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New project takes aim at a public health syndemic in the Caribbean

By Robyn Nissim

Public health crises don't happen in a vacuum; they begin and grow with the help of multiple, converging issues.

So researchers can't just try to stop the spread of HIV infections—they need to address all of the problems that may be contributing to that spread in order to recommend long-lasting, effective interventions.

With that in mind, Mark Padilla, Ph.D., M.P.H., associate professor of sociology in the Department of Global and Sociocultural Studies, School of International and Public Affairs, designed a new study entitled "Migration, Tourism, and the HIV/Drug Use Syndemic in the Dominican Republic." The Caribbean region has the second highest prevalence of HIV in the world after sub-Saharan Africa, and more than 75 percent of the region's AIDS cases are on the island of Hispaniola, which contains Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The Dominican Republic also hosts the greatest number of tourists and has the Caribbean's largest tourism investment. Padilla's study is the first large NIH-funded interdisciplinary research project to examine the social and structural risks—such as social isolation and availability of sex and drugs—for HIV and drug abuse associated with the tourism industry. Padilla aims to develop collaboratively a pilot intervention to support the health and well-being of Dominicans who

work in tourism zones, which may possibly serve as a model for vacation destinations that also face issues with thriving tourism sectors and rising rates of HIV infection, like South Florida.

Padilla has received wide support from a broad spectrum of public and private stakeholders in Miami and the Dominican Republic, including U.S. Congresswomen Ileana Ros-Lehtinen and Frederica Wilson and Congressman Alcee Hastings; Dr. Luis Rene Canaán, senator in the Dominican Congress and president of the Health Commission, and Dr. Lorenzo W. Hidalgo Núñez, Minister of Health for the Dominican Republic, all of whom are members of the study's Community Advisory Board. The board also includes representatives from the hospitality and tourism sectors as well as researchers from the academic community in the Dominican Republic.

The Chancellor of the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, Dr. Mateo Aquino Febrillet, visited FIU on February 3 to sign a Letter of Intent between the two universities, heralding the start of the project. A formal agreement will be completed by early March.

"This study demonstrates the university's strength in cross-regional, cross-dialogue research projects," says Andrés G. Gil, vice president of the university's Division of Research. "Multidisciplinary research is what our sponsor agencies are looking for when they make funding decisions. We encourage our faculty to keep this in mind when they are designing their projects."

The Division of Research offers assistance to all of FIU's researchers through our [Research Development](#) office. Please contact [Maureen Pelham](#) for more information.



From left to right, Luis Salas, associate vice president for research, Andrés Gil, vice president for research, Mateo Aquino Febrillet, chancellor of the Universidad Autónoma de Santo Domingo, and Mark Padilla, associate professor, during the chancellor's recent visit to FIU to sign the Letter of Intent between both universities.