



COMMIT TO  
**Connect**

**engAGED**  
The National Resource Center  
for Engaging Older Adults

# 2024 National Summit to Increase Social Connections

## Speaker Profiles

**USAging**

 **ACL**  
Administration for Community Living

**May 14-15, 2024**

# Katie Clark, MPH

Policy Analyst, Office of Interagency Innovation, Administration for Community Living



Katie leads Commit to Connect, the ACL's cross-sector initiative addressing social isolation and loneliness. Commit to Connect aims to increase the social connection of all people, but especially people with disabilities, older and aging adults, and caregivers. Prior to her work at ACL, Katie worked at the NIH in extramural research grants. Katie also served as a Community Health Advisor in Madagascar from 2017-2020 with the U.S. Peace Corps where she focused on community capacity building, maternal/child health, and youth development. Katie holds a B.A. in American History from Kalamazoo College and a Master of Public in Health Policy from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

# Kelly Cronin, MPH, MS

Deputy Administrator, Innovation and Partnership Administration for Community Living  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Living



Kelly Cronin serves as Deputy Administrator for Innovation and Partnership at HHS's Administration for Community Living. She has been with HHS since 2001, in a variety of roles at the FDA, CMS, and the Office of the National Coordinator for Health IT. At ACL, she oversees grant programs that help Medicare beneficiaries' access to low-income benefits and health insurance counseling, State No Wrong Door systems to enable access to long-term services and supports as well as state programs to enable individuals access assistive technologies. Her Center also leads efforts to align health and social care through Community Care Hubs and networks of community-based organizations as well as inter-agency efforts to address the direct care workforce crisis and improve access to housing and services. She holds a Master of Public Health with a concentration in epidemiology and biostatistics and a Master of Science in health policy from the School of Public Health and Health Services at George Washington University.

# Steve Ewell

## Executive Director, Consumer Technology Association Foundation



Steve Ewell is the executive director of the Consumer Technology Association (CTA) Foundation, a charitable foundation with the mission of linking seniors and people with disabilities with technology that can enhance their lives. They support programs that provide independence, purpose, and vital connections for people across the country. He also serves as the Vice President for Accessibility and AgeTech for the Consumer Technology Association.

Prior to joining the CTA Foundation, he served in other nonprofit leadership roles. He was managing director of the InfraGard National Members Alliance (INMA), a public-private partnership with the FBI focused on promoting and developing critical infrastructure protection, with 86 chapters and more than 40,000 members.

While at Business Executives for National Security (BENS), Steve served as the director of the Metro Washington, DC region where he built the membership in DC, Maryland and Virginia into one of the largest and most active regions in the organization through a wide variety of policy engagements and programs.

Steve graduated from Drew University with a Bachelor of Arts and earned his MBA and Master of Science in information and telecommunications systems from Johns Hopkins University's Carey Business School. He serves as co-chair of the Forum on Aging, Disability and Independence at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, the Advisory Council for the Center for Inclusive Design and Engineering (CIDE) and the Coleman Institute for Cognitive Disabilities at the University of Colorado and the External Advisory Board of the Enhance Center RERC, a consortium between Weill Cornell Medicine, Florida State University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

# Rebecca Freeman, MPH

**Human Services Planner/Evaluator III, NC Department of Health and Human Services Division of Aging**



Rebecca Freeman works at the NC DHHS Division of Aging assisting division leadership with many new initiatives, including the All Ages, All Stages, NC multisector plan on aging and the Social Bridging NC project. She also serves as liaison to the division's two legislatively authorized advocacy groups, the Governor's Advisory Council on Aging and the NC Senior Tar Heel Legislature. She earned a Bachelor of Arts in psychology from East Carolina University and a Master of Public Health with a concentration in health policy and management from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She is passionate about helping older adults remain active, engaged, and filled with a sense of purpose.

# Edward Garcia, MHS-PH

**Founder and Chair, Foundation for Social Connection;  
Vice Chair, Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness;  
Co-Founder and Board Member, Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection**



Edward Garcia (Eddie) is the Founder and Chair of the Foundation for Social Connection – a US-based non-profit organization dedicated to the translation of scientific research to real-world solutions to address social connection. He is the Vice Chair of its sister-organization, the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness – a non-profit advocacy organization fighting to raise national awareness and policy change to combat the negative impacts of social isolation and loneliness within the US. He is also the Co-Founder and Board Member of the Global Initiative on Loneliness and Connection, a partnership with 15 countries across the globe, the World Health Organization, and the European Union focused on raising global awareness, supporting knowledge dissemination, and the development of systemic, nationally-based strategies to address social connection.

Eddie's 20 years working in US-government health care and social services programs has made him knowledgeable in a multitude of health and social policy issues. He has led and been actively involved in numerous multi-stakeholder coalitions aimed at improving the US health care delivery and financing systems and served within the US Department of Health and Human Services and US Congress between 2006-2016. Eddie currently serves as a Partner at Healthsperien, a US-based healthcare and social services consulting firm focused on transforming systems of care for the most vulnerable populations. Eddie holds degrees in political science and comparative health politics from Boston University and a Master of Health Science in Public Health from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Eddie works and resides in Washington, DC USA.

# Lori Gerhard

**Director, Office of Interagency Innovation, Administration for Community Living  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Living**



Lori Gerhard is the Director of the Office of Interagency Innovation (OII) in the U.S. Administration for Community Living (ACL). The Office of Interagency Innovation partners with federal departments and agencies such as the U.S. Office of the Surgeon General, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, the HHS Office of the Assistant Secretary for Health, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, the U.S. Department of Transportation, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Department of Education, and national, state and local organizations to foster and develop partnerships that enable older adults, people with disabilities and caregivers to live at home and participate as they choose in their community. Her portfolio of work includes advancing partnerships, implementing and supporting self-direction programs, increasing access to programs that address social isolation and loneliness, assistive technology, accessible and affordable housing, transportation, care transitions out of institutions, and other long-term services and supports. Ms. Gerhard has a Bachelor of Science degree in Health Planning and Administration from The Pennsylvania State University, she has served in policy and leadership positions in Pennsylvania State Human services agencies and worked in various capacities in senior living programs. She has more than 40 years of experience partnering with individuals and organizations to serve people with disabilities, older adults and caregivers to live the lives they choose.

# Meredith Hanley

## Director of Community Capacity Building, USAging



Meredith Hanley joined USAging in 2016 and currently serves as a Program Director overseeing USAging's work relation to social connection, caregiving and kinship care. She oversees [engAGED: The National Resource Center for Engaging Older Adults](#), expanding and enhancing the Aging Network's capacity to offer social engagement. She also provides leadership for [Commit to Connect](#), an Administration for Community Living (ACL) initiative working to fight social isolation and loneliness by helping people connect and engage to build the social connections they need to thrive.

Meredith also oversees USAging's role in the [Grandfamilies and Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center](#), which is led by Generations United in collaboration with five key partners including USAging, to increase the capacity and effectiveness of states, territories, tribes/tribal organizations, nonprofits and other community-based organizations to serve and support grandfamilies and kinship families. Meredith also directs the [Innovations in Family Caregiver Services and Supports Initiative](#). Through this initiative, with ACL funding, USAging and its funded partners will work to expand and enhance the capacity of the Aging Network to strengthen and spur innovation in the development and implementation of person and family-centered services and supports that meet the diverse needs of the nation's caregivers.

Meredith has a master's degree in social work with a focus in gerontology from Washington University in St. Louis.



# Sara Link

## Director of No Wrong Door Virginia, Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services



Sara Link directs No Wrong Door Virginia, a statewide initiative streamlining access to long term service and supports through person-centered practices, self-direction, and a technology system. In 2016, Sara joined Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services, as strategist monitoring options counseling service standards and developing policy standards for implementation of a statewide person-centered single point of entry system. Sara formerly directed a partnership between Senior Connections, The Capital Area Agency on Aging and Virginia Commonwealth University Department of Gerontology for livable communities and formerly served as analyst for New York City Office of the Mayor and Department for the Aging. Sara has led research studying older adult services, social isolation, and community-based supports. Sara's work in person-centered care was informed by her experience as an educator, community organizer, applied researcher, funder, policymaker, and administrator. Sara and her team are currently expanding self-directed tools to support community members, the number of statewide person-centered thinking trainers and incorporating trauma-informed care and ageism disruption into the statewide person-centered planning curriculum for the aging and disability services workforce. Sara holds a Master of Science degree in Urban Policy and Management and formerly served as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Guatemala. She enjoys spending free time hiking, camping and traveling with her husband and their two young kiddos ages 6 and 8.

# Catherine MacDonald

**Director of Community Engagement and Outreach, Virginia Commonwealth University**



Catherine MacDonald is Director of Community Engagement and Outreach with Virginia Commonwealth University's Dept. of Gerontology and the Virginia Center on Aging, both located within VCU's College of Health Professions at the Medical College of Virginia. For the past decade, MacDonald has served as a gerontologist at Virginia Commonwealth University working to advance evidence-based research and scholarship. Catherine aims to change the way we think about growing old, while working to dismantle the systems that cause harm. She works to promote increased inclusion, equity, and access to resources for the elders of today and the elders of tomorrow.

# Sandy Markwood

## Chief Executive Officer, USAging



Sandy Markwood is a national advocate for aging issues and a champion for ensuring that older adults have the best supports to age well at home and in their communities. As the CEO of USAging since 2002, she is committed to ensuring that our society values and supports people across the lifespan. This commitment has taken many forms, including advocacy with multiple administrations and on Capitol Hill for the passage of legislation aimed at supporting older adults, including access to critical information, in-home services and caregiver support.

A passionate advocate, Sandy has led numerous USAging campaigns to support the needs of older adults as they age, including those focused on combating social isolation among older adults, encouraging healthy aging, supporting caregivers, promoting livable communities, and access to transportation and housing options. Sandy has focused on the development of community planning practices that include the creation of dementia friendly communities and maximize the benefits of volunteering and engagement for people of all ages while preventing elder abuse and neglect. Sandy's goal and the goal of USAging is to ensure that older adults have the ability to age with maximum independence and quality of life. According to Sandy, aging isn't just about adding years to our lives, it's about adding life to those years.

Sandy has more than 30 years' experience in the development and delivery of aging, health, human services, housing and transportation programs in counties and cities across the nation. Prior to joining USAging, Sandy served as the Deputy Director of County Services at the National Association of Counties where she took a lead role in research, training, conference planning, program development, technical assistance and grants management.

Sandy holds bachelor's and master's degrees from the University of Virginia.

# Dawn Merth-Johnson, MA, CC-SLP

Education Consultant, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



Dawn Merth-Johnson, MA, CCC-SLP, is an Education Consultant for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction with a focus on speech-language and assistive technology.

In this role, she provides leadership, consultation and technical assistance for local education agencies, providers and families. She manages IDEA discretionary grants related to assistive technology and comprehensive special education evaluation in the area of speech and language. Merth-Johnson serves as a member of the Assistive Technology Advisory Council (ATAC) through the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. She has 29 years of clinical and supervisory experience in the schools, long-term rehabilitation, and at the university level. Merth-Johnson presents at the state and national level on topics related to leadership, advocacy, and clinical practice. She serves on the Wisconsin Speech-Language Pathology and Audiology Association (WSHA) Board as the State Education Advocacy Co-Leader (Co-SEAL) for Wisconsin and is the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) SEAL Champion of the Midwest region. Merth-Johnson is a Past President and Past VP-Schools of WSHA. She served two terms as the ASHA SLP Advisory Council representative (AC) for Wisconsin and one term as a member and chair of the ASHA School Issues Advisory Board (SIAB).

# Erika Okonsky

## No Wrong Door Expansion Specialist, Virginia Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services



Erika has been involved with Virginia's No Wrong Door initiative for the past 15 years. In her role as Expansion Specialist, she promotes and educates agencies across the Commonwealth about this statewide network of shared resources designed to streamline access to long term services and supports. She started out her career in the information technology world, and it was the impetus for her move to America from South Africa. An early assignment through an IT consulting firm at VirginiaNavigator, turned into a long career where Information Technology blended with Health and Human Services. Today she's employed by Virginia's Department for Aging and Rehabilitative Services and supports the continued enhancement of technologies that allow Virginians to connect with needed resources. She serves on the Inform USA Board and on the No Wrong Door Resource Advisory Council.

# Laura Plummer, MA, CRC, ATP

Assistive Technology Program Coordinator, Wisconsin Department of Health Services



Laura Plummer, MA, CRC, ATP is the Assistive Technology Program Coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Health Services. In this position she manages Wistech, Wisconsin's Assistive Technology Act program, the iCanConnect program, and collaborates with program partners to ensure comprehensive AT programs are available for individuals with disabilities.

Her experience includes conducting assistive technology assessments in the areas of hearing loss, vision loss, and communication. She provides technical assistance to stakeholders, connects consumers to programs and resources and conducts trainings on assistive technology at the local, statewide, and national levels. Ms. Plummer has both Bachelors and Masters Degrees in Deafness Rehabilitation Counseling and she takes an active role in learning and using the latest in electronic gadgets.

# Rani Snyder, MPA

Vice President, Program at The John A. Hartford Foundation



Rani E. Snyder, MPA, is Vice President, Program at The John A. Hartford Foundation. Ms. Snyder has over 25 years of experience working with preeminent health care institutions across the nation improving the care of older adults, identifying and guiding health care programs that have set the standard for medical best practices, increased medical education opportunities, and maximizing resources to improve health care broadly. She brings that experience to The John A. Hartford Foundation where she coordinates initiatives that foster collaboration among academic institutions, hospitals and health care providers to build Age-Friendly Health Systems, support family caregivers, and improve serious illness and end-of-life care. She is also chair of the board for Grantmakers in Aging, a membership organization comprised of philanthropies with a common dedication to improving the experience of aging, a fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine, and previously served as a Volunteer Long-Term Care Ombudsman for the State of Nevada Aging and Disability Services Division.

# Laura Talmus

## Executive Director and Co-founder, Beyond Differences



Laura Talmus founded Beyond Differences along with her husband, Averell “Ace” Smith, following the unexpected death of their daughter Lili Rachel Smith in October 2009.

Passionate about bringing awareness to the issue of adolescent social isolation, Laura is the full-time Executive Director of Beyond Differences, a non-profit organization dedicated to inspiring students nationwide to end social isolation and create cultures of belonging among middle school students.

Beyond Differences’ original Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum for grades 5 – 8, their Professional Development training for educators, counselors, and social workers, along with their youth leadership programs have been used in over 9000 schools across all 50 states. They are best known for the national holiday, No One Eats Alone Day™.

Prior to the COVID pandemic, Laura secured funding from the Marin Community Foundation to undertake a groundbreaking initiative to Advance SEL in the State of California in partnership with California Governor Gavin Newsom, First Partner Jennifer Siebel Newsom and Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony Thurmond. The Advance SEL initiative helped inform the California SEL Task Force 2.0, a state-wide coalition to address children’s mental health and social emotional learning needs, on which she served as a member.

Laura has received numerous awards and recognitions including being selected as an AARP Purpose Prize Fellow, a Jefferson Prize winner, the Martin Luther King, Jr. Humanitarian Award from the Marin County Human Rights Commission, the Courageous Leaders Award from the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco, and the North Bay Business Journal’s Award’s Nonprofit Leadership Award. She is also a member of the Washington, D.C.-based organization, the Coalition to End Social Isolation and Loneliness (CESIL).

Laura and Ace live in the San Francisco Bay Area. They have a son, Abram Smith (daughter-in-law, Aine Minihane-Smith), and two beautiful grandchildren Tadhg and Nora.



# Dr. Vivek Murthy

## Surgeon General of the United States



Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, MD, MBA, was confirmed by the U.S. Senate in March 2021 to serve as the 21st Surgeon General of the United States. As the nation's top doctor, Dr. Vivek Murthy helps to advance the health and well-being of all Americans and has worked to address critical public health issues. He has issued Surgeon General Advisories on the [youth mental health crisis](#) and [social media's impact on youth mental health](#), the [epidemic of loneliness and isolation](#), and on [burnout in the health worker community](#). Dr. Murthy also issued a Surgeon General's Framework on [mental health in the workplace](#) and he is the first Surgeon General to host a podcast, [House Calls with Dr. Vivek Murthy](#), where he invites guests and listeners to explore how we can all build more connected and meaningful lives.

As Vice Admiral of the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps, Dr. Murthy oversees more than 6,000 dedicated public health officers serving underserved and vulnerable populations.

Dr. Murthy previously served as the 19th Surgeon General under President Obama. Raised in Miami, Dr. Murthy received his bachelor's degree from Harvard, his medical degree from the Yale School of Medicine, and his Master's in Business Administration from the Yale School of Management.

# Glenna Wright-Gallo

Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services



Glenna Wright-Gallo is the assistant secretary in the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services at the United States Department of Education. In this capacity, she serves as advisor to the U.S. secretary of education on matters related to the education of children and youth with disabilities, as well as employment and community living for youth and adults with disabilities. The mission of her office is to improve early childhood, educational, and employment outcomes, and to raise expectations for all people with disabilities, their families, their communities, and the nation.

Wright-Gallo has more than 25 years of experience supporting students and adults with disabilities. She served as the assistant superintendent of special education in the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in Washington from 2017–2022 and previously as the state director of special education for the Utah State Board of Education for seven years. In her state-level education leadership roles, Wright-Gallo provided expertise in the improvement planning, data analysis, and monitoring of public pre-K through 12th grade+ special education programs. Before her state-level education leadership roles, Wright-Gallo worked as a classroom teacher and administrator.

Wright-Gallo has a Bachelor of Science and a Master of Science degrees in special education; special education teacher and administrative licenses; endorsements as a program administrator, principal, and superintendent; and a Master of Business Administration.

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