

Meet the 2023 *Equity Changemakers Institute* Participants

Get to know the participants in the Center for Health Care Strategies' [Equity Changemakers Institute](#).

The program is designed to strengthen the capacity of public sector leaders who oversee agency efforts to advance health equity by helping them cultivate the skills to drive transformational change and positively impact the health of those who live in their states. To learn more, visit chcs.org/project/equity-changemakers-institute.



Ashley Bennett *(she/her)*

[Ashley Bennett, MPH](#), is the Health Equity Program Manager at the Washington State Healthcare Authority. In this role, she focuses on operations, strategic planning, and process improvement to address equity and inclusion and outreach and engagement related to improving the health status of the populations served. Prior to this role, Ashley was a mental health professional and crisis counselor and served as a New Jersey County Commissioner.



"I'm inspired to do this work every day by the countless community members who depend on good policies and programs that are transformative."



Eva Bighorse *(she/her)*

[Eva Bighorse](#) is the Tribal Health Coordinator in the Arizona Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), where she administers the Division's Fee-For-Service Tribal Health Program and oversees the Division's subcontracted managed care health plans providing services to American Indians/Alaska Native DDD member populations. Eva is an Indigenous human development advocate with expertise in tribal relations. She has experience in strategic collaboration; working in multidisciplinary teams specializing in health care delivery and multi-stakeholder engagement; and serving children, youth, and adults living with disabilities in urban and rural areas, both on and off tribal land.



"I am motivated to advance access to health care and traditional lifeways for indigenous people everywhere, helping members of society live healthier, longer lives."



Rhiannon Blackdeer de Prado *(she/her)*

[Rhiannon Blackdeer de Prado, MA](#), is the Health Equity Director in the Direct Care and Treatment Administration at the Minnesota Department of Human Services. Her philosophy as a leader is using a collaborative approach to integrate a high commitment to continuous quality improvement and equitable changes to benefit the communities served. Rhiannon is a member of the Ho-Chunk Nation of Wisconsin.



"I am inspired to be part of a team where we are actively learning and working collaboratively towards creating a meaningful and impactful change for the people we serve."



Alex Castillo Smith *(she/they)*

[Alex Castillo Smith, MPH, MSW](#), is the Acting Deputy Cabinet Secretary for the New Mexico Human Services Department, working with colleagues and community members to provide critical supports to half of New Mexico’s residents. Alex has a background working in federal disability rights, aging policy, and non-profit education, with experience on Capitol Hill and political campaigns. Alex is a first-generation Panamanian American, and a proud past recipient of safety net programs like SNAP and Medicaid.



“I am so lucky to call New Mexico home and am inspired by how the safety net programs, benefits, and services provided by the Human Services Department truly transforms lives.”



Carmelita Cruz *(she/her)*

[Carmelita Cruz, JD](#), is the Executive Equity Officer at the New York State Office of Addiction Services and Supports (OASAS), where she leads the newly created Office of Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (JEDI). Carmelita leads the development and execution of the agency’s equity vision and strategic plan and through her work centers internal equity and trauma-informed organizational change. The JEDI Office also leads work to reduce institutional racism through the development of equitable practices and policies within internal agency operations. The office supports external collaboration and continuous improvement with OASAS providers to develop and implement innovative JEDI strategies that provide measurable results.



“My family, friends, and people I’ve met in my journey fuel my dedication to pursuing justice, dismantling oppressive policies, and increasing access for underserved communities.”



Jeannie Jonas *(she/her)*

Jeannie Jonas is the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Oversight Manager at the Oregon Department of Human Services (ODHS). Prior to this role, Jeannie worked as a chef and head baker, architect, college professor, and at a global software firm before shifting her career to public service. A proud transwoman, Jeannie has always believed in creating spaces that help to better those around her, teach those who seek knowledge, and share her views with those seeking to expand their ideas. In addition to her current role, she serves as the co-chair of the statewide PRIDE Employee Resource Group, and created statewide workgroups to advance equity around LGBTQIA2S+ issues for staff and the people of Oregon. The statewide workgroups are currently creating anti-bias trainings for each ODHS office across the state. Jeannie is also on the board of directors for the Northwest Gender Alliance.



“It’s wonderful knowing that the work that I do today doesn’t just affect me, but positively impacts people across Oregon who need services, or who work for the state, for years to come.”



Amanda Medina-Forrester *(she/her)*

[Amanda Medina-Forrester, MA, MPH](#), is the Executive Director of the Office of Minority and Multicultural Health, housed within the New Jersey Department of Health. In this role, Amanda is charged with ensuring health equity policies, practices, and programs are implemented to reduce and eliminate health disparities among diverse and marginalized populations. She also co-leads the specific population team for the COVID-19 vaccine plan to ensure vaccine equity across marginalized populations in New Jersey.



“New Jersey residents affected by health disparities motivates me every day to build and sustain health equity. Inspired by family and friends, I aspire to be an effective equity changemaker.”



Breanca Merritt *(she/her)*

[Breanca Merritt, PhD](#), is Chief Health Equity and ADA Officer for Indiana’s Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). In this role, she serves as director of FSSA’s Office of Healthy Opportunities, which aims to address social drivers of health for Hoosiers through co-designing and implementing socially equitable policies and programs. Prior to joining FSSA, Breanca was the Founding Director of the Center for Research on Inclusion and Social Policy at the Indiana University Public Policy Institute.



“I’m inspired by complex constituent experiences that highlight service gaps we need to address and staff members newly empowered to advocate for systemic change.”



Maggie Middleton *(she/her)*

[Maggie Middleton, JD, MPA](#), is the Attorney for Special Projects and Strategic Initiatives at the Mississippi Division of Medicaid where she specializes in novel policy and strategic planning. Prior to this role, she spent 11 years in federal and state government service combining expertise in litigation, bankruptcy and creditor abuse issues, and innovative Medicaid policies.



“Every day is an opportunity to find a new way to help someone. Even if you don’t meet that goal, there is value in the trying, because the trying helps you get there eventually.”



Margaret Mullins *(she/her)*

[Margaret Mullins, MS](#), is the Determinants of Health Program Coordinator with the Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion Bureau at the Montana Department of Public Health & Human Services. In this role, she is a primary resource for integrating strategies and practices that cultivate health equity by focusing on the determinants of health in communities around Montana. Margaret has worked in the public health arena for many years, both as an advocate for worker health and safety and in efforts directed at improving patient care. Her current focus is to encourage partnerships between health care and community that will best serve a patient's needs for total health and well-being.



“I am inspired to improve the public’s health by identifying and helping to reduce barriers that lead to health disparities across Montana.”



Viveka Prakash-Zawisza *(she/her)*

[Viveka Prakash-Zawisza, MD, MS, MBA](#), is the Senior Associate Medical Director with the MassHealth Payment and Care Delivery Innovation team and is the clinical lead on perinatal health initiatives. She also helps to lead health equity initiatives, such as Trans Health and Member and Community Engagement by creating strategic approaches to include the first-hand perspectives of the most marginalized members of the community. Viveka is an experienced physician leader and innovator with a passion for exploring how policy and systems impact health care delivery and social justice.



“I am inspired in my work every day by the privilege of creating policy that impacts the health and well-being of vulnerable and marginalized people in my state.”



Sarah Qin *(she/her)*

[Sarah Qin, MBA](#), is the Deputy Director for Strategic Initiatives at MassHealth, Massachusetts's Medicaid and CHIP program, in the Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services, which involves policy development and operationalization of MassHealth health equity efforts, especially relating to the recently signed 1115 waiver. Her role includes managing various health equity efforts of 61 acute care hospitals and 17 accountable care organizations across the state, as well as MassHealth's data strategy for demographic data. Prior to joining MassHealth in 2019, her work included supporting the Autism Friendly Initiative at Boston Medical Center, working for a health economics consultancy, and mentoring international students through their journey to accessing an American higher education.



“At MassHealth, I am inspired by our members, and also the passion, dedication, and determination of my colleagues to provide the best possible care for our members every day.”



Ruben Soliz *(he/him)*

[Ruben Soliz, MPH](#), is the Federal Relations and Health Policy Advisor for Arizona’s State Medicaid Program, the Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System (AHCCCS). With 15 years of experience in health and human services, he has tirelessly advanced the policy objectives of improving access to care, ending homelessness, and youth development.



“I’m inspired by the memory of a playground rebellion that I led as a fifth grader. It resulted in a policy change and reminds me that even the most marginalized among us can champion justice.”



Olivia Walker *(she/her)*

[Olivia Walker, MEd](#), is the Health Equity Officer at the Office of Health Equity at Iowa Health and Human Services, where she is responsible for leadership and oversight of health equity strategy and initiatives. Prior to this role, she served in local, tribal, and state government working on complex issues, including institutional change work, community health improvement, youth development, racial equity training, and workforce development. Olivia is a citizen of the Meskwaki Nation.



“Every day I have the honor to plant seeds of knowledge, watering and cultivating people to understand and prioritize the work required to build a more just society.”



Nicolette E. Wise *(she/her)*

[Nicolette Wise, MPH, CHES](#), is the Social Determinants of Health Director at TennCare, Tennessee’s Medicaid agency, where she leads efforts to address social risk factors and health equity for 1.4 million Tennesseans. Nicolette enacts her passion for public health and personal change as a woman of color to implement innovative approaches to holistically address health equity in historically underserved and marginalized populations.



“I am inspired by the increased focus on social determinants of health and health equity and how they will foster avenues for individuals to reach their full health potential.”

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR HEALTH CARE STRATEGIES

The Center for Health Care Strategies (CHCS) is a policy design and implementation partner devoted to improving outcomes for people enrolled in Medicaid. CHCS supports partners across sectors and disciplines to make more effective, efficient, and equitable care possible for millions of people across the nation. Its national initiatives, including the [Medicaid Leadership Institute](#) and the [Medicaid Pathways Program](#), build the skills and maximize the potential of public sector leaders to positively impact the health of individuals enrolled in Medicaid. For more information, visit www.chcs.org.