

 **Opening remarks by Jan Nicholson, President of The Nicholson Foundation
“Pain, Pain Management and the Opioid Epidemic” Symposium
December 2, 2016, Princeton, NJ**

It is a pleasure to co-sponsor this symposium with Princeton and to be here with all of you today. I would like to thank the Woodrow Wilson School’s Center for Health and Well-being for collaborating with The Nicholson Foundation to bring together this stellar group of speakers.

For more than ten years, The Nicholson Foundation has worked to address the needs of vulnerable populations in New Jersey. We have collaborated with a diverse array of partners on a wide range of initiatives, many of which have been focused on transforming the State’s healthcare system. Over the past several years, we have placed increasing emphasis on strengthening primary care for New Jersey’s safety net.

While working with primary care providers, we learned that many of their patients suffer from chronic pain. Moreover, providers emphasized the many challenges they must face in order to treat it effectively. Both of these themes are echoed by the academic literature. Consequently, we became convinced that working to improve pain care could help drive the improvement of primary care.

Chronic pain is a complex and growing issue in the United States: More than 100 million people in the US suffer from chronic pain and it has a significant adverse effect on the quality of their lives. Over the past 20 years, physicians have been encouraged to treat pain aggressively with prescription opioids. In 2012, healthcare providers nationwide wrote 259 million prescriptions for opioid pain medication. That’s the equivalent of one prescription for every adult in the United States.

The problem is that primary care providers have not been trained in safe opioid prescribing or in evidence-based, non-opioid pain treatment strategies. The result is that providers often feel they have few tools with which to treat chronic pain effectively, and thus, may over-rely on prescription opioids. This greatly increases the risk of misuse and even addiction, overdose, and death. We now face a nationwide epidemic that is devastating individuals and families, and overwhelming communities.

The Nicholson Foundation is convinced that a better and more comprehensive approach to pain care can have a significant impact not only on the opioid epidemic but also more generally on healthcare delivery.

First, better pain care can reduce inappropriate prescribing of opioids, thereby helping patients avoid addiction.

Second, a comprehensive approach can help providers understand pain as a nexus where physical and behavioral health often intersect. This understanding can enhance providers’ ability to manage behavioral as well as physical health conditions, leading to improved overall health.

Nicholson is currently supporting the New Jersey Pain Care Collaborative, a project that is promoting just this kind of comprehensive approach to chronic pain care. You’ll hear more about this project later today, and I hope you share our excitement about its promise.

To make sure that our work is grounded in evidence and engages stakeholders who can contribute the most and put the knowledge to best use, Nicholson sponsors events, like this symposium, to foster discussion and learning. Today, we are privileged to hear from an eminent group of experts. These academics, researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and legislators will give us a thorough briefing on the intersecting issues of pain, pain management, and the opioid epidemic.

We’ll get an overview of the history of pain and how chronic pain has been viewed socio-politically in our national culture. We’ll also learn about the neuroscience behind the link between pain and addiction, and how dependence on pain medication differs from substance misuse — a difference that has important implications for designing effective interventions.

We’ll hear about how the opioid epidemic became a public health crisis and what the federal government is doing to combat the epidemic. We'll learn about research that examines the alarming increase in mortality and morbidity rates among middle-aged white Americans with modest education. As part of this discussion, we’ll explore how some medical schools have begun to include pain care and opioid prescribing practices in their curricula.

We’ll take a close look at pain management “on the front lines” of medicine. We’ll learn about some of the innovative approaches New Jersey’s health care professionals are pursuing to improve pain care, reduce opioid overprescribing, and treat addiction.

Finally, we’ll examine new policy approaches. We’ll learn about Washington State’s coordinated, multi-faceted approach to pain management and hear what is happening here in New Jersey.

This symposium invites all of us to ponder how the issues explored by these experts can apply to New Jersey: How can concerned stakeholders galvanize the broader healthcare community and nurture the promising practices highlighted by today’s speakers? How can the State accelerate the adoption of a strategic response that can address a critical health problem — chronic pain — as well as lessen the opioid epidemic?

Thank you for being here today. I look forward to participating in a conversation with you that is sure to continue even after this conference is over.