



2022 Child Welfare Fellows Kickoff Meeting

Joint Fellows Convening

Child Welfare · Early Childhood · Youth Homelessness

Embassy Suites, Denver Downtown Convention Center

Denver, Colo. | Sept. 12-14, 2022

Speaker Bios

Emily Blandford covers Medicaid policy and provides in-depth technical assistance and research for NCSL's members around complex topics related to Medicaid and other health care access and coverage issues. Prior to joining NCSL in 2018, Emily spent her career working in the executive branch, overseeing various aspects of Colorado's Medicaid program. Emily is a national expert in Medicaid policy with extensive knowledge and experience in operations and program oversight. Email: emily.blandford@ncsl.org

Jerry Bruce is the director of Georgia's Office of the Child Advocate. He has 27 years of experience in child welfare and juvenile justice law. Prior to his current position he worked as Georgia's Court Improvement Program Director and as Program Attorney for the Georgia Supreme Court Committee on Justice for Children. His experience also includes service as a Juvenile Courts Judge in the Enotah Judicial Circuit, and as a Special Assistant Attorney General representing the Department of Family and Children Services in Union, Towns, and Rabun Counties. Mr. Bruce received his Juris Doctorate from the University of Georgia in 1993, as well as a Master of Arts degree in English Literature from Louisiana State University in 1990. Email: jbruce@oca.ga.gov

Minna Castillo Cohen is the director of Colorado's Office of Children, Youth and Families. Since 2017, Castillo Cohen has directed the operations of programs and facilities that improve the safety, independence and well-being of Colorado's children, youth and families. She oversees Child Welfare, Youth Services and the Domestic Violence Program — as well as the Colorado Juvenile Parole Board, the Colorado Sexual Health Initiative (CoSHI) and the Medical Oversight Unit. She has served for 20 years in the nonprofit sector, with all of her work focused on serving children, youth and families. Email: minna.castillocohen@state.co.us

Josh Cunningham is a project manager in NCSL's Employment, Labor and Retirement program. He specializes in state recruitment and retention policies, particularly within the public sector. He also manages a project on inclusive employment policies, including people with disabilities with support from the U.S. Department of Labor. Prior to NCSL, Josh worked as a legislative aide for the Colorado House of Representatives. Email: josh.cunningham@ncsl.org



Ken DeCerchio currently serves as the program director of the In-Depth Technical Assistance Program of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Center on Substance Abuse and Child Welfare. Prior to joining the Center for Children and Family Futures, Mr. DeCerchio served as the Assistant Secretary for Substance Abuse and Mental Health with the Florida Department of Children and Families and as the state Substance Abuse Director. Mr. DeCerchio has served on Florida's Drug Policy Advisory Council and Supreme Court Task Force on Treatment-Based Drug Courts, and SAMHSA's Center for Substance Abuse Treatment National Advisory Council. In 2005, Mr. DeCerchio received the National Association of State Alcohol and Drug Abuse Directors' Service Award, and in 2007, Mr. DeCerchio received the Florida Alcohol and Drug Abuse Association's Lifetime Achievement Award for his contributions to prevention and treatment services in Florida. Mr. DeCerchio is a Certified Addictions Professional and has been a volunteer Guardian Ad Litem for children in foster care since October 2008. Email: kdecerchio@cffutures.org

Elizabeth Gaines is the founder and chief executive officer of Children's Funding Project. Her career began with leading after-school and community-based youth programs at the Atwood Community Center in Madison, Wis. She later served as youth policy analyst for Citizens for Missouri's Children, followed by 13 years at the Forum for Youth Investment, where she helped policy leaders develop tools and techniques to improve their use of data, increase their policy alignment and more efficiently apply resources for greater impact. Gaines is also the executive director of Children's Funding Accelerator, the advocacy arm of Children's Funding Project. Since 2018, Gaines has guided Children's Funding Project through over 40 projects with national networks, state and local governments, advocates, and youth leaders. A native of St. Louis, she attended the University of Wisconsin-Madison and currently resides in Washington, D.C. Email: elizabeth@childrensfundingproject.org

Melissa Merrick, Ph.D., is president and CEO of Prevent Child Abuse America, the nation's oldest and largest nonprofit organization dedicated to the primary prevention of child abuse and neglect. She has more than 20 years of clinical, research and leadership experience related to the etiology, course and prevention of child abuse and neglect. Previously, Merrick was a senior epidemiologist at the National Center for Injury Prevention and Control at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Merrick successfully leverages her significant clinical and research experiences to communicate and disseminate the critical public health importance of preventing early adversity to key stakeholders with diverse priorities, backgrounds, and knowledge, including legislators, business and civic leaders, and members of the academic and medical communities. Merrick received her BA in psychology, magna cum laude, from the University of Pennsylvania, and her master's and doctoral degrees in clinical psychology from the San Diego State University/University of California, San Diego, joint doctoral program in clinical psychology, where she served as a program coordinator for the San Diego site of the Longitudinal Studies on Child Abuse and Neglect consortium. Email: mmerrick@preventchildabuse.org



Tim Storey is the chief executive officer of the National Conference of State Legislatures (NCSL) with offices in Denver and Washington, D.C. Storey has spent the past 30 years working for and studying legislatures--specializing in the areas of elections, redistricting, legislative organization and leadership. During his tenure at NCSL, he has participated in, and led, more than two dozen, in-depth studies of legislative operations. And, he has consulted with, and conducted training for parliaments around the world. Storey staffed NCSL's Redistricting and Elections Committee for 20 years authoring numerous articles and papers on the topics of redistricting and elections. For two decades, he led NCSL's StateVote effort to collect and analyze state election results. He led NCSL's State Services Division prior to being hired as NCSL's third executive director in June 2019. Born and raised in western North Carolina, Tim attended Mars Hill College and received his MA from the University of Colorado.

Email: tim.storey@ncsl.org

Taylor Vitello is the Director of Proximate Policy at Think of Us, a research and design lab for child welfare, focused on transforming the system so that people with lived experience are at the center and is a founding team member of the organization's Center for Lived Experience. Previously, she served as the Senior Director of Policy for the Congressional Coalition on Adoption Institute (CCAI) in which she led CCAI's government relations, Congressional Adoption Caucus work, education, and advocacy work in domestic and international child welfare policy. Taylor has played an instrumental role in leading several child welfare laws to passage including the Adoption Tax Credit in the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017. Taylor received her undergraduate degree in political science from the Catholic University of America and a Master's degree in Public Management from Johns Hopkins University. In her personal capacity, Taylor serves as a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA). Taylor currently resides in New Jersey with her husband and their three dogs. Email: taylor@thinkof-us.org

Dr. Kathryn Wells serves as the section head for child abuse and associate professor of Pediatrics at the University of Colorado School of Medicine. The center is located on the CU Anschutz Medical Campus, and is supported by the CU School of Medicine and the Kempe Foundation. It also works in partnership with Children's Hospital Colorado to run the Kempe Child Protection Team, a multidisciplinary team made up of professionals from medicine, pediatrics, mental health and hospital social work to evaluate, diagnose and treat suspected victims of child abuse and neglect. Prior to taking this position, Wells was the medical director of the Denver Health Clinic at the Family Crisis Center and an attending physician at Denver Health and with the Kempe Child Protection Team at Children's Hospital Colorado. She also did clinical research at the Kempe Center and served as an Outreach Liaison with ECHO Colorado. Wells is originally from Montana where she went to college at Carroll College in Helena. She then earned her medical degree from Creighton University in Omaha, Neb., where she also completed a pediatric residency at Creighton/University of NE combined program. She practiced general pediatrics for five years in Caldwell, Idaho, before coming to Colorado in 2001. Email: kathi.wells@childrenscolorado.org