGIC PLANNING PROCESS begins with our core clinical mission. The Austen Riggs Center exists, first and foremost, as a place where people can bring their troubles, learn about themselves, and discover resources and support for confronting the challenges of their lives.

The Clinical Systems Strategic Initiative has three parts: redesigning the infrastructure that supports our ongoing clinical work, enhancing specific clinical programs, and seeking ways to offer our services to new groups of people.

Clinical systems design
Patients come to Riggs seeking help for symptoms that have meaning in a social context, and our work is centrally about understanding. In order to do this effectively, the staff has to work to understand our own experience in our own social contexts – both the ones we create deliberately and the ones we find ourselves inhabiting unwittingly.

During the fall we conducted a study of the ways we use time at Riggs. We learned that some things take more time than we thought, and some things take less time, but in general the clinical staff is busy, engaged in work that we value greatly. In particular, the ample time spent reflecting on the work together in interdisciplinary case conferences, team meetings, and clinical staff meetings is vital to understanding our patients and supporting one another in our work. So while we are in the process of making some adjustments to our meetings, they will be minor. More importantly, we have been thinking about how to support the values underlying our work. Reflecting on the varied experiences of clinicians in different roles doing distinct but interrelated tasks helps us to understand our current social context, and helps us to collaborate with patients in building a community worth living and working in. Some conflicts inevitably arise among people working deeply with others in distress. A certain amount of unstructured time together is important for sustaining working relationships that are strong enough to bear these stresses. Together we face common challenges that override the differences represented by standard categories of diagnosis or credential.

One change we are making to our meeting structure is to institute a dedicated weekly time for staff education. Ongoing learning is essential to maintaining the

Strategic Initiatives
Recently, the Austen Riggs Center Board of Trustees and staff undertook a comprehensive strategic planning process that prioritized a number of initiatives designed to expand our role and positively impact the serious mental health issues we face as a society. These include: clinical systems, neural mediators of psychotherapeutic change, human development, biopsychosocial advocacy, suicide research and education, and psychodynamic psychopharmacology. In this issue of the ARC News, you will hear about the first three of these strategic initiatives.

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I am delighted to share with you the Spring 2017 issue of the ARC News. It is with particular excitement that we welcome 2017 by introducing you to key aspects of our new strategic plan.

As I have mentioned previously, the Board of Trustees, the staff, and I have spent the past year engaged in important conversations about our mission, our values, and our work. Critical to that process has been a reaffirmation of the importance – and primacy – of delivering excellent clinical care. We also recognize our potential to positively impact the mental health crisis in this country through research, outreach, and advocacy.

In the pages that follow, you will read about three key aspects of our strategic plan: clinical systems, neural mediators of psychotherapeutic change, and human development.

I look forward to continuing to share with you updates on our strategic plan throughout the year.

Best,
Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD

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highest standards of care; it also nourishes and supports the staff, who in turn bring new ideas and the liveliness of ongoing intellectual inquiry into the clinical work. Beginning in the fall of 2017, a new interdisciplinary Grand Rounds Program for all members of the Riggs clinical staff will include a combination of staff presentations of current projects, invited guest speakers, and collaborative reading and study groups.

Enhanced clinical services
While a number of our clinical programs are in continual development, in our strategic plan we are highlighting enhancements to two of these. First, we have increased the number of “wellness” offerings, including yoga, qigong, meditation, interpersonal skills training, nutrition counseling, support for sobriety and smoking cessation, fitness instruction, and daily walks. We are working on developing an integrated approach to health as an actively pursued state, not just a passive absence of illness.

Family work has long been a central component of our treatment, and we are working to encourage and support family involvement as well, beginning at the point of admission. A new family lounge near the lobby in the main office building offers families a private, comfortable place to relax and talk together during the thorough and sometimes lengthy admissions process. We have increased the staff support available to patients and families negotiating with insurance companies for coverage. In addition, we plan to provide additional training and supervision to clinicians working with families. We also are exploring ways to invite family members of different patients to come together for mutual support and learning.

Clinical outreach
The work at Riggs is intense and inward; to balance this, we turn our attention to our connections with others we might serve, learn from, or collaborate with. In the clinical arena, we are working with the Brien Center, a local mental health agency, to provide clinical consultation for their therapists with our postdoctoral Fellows in psychiatry and psychology. This partnership started in October, enabling us to offer both a needed service in the local community and a training opportunity to our Fellows.

Finally, we are exploring the possibility of opening an outpatient intensive dynamic assessment service for people who are seeking an in-depth understanding of a set of problems in a relatively brief period of time, without entering into residential treatment. An interdisciplinary team will offer an integrated assessment using clinical interviews, psychological testing, psychiatric evaluation, and family consultation where possible. We aim to do a pilot test of the viability of such a program by offering a few assessments during the first part of 2017.

The Clinical Systems Strategic Initiative is central to the larger strategic plan for the Austen Riggs Center.

From the Medical Director/CEO

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Neural Mediators of Psychotherapeutic Change

By Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, Medical Director/CEO

IN MY OWN CAREER, psychoanalytic research and clinical work have always gone hand in hand. I have long believed that by combining the enormous clinical sophistication of the psychoanalytic perspective with the careful precision and reproducibility of empirical research, we will be able to use research to improve patient care. I chose to come to Riggs because of the depth of its clinical work, and my appreciation for the staff, the patients, and the work they do together has only grown in the past year. That depth makes Riggs uniquely suited to participate in the design and execution of research studies aimed at increasing understanding of complex psychiatric disorders.

Over the past 100 years, neuroscientists have developed a basic understanding of the human brain’s biology, physiology, and structure, but there is also much that we do not know. At the same time, psychologists have refined our concept and definition of the mind and its capacities, but we still have much to learn about this as well. The greatest challenge, though, and one that requires our attention, is to understand how the mind arises from the biology of the brain. We have been limited in studying this by the difficulty of accurately measuring the structure and function of the brain in an awake person carrying out a behavior. One of the consequences of this limitation is that we do not yet understand the underlying pathophysiology of mental illnesses, and therefore have historically described them mostly with respect to symptoms, instead of underlying causes and mechanisms.

With the advent of new technologies over the past five to ten years, all of this is beginning to change more rapidly. Our Neural Mediators of Psychotherapeutic Change Strategic Initiative will use new neuroimaging hardware and software technologies to better understand both the brain and the mind in mental illness.

In other settings, HCP is starting to yield evidence of its clinical research utility. For example, one recent study used HCP data to identify potential structural brain differences linked to anxiety and depression. This field is gaining momentum, and the type of research we propose is an example of the promise it holds.

We have much to learn in the emerging field of mind-brain research from combining new technologies with the rich clinical history that can be gathered by experienced and skilled clinicians meeting face-to-face with their patients. This pairing has enormous potential to contribute to our understanding of mental illness. Through the Neural Mediators of Psychotherapeutic Change Strategic Initiative, Riggs is poised to be at the forefront of this work.

I AM DELIGHTED TO ANNOUNCE the launch of the Human Development Strategic Initiative at the Austen Riggs Center.

The primary aim of this new endeavor is to support infant, child, and family mental health in Berkshire County, while also bringing a deeper understanding of the developmental process to the Riggs staff and patients. The Human Development Strategic Initiative will apply our relational view of early development to a community-based preventive model of care. The offerings will build on learning from our Therapeutic Community Program in which an individual is recognized, understood, and supported in the broader contexts of family, community, and society. This initiative provides an opportunity to extend the impact of our work beyond the small number of patients who have access to our intensive residential treatment through meaningful engagement in our local community. Staff and patients at Austen Riggs will, in turn, benefit from this effort as we deepen our knowledge about the impact of early adversity on the unfolding developmental process and about the importance of recognizing children’s early efforts at communicating.

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Through conversations with local professionals serving the mental health needs of children and families in southern Berkshire County, as well as representatives from our local school district, we recognized the need to support new families from the very start. The Human Development Strategic Initiative’s first project has evolved as a partnership with Fairview Hospital, Community Health Programs, and MACONY Pediatrics, and is guided by Riggs staff member Claudia Gold, MD, a behavioral pediatrician with extensive experience in infant mental health. Community support for the project has been robust.

In the initial phase of the project, we will provide training for maternity nurses, pediatricians, early intervention clinicians, family physicians, nurse practitioners, and home visitors to learn a new approach to helping parents recognize and respond to their newborn’s unique qualities and capacity for communication – the Newborn Behavioral Observations (NBO) system. The training will offer a theoretical framework, exposure to current research, and practical guidance for clinical intervention. As we look ahead, we will continue our conversation with local families, clinicians, and educators to identify other areas of need to be addressed.

According to Brian Burke, MD, president of the medical staff at Fairview Hospital, “The Newborn Behavioral Observations System is a remarkable opportunity for Fairview Hospital’s Maternity Unit to collaborate with the Austen Riggs Center. This value-proven program gives parents an opportunity to spend time learning about their baby’s unique qualities and ways of communicating. Our specially trained maternity nurses offer individualized attention to parents and their newborns – even before the family goes home after delivery.”

Medical Director/CEO Andrew J. Gerber, MD, PhD, recently shared his perspective on the project: “I am excited by the potential of this important initiative to extend our work to the local community and to build partnerships with those serving infants and families.” We hope this project will serve as a model for future community partnerships through our Human Development Strategic Initiative in Berkshire County and beyond.