

## Wicked Problems Institute 2026

### The Future We Shape Together: Real Solutions for Families in Changing Times

#### Bios

##### Uma Ahluwalia, Chapin Hall

Uma Ahluwalia is a Senior Policy Fellow at Chapin Hall and an expert in delivering innovative, reliable, cost-effective solutions and public policy strategies that improve operations and productivity. At Chapin Hall, she is working on child- and family-related projects in multiple states, building out a children's behavioral health portfolio, coaching and mentoring mid-career professionals, and serving on several boards supporting improved outcomes for children and families.

Prior to joining Chapin Hall, she worked at Health Management Associates, supporting public and private sector organizations with consulting solutions related to public health, child welfare, social services, children's behavioral health and strategic planning.

For 12 years she served as director of the Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services in Maryland, where she led the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and oversaw the move to a more integrated health and human services enterprise. Her experience also includes executive leadership roles in child welfare in Washington, DC and the State of Washington.

##### Darneshia Allen, Zero to Three

Darneshia Allen's background includes 30 years of intensive work with families in urban communities, years of experience in Early Care and Education, which led to the development of a Pre-K 4 program. She joined ZERO TO THREE as the Arkansas Community Coordinator for the Pulaski County Safe Babies Court Team Project in 2009.

She previously led the work as a Statewide Training and Outreach Coordinator and as a Quality Improvement Center for Infant Toddler Court Teams Technical Assistance Specialist, prior to becoming the Senior Technical Assistance Specialist in 2018. She currently serves the project as the manager of training and technical assistance integration for Safe Babies.

Over the last 15 years, Ms. Allen has spoken at the National Birth to Three Institute, World Infant Mental Health Association, ZERO TO THREE LEARN Conference, BUILD National Conference, National Child Abuse and Neglect Conference, National Association of Counsel for Children and North Carolina Strong Starts.

**Dr. Melanie Berry, Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University**

Dr. Melanie R. Berry is a clinical psychologist and nonprofit leader with over two decades of experience advancing equity for children and families facing adversity.

She began her career providing community-based services to children and families in underserved communities in the San Francisco Bay Area, then moved into applied research at the University of Oregon's Stress Neurobiology and Prevention Lab, where she helped develop and test innovative interventions for young children facing adversity.

Most recently, Melanie directed the Pediatric Innovation Initiative at Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, leading a national collaborative to develop novel measures of stress and resilience in young children. She previously directed the Center's Frontiers of Innovation, where she spearheaded the development of the IDEAS Impact Framework, now widely used to strengthen program design and continuous improvement. Across these roles, she has set strategy, built and led high-performing teams, and convened diverse stakeholders to co-create and test science-based solutions.

**Dee Bonnick, JUST-US Partnerships, LLC**

Dee Bonnick has been a National Lived Experience Integration Subject Matter Expert and a Race Equity Social Justice Consultant for the past ten years. Her work has included co-leading the development of the Family Empowerment and Leadership Academy curriculum, serving as a subject matter expert for the Quality Contact Visits Product Suites, Congregate Care Product Development Brief, Levels of Prevention Product Development Brief, and Race Equity Product Briefs.

She has served as a Subject Matter Expert Consultant in Tailored Services delivery work in New Mexico, the US Virgin Islands and Rhode Island to support the implementation of family and youth engagement infrastructures and lift up race equity and justice work in child welfare. She is a lived-experience partner with the National Partnership for Child Safety and a member of multiple national workgroups and initiatives.

Dee has vast experience in training, coaching, facilitation, public speaking and project management and is an Education Consultant with the Connecticut State Department of Education.

**Tameka Caldwell, National Family Support Network**

Tameka is the Family Support Project Coordinator for the Texas Alliance of Child and Family Services (TACFS). Before leading the growth and development of TACFS' Family Resource Center (FRC) programming, she spent more than 21 years working across the full continuum of care in child welfare organizations. Now serving as the Director of Family Strengthening, Tameka oversees the daily operations of TACFS' family strengthening initiatives. Her vision is for every child and family to grow, flourish, and reach their full potential in a safe and supportive community.

Tameka brings her love of family and sports to her passion for collaborating, training, and supporting FRCs statewide.

### **Mary Chant, Missouri Coalition for Children**

Mary Chant started her career working with Missouri runaway and homeless youth. She moved to Idaho in the 1990s to focus on economic security and asset development for low-income communities as the community services director, and later the executive director, of the Community Action Partnership Association of Idaho. In 2012 she returned to Missouri, becoming CEO of Missouri Coalition for Children. As MCC's CEO, Mary works with partners at all levels to develop policies and practices that support child and family well-being and healthy communities.

Mary is the grateful mother of two daughters. She has served on several community and statewide nonprofit boards focusing on education, economic security and equity. Mary is a longtime student of traditional Okinawan martial arts and teaches a small karate class in Jefferson City, Missouri.

### **Valerie Frost, Sunlight**

Valerie's work focuses on helping leaders and organizations rethink how authority, accountability, and decision-making operate within child welfare and family-serving systems.

She partners with agencies, foundations, and cross-sector initiatives to design governance structures, prevention strategies, and engagement approaches that are grounded in real-world conditions, not assumptions. This includes integrating family insight into how decisions are made, not just how feedback is gathered.

As a nationally recognized parent leader, TEDx speaker, educator, and strategist, she has contributed to state and national initiatives, built parent-led councils, and supported efforts to shift systems toward shared authority and accountability. She has spoken at national convenings, including the White House, and my work has been featured across media and field conversations on family well-being and systems change.

She is also the creator of the Ethical Lived Experience Engagement Test™, a framework for evaluating whether engagement is truly ethical, accountable, and structured for real influence.

### **Sandra Gasca, Annie E. Casey Foundation**

As vice president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Center for Systems Innovation since 2018, Sandra Gasca oversees national and state reform efforts in three key areas: child welfare, young people transitioning into adulthood and juvenile justice.

Prior to this role, Gasca served as the director of the Jim Casey Youth Opportunities Initiative, which aims to equip young people leaving foster care with the relationships, resources and opportunities needed to achieve well-being and success as they transition into adulthood. A former Children and Family Fellow, Gasca joined the Foundation in 2015. She previously worked at KVC Health Systems, a national leader in behavioral health care, child welfare, and community health and wellness as the nonprofit's executive vice president of practice and leadership integration.

Gasca's career stops include the Child and Family Services Agency in Washington, D.C., KVC Nebraska and Youthville (now EmberHope), a Kansas-based nonprofit serving at-risk youth and families.

### **Michael Huesca, Paternal Opportunities Programs and Services (POPS)**

Michael Huesca is a proud son, partner, and father whose leadership is driven by his Mexican Indigenous culture and values. He has served as the chairperson of the Board of Directors for Paternal Opportunities Programs & Services (POPS) Inc. since 2015.

Before joining POPS, Huesca was a director for Urbanhood Inc., an agency that focuses on supporting victims of domestic violence. He also served a two-year term as the Tribal Administrator for the Iipay Nation of Santa Ysabel. For nearly 10 years, he has been a well-respected national parent leader with the Children's Trust Fund Alliance.

Huesca is nationally recognized as a subject matter expert in the Child Welfare System, Father and Family Engagement, Domestic Violence, and the Indian Child Welfare Act ICWA. His purpose is to advance the importance of parents with lived experience as the essential and core value in transforming the current child welfare system into a family well-being experience that promotes positive outcomes for children, youth, and families.

### **Dony JeanCharles, Children's Home Society of Florida**

Dony Jean-Charles brings a diverse background in administrative support, client services, and communications. Their experience spans multiple sectors, demonstrating versatile capabilities in various organizational settings.

As an Administrative Assistant at Children's Home Society of Florida, Dony provides administrative support focused on family services. Previously, at CVS Health as a Patient Care Specialist, they delivered patient assistance and coordinated patient care. Their responsibilities included client assistance and ensuring quality service delivery.

### **Derreasha Jones, Children's Home Society of Florida**

Derreasha Jones is the Founder and Executive Director of LIBE & Co. LLC, a holistic wellness organization demonstrating how ambition meets well-being. As a community engagement leader, she has 9+ years of experience building inclusive workplaces and cross-sector partnerships.

Jones is passionate about culture building, faith, community, and holistic wellness. She is the author of *What Must I Know?* and *Catching the Grains*, available on Amazon.

### **David Kelly, The Family Justice Group**

David P. Kelly is Co-Director of the Family Justice Group. For over a decade he served in the United States Children's Bureau, holding positions as Special Assistant to the Associate Commissioner, Senior Policy Advisor on Courts and Justice and overseeing the Children's Bureau's work with the legal and judicial community.

Prior to joining the federal government, David was an Assistant Staff Director at the American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law and served as a Senior Assistant Child Advocate in the New Jersey Office of the Child Advocate.

David began his career as an attorney at the Youth Advocacy Center of Covenant House New Jersey representing homeless, runaway, and at-risk youth; he later became Director of Legal and Clinical services.

### **Katrina Lanahan, Bloom Works**

Katrina Lanahan is a Senior UX Researcher for Bloom Works, a company that works in the emerging area of public interest technology. With 10+ years of experience as a UX researcher, Katrina Lanahan's passion is using human-centered design to improve health outcomes. Katrina loves thinking about problems at the intersections of health behavior, design, technology, and accessibility – her goal is to understand audiences' needs and create better experiences.

She uses a broad range of UX design and research methods, such as usability studies, contextual inquiry, A/B concept testing, click testing, personas, journey maps, card sorting, heuristic evaluation, interviews, and focus groups and work with diverse audiences like Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries, Veterans, and non-native English speakers.

### **Zach Laris, Child Welfare Wonk**

Zach Laris is a social entrepreneur building strategic intelligence and leadership infrastructure to transform child and family policy.

Zach has founded and leads two distinct but complementary organizations. He is the Founder and President of Child Welfare Wonk, a strategic policy intelligence platform delivering actionable, data-driven insights to policymakers, partners, and philanthropy.

He is also the Founder and Executive Director of Bolder Horizon, a nonprofit cultivating cross-partisan child and family policy leadership and innovation.

Zach's work focuses on the structural intersections of health, human services, and economic policy, and their role in disrupting cycles of adversity and expanding opportunity for families.

Before launching these ventures, Zach spent over a decade shaping bipartisan federal policy and building national child welfare policy infrastructure at the American Academy of Pediatrics.

### **Miranda Lynch-Smith, Chapin Hall**

Miranda Lynch-Smith is the Chief Strategy Officer at Chapin Hall. In this position, Lynch-Smith focuses on developing actionable policy solutions, building strategic partnerships, advancing interdisciplinary research, and driving cross-sector collaborations. She plays a key role in shaping Chapin Hall's policy agenda by translating research into impact and identifying opportunities to address challenges across the organization's impact areas.

With over 25 years of experience working in federal government, Lynch-Smith has served in multiple senior leadership roles in the Department of Health and Human Services and as a senior advisor to the White House Domestic Policy Council.

At the Children's Bureau within the Department of Health and Human Services, she led the Child and Family Service Review process and played a central role in creating a federal framework for continuous quality improvement in child welfare. She was also instrumental in shaping and evaluating federal and state legislation, regulations, and policies related to child welfare and broader human services programs.

### **Julie Matusick, National Family Support Network**

Julie Matusick serves as Co-Executive Director of the National Family Support Network, where she has been instrumental in driving the organization's growth and success since joining the team in 2018. She has taken on diverse leadership roles, overseeing membership management, developing training programs, coordinating large-scale events, and supporting Members in implementing the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support. She plays a key role in organizational operations, program development and delivery, and human resources, shaping policies, streamlining processes, and fostering strong relationships with Members and stakeholders.

With over twenty years of experience in the Family Support field, Julie previously served as Manager of the Nonnie Hood Parent & Family Resource Center, where she oversaw multiple programs, implemented a Parent Advisory Committee, and integrated the Standards of Quality into daily practices. Julie's leadership was recognized nationally when she presented at the 2017 NFSN National Summit, and she currently serves as a Standards of Quality Master Trainer.

### **Gabe McGaughey, Institute for Child & Family Well-Being, Children's Wisconsin**

Gabriel McGaughey is the Director of Well-Being for Children's Wisconsin Community Services and a founding leader of the Institute for Child and Family Well-Being (ICFW). He helps public systems shift from crisis response to community-led, data-informed prevention strategies that support long-term well-being.

At ICFW, he focuses on building prevention infrastructure, aligning data with decision-making, and strengthening agencies' ability to adapt in complex environments. He is also an architect of Strong Families, Thriving Children, Connected Communities (SFTCCC), a collaborative effort to prevent neglect by addressing family overload and the systems that contribute to it.

Gabriel's 20+ years of experience spans direct care, supervision, quality improvement, and executive leadership. He began in group homes and prevention programs before joining Milwaukee's child welfare system in 2003. He later led performance and quality improvement, developing analytics tools that shaped practice and policy. Before co-founding ICFW, he directed Family Case Management, advancing evidence-based interventions and a system-wide focus on child and family well-being.

### **Jerry Milner, The Family Justice Group**

Jerry Milner is Co-director of the Family Justice Group. He began his career as a front-line social worker in Alabama, working primarily with teenagers in foster care and in prevention services for families.

Prior work includes serving as state child welfare director in Alabama. From 2017-2021, he led the U.S. Children's Bureau, Department of Health and Human Services and, for most of that time, was Acting Commissioner, Administration on Children, Youth and Families.

### **Ryan O'Donnell, Sunlight**

Ryan O'Donnell is a former foster parent and entrepreneur on a mission to use tech for good. He is currently Co-Founder & CEO of Sunlight, where they build technology to connect and serve over 53,000 youth in foster care and their families across more than 30 states.

Prior to founding Sunlight, he spent over a decade building for-profit and non-profit start-ups where they used technology to feed the hungry, raise money for charity, and get people jobs at scale.

After breaking the World Record for the largest food drive in 24 hours, Ryan launched his first tech start-up to help nonprofits fundraise which became one of the first national "round up for charity" platform. He then started EmployUs, which helped ~30,000 people get hired at ~2,500 businesses.

After selling EmployUs and reunifying their foster son with his family, he and his wife invested over \$1M to improve the quality of legal representation, unlock more affordable housing, and advance key policy reforms.

### **Eshawn Peterson, National Child Welfare Center for Innovation & Advancement (NCWCIA)**

Eshawn Peterson is an executive leader working at the intersection of child welfare systems transformation, community-driven strategy, and lived experience integration. Over the past decade, she has led work at the local, state, and national levels to help reimagine how systems support families—not just intervene in their lives.

Today, she serves as the Lead (Director) of Community & Systems Insights at the NCWCIA, a federal technical assistance center, where she leads a national portfolio focused on integrating lived experience, community voice, and cross-systems collaboration across projects with states and jurisdictions.

She also brings lived experience connected to the systems she now works to transform. That perspective informs how she leads, partners, and makes decisions.

She's drawn to work that requires:

- Holding complexity without losing clarity
- Building alongside communities, not around them
- Turning bold ideas into operational reality

Because at the end of the day: Families don't experience strategy. They experience systems.

### **Laura Porter, ACE Interface**

Laura Porter is Co-Founder of ACE Interface, LLC, where she and Dr. Robert Anda develop and disseminate educational products and empowerment strategies that help leaders improve population health.

She serves as a thought partner, educator, consultant and coach in over two dozen states, supporting groups ranging from parents to state, federal and Tribal Nation leaders. Laura has more than two decades of experience implementing ACE Study concepts, overseeing data analysis and designing processes that improve health, safety and productivity. Her teaching and coaching focus on using NEAR Science and living systems theory to build positive feedback in communities.

Featured in the documentary *Resilience*, she believes that “If you put this science into the hands of the people, they will do very wise things with it.” Laura has also served as a technical advisor in the national substance abuse prevention system and previously as an elected County Commissioner.

### **Dr. Jessica Pryce, College of Social Work, Florida State University**

Dr. Pryce is a social worker, researcher and national speaker on issues of equity and leadership in child protective services. Her dedication to the child welfare field spans over 15 years, contributing her expertise from various perspectives, including direct practice as a child protective caseworker, teaching, training, policy development, and research.

Throughout her career, she has authored numerous publications on subjects like training and education, racial disparity, and anti-poverty practices within child welfare. Additionally, Dr. Pryce has shared her work and vision for child welfare at over 250 virtual and in-person conferences, both nationally and internationally.

In 2018, she delivered a powerful TED Talk on Implicit Racial Bias in Decision Making, which has since garnered over 1.3 million views. This ted talk has created critical dialogue about equity, decisions, and the courage to try something new in a field that is riddled with antiquated procedures.

### **Adrian Saldaña, American Public Human Services Association (APHSA)**

Adrian Saldaña serves on APHSA’s Impact & Innovation team as Implementation Manager, partnering with members to advance organizational transformation and systems modernization efforts. He has more than 23 years of experience across nonprofit and public human services, with a background that includes direct service, workforce development, performance measurement, and enterprise change initiatives.

Prior to joining APHSA, Adrian spent six years at New York City’s Administration for Children’s Services (ACS), where he supported agency-wide improvement efforts impacting one of the nation’s largest child welfare systems. He also supported implementation of the Family First Prevention Services Act (FFPSA) within the Division of Family Permanency Services.

Earlier in his career, Adrian contributed to organizational change efforts at the U.N., the National Harm Reduction Coalition, and Henry Street Settlement. He began his work in human services providing counseling and case management to homeless and street-involved youth at Safe Horizon, grounding his systems-level leadership in direct practice experience.

**Jacob Schmitt, Peer Services Lead, National Child Welfare Center for Innovation & Advancement (NCWCIA)**

Jacob Schmitt, Peer Services Lead, National Child Welfare Center for Innovation & Advancement (NCWCIA). Jacob Schmitt is a Technical Specialist at JBS International, bringing expertise in both public and private child welfare administration and programs to NCWCIA.

With over 25 years of leading and serving child welfare and social service programs and agencies, Jacob began his career serving as a foster care case manager in Kansas City, Missouri. After relocating to Arizona, Jacob worked at all levels in the former, Child Protective Services, from an investigative worker to eventually overseeing the state's permanency programs for guardianship, kinship, independent living, and the Education Training Voucher (ETV). He was later appointed as the Administrator for CPS in Arizona, overseeing all field offices across the state as well as the child abuse hotline.

Prior to his current role, Jacob served as the President & CEO of Arizona's Children Association, one of the largest and longest serving child and family social service agencies in Arizona. He also previously had helped create the agency's compliance and quality departments while serving as the Chief Compliance Officer & Director of Quality.

Jacob is a previous board member for the Children's Home Society of America and also served as its Treasurer for a number of years.

**Dr. Bob Sege, Center for Community-Engaged Medicine, Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute**

Dr. Robert Sege is nationally known for his research on effective health systems approaches that directly address the needs of children, who are the poorest and most diverse segment of the US population. His academic work incorporates community engagement at all stages of design, implementation, dissemination, and improvement.

He directs the development and dissemination of Healthy Outcomes from Positive Experiences, an early childhood development framework that has led to changes in care across the country. He co-directed the community and stakeholder engagement component of the Tufts Clinical and Translational Science Institute for more than seven years and is a professor of medicine and pediatrics at Tufts University School of Medicine.

He is a senior fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Policy, serves on the board of the Massachusetts Children's Trust, and served for many years on the Board of Prevent Child Abuse America and on the American Academy of Pediatrics' committees on Child Abuse and Neglect and Injury, Violence, and Poisoning Prevention.

**Christine Tappan, Executive Director, National Child Welfare Center for Innovation & Advancement (NCWCIA)**

As the Executive Director of the NCWCIA, Christine Tappan brings more than 25 years of experience applying progressive practice, policy, strategy, and financial expertise across the health and human services spectrum. She has worked in public, social, and for-profit sectors, as well as primary and higher education in the U.S. and internationally. Her career has centered on building partnerships that use data and analytics to drive collaboration and advance transformation across the social determinants of health, including early childhood, economic mobility, workforce, housing, behavioral health, child welfare, and juvenile justice.

Christine previously served as the Chief of Community Based Services & Advancement at Ascentria Care Alliance. She co-led Abt Associates' Global Center for Technical Assistance and served as Associate Commissioner of NH DHHS, overseeing statewide human and behavioral health services for children, families, and communities.

She is also the founder and lead guide of BirchWalking, a social impact organization that creates nature-based spaces to deepen connection, build resiliency, and support well-being.

**Sarah Verbiest, Jordan Institute for Families, UNC School of Social Work**

Sarah Verbiest is a clinical professor and the director of the Jordan Institute for Families at the UNC School of Social Work. She is also the executive director of the Collaborative for Maternal and Infant Health at the UNC School of Medicine.

Verbiest has an extensive career as an advocate, leader, researcher, trainer, teacher and program director. Her main areas of focus have been maternal and infant health and equity, system supports for families, caregiving, preconception health and more recently menopause. She has managed more than 20 major grants with federal, state and foundation funding and has authored more than 50 journal articles and edited four books.

**Dr. David Willis, Thrive Center for Children, Families and Communities, Georgetown University: Nurture Connection**

David W Willis is Professor of Pediatrics at Georgetown University, within the new Thrive Center for Children, Families and Communities. There, he leads [Nurture Connection](#), an impact network, to advance early relational health at the growing intersection of child health transformation and resilient community building in partnerships with families with a social justice commitment. He also is the current Co-Chair of National Academy of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's Forum on Children's Wellbeing.

Dr. Willis was previously a Senior Fellow at the Center for the Study of Social Studies in Washington DC, the Inaugural Executive Director of the Perigee Fund of Seattle, WA, the Division Director of Home Visiting and Early Childhood Systems at HRSA during the Obama Administration, and an early brain and child development clinician and leader in Oregon and the American Academy of Pediatrics. He currently lives in Alexandria, VA with his wife in close proximity to his oldest son's family.