



Leadership North Carolina Class 33
Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina Health and Human Services Session
March 10-12, 2026

Speaker Directory

Ms. Kate Burgess

District Programming and Ecosystem Development Manager
Advocate Health
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Kate Burgess joined Atrium Health, now a part of Advocate Health, in 2023 and serves as District Programming and Ecosystem Development Manager at the Pearl, Charlotte's medical innovation district. Prior to joining Atrium Health, Kate was a graduate student working in quality data coordination and patient access.

Kate holds a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a Bachelor of Arts in Medical Anthropology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a Master of Health Administration from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She has experience in event management and clinical data analysis, and she has received certificates in Enterprise Design Thinking and Lean Six Sigma. She was also a four-year varsity athlete at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, serving as Captain and Community Service Representative for the Women's Rowing team.

Dr. Richard Cox, Jr.

Director of Districts Education and Innovation Partnerships
The Pearl/Atrium Health
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Dr. Richard Cox, Jr., PhD, MEd, MA, serves as Director of Districts Education & Innovation Partnerships at The Pearl Innovation District in Charlotte, where he leads The Pearl's K-12 STEM learning lab and pathway strategy connecting schools, industry, and higher education. His work focuses on expanding equitable access to hands-on learning in health sciences, biomedical engineering, medtech, AI in

healthcare, and sustainability, helping young people build the skills, mindsets, and career awareness to thrive in the future of health and innovation.

Richard partners across Advocate Health/Atrium Health, Wake Forest University School of Medicine, and regional school systems to design immersive, industry-informed experiences that translate real challenges into powerful student learning. He is especially committed to empowering educators as co-designers, building programs that are rigorous, culturally responsive, and grounded in the lived realities of students and communities.

With a PhD in Education and Social Change, Richard's scholarship and practice sit at the intersection of design, imagination, and STEAM learning. He is also a co-author of *Sparkling Innovation in Children Through STEM Exploration*, and he brings a storyteller's lens to how institutions can cultivate curiosity, belonging, and "what if" thinking at scale—so more young people can see themselves in the innovation economy and shape it for the better.

Ms. Amaya Daniel

Senior Business Analyst

The Pearl

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Amaya Daniel is a Senior Business Analyst (SE) within Administration at The Pearl, part of Advocate Health. She brings a strong background in health administration and enterprise operations, supported by a Bachelor of Science in Health Science with a concentration in Policy and Administration from Hampton University and a Master's degree in Health Administration from Virginia Commonwealth University.

Prior to joining The Pearl operations team, Amaya served as an Administrative Fellow at Atrium Health Navicent in Macon, GA, where she contributed to enterprise initiatives spanning innovation, patient experience, and virtual services billing. These experiences strengthened her ability to navigate complex health system environments and support cross-functional teams through data-driven insights.

In her current role, Amaya supports enterprise and operational initiatives through data analysis, business insight, and cross-functional collaboration. She works closely with clinical, strategy, community programming, and project activities that advance organizational effectiveness across Advocate Health. Her work emphasizes clear analysis, thoughtful coordination, and aligning data with decision-making to support the organization's broader mission.

The Honorable Devdutta Sangvai

Secretary
North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services
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Dr. Devdutta “Dev” Sangvai was sworn in as the new Secretary for the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services on Sunday, Jan. 12, 2025. Gov. Josh Stein selected Dr. Sangvai to lead the department as the state’s 19th Secretary for Health and Human Services.

Secretary Sangvai is a family medicine physician and a professor at Duke University. He is also a member of the North Carolina Medical Board. Prior to his role with NCDHHS, he served as President of Duke Regional Hospital and President of the North Carolina Medical Society. His work has focused on improving access, developing the healthcare workforce, and making care more efficient. Dr. Sangvai is the first Indian American cabinet member to serve under a North Carolina governor.

Ms. Michelle Ries

LNC Class 26

President and CEO
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Michelle G. Ries, MPH, is President & CEO of the North Carolina Institute of Medicine. Ries has been on the NCIOM team for over a decade, serving the Institute and the state across many roles within the organization, most recently as Associate Director. During her tenure with NCIOM, Ries has provided strategic leadership to the Institute in its work providing advisory support to state stakeholders across many integral health policy issues. Ries led much of NCIOM’s work over the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, including providing facilitation and drafting support for the North Carolina Scarce Resource Allocation Protocol (in partnership with the North Carolina Healthcare Association and the North Carolina Medical Society) and the Vaccine Advisory Committee (in partnership with the NC Department of Health and Human Services); launching statewide task forces on pandemic preparedness and local public health; and providing analysis of state- and federal-level COVID policy response and subsequent impact on North Carolinians.

In her tenure at the NCIOM, Ries has directed task forces and served as primary author on task force reports including Improving Serious Illness Care in North Carolina, the Task Force on Health Care Analytics, tasked with developing a concise set of metrics to improve population health and quality of care under Medicaid reform; Dementia-Capable North Carolina, the state plan for addressing the needs of people with dementia and their caregivers; and the Task Force on Essentials for Childhood, a statewide collective plan to prevent child maltreatment and ensure child and family well-being. Ries also spearheaded NCIOM’s pioneering Legislative Health Policy Fellows program, which provides state lawmakers and their staff with the data and resources needed to make effective decisions about the health of our state. Prior to her work at NCIOM, Ries worked as senior program associate in the

International Health Policy and Practice Innovations program at the Commonwealth Fund, a nonprofit foundation dedicated to achieving a high-performing health care system. Previously, Ries also completed the Health Research Training Program at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Office of Health Media and Marketing, where she managed citywide health media campaigns on various health issues, including cardiovascular disease, childhood obesity, and adolescent mental health. Ries received her MPH from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health and a B.A. with honors in dramatic art and anthropology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where she graduated Phi Beta Kappa. She is a 2019 graduate of Leadership North Carolina and is currently enrolled in the executive doctoral program at the University of North Carolina Gillings School of Global Public Health.

Ms. LaRita Barber

LNC Class 31

Chief Advancement Officer
Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont
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LaRita Barber has been involved in community endeavors in the Charlotte area since 1987. In her current role as Chief Advancement Officer, she is responsible for identifying and cultivating relationships and strategies that establish and sustain Goodwill's relevance and brand in the community and advance the organization's mission.

A native Charlottean, LaRita has served on a number of community boards, including the Arts & Science Council, Central Piedmont Community College Education Foundation, and Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont. She is currently active on the Johnson C. Smith University Board of Visitors, Women Executives, and Wells Fargo Champions for Education Board of Directors. She is also a member of the Charlotte Chapter of the National Association for Fundraising Professionals.

Ms. Hannah Beavers

Executive Director
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Hannah Beavers has spent over 15 years working in the social impact and holistic community development space as nonprofit founder, board member, and consultant. Today, she inspires and spearheads change as the Executive Director of Freedom Communities.

Hannah lived in six different countries as a child and speaks four languages. This multicultural background ingrained her fierce advocacy for social justice and gave her the ability to understand and solve problems holistically. She started her career with General Electric's Energy business in various finance roles and leading multi-billion dollar business integrations. Prior to joining Freedom

Communities, she led the international non-profit, Mama Hope, as Chief Operations Officer, supporting 22 communities worldwide to build sustainable social businesses and communities.

Ms. Danielle Young

Family Case Manager and Program Operations Coordinator
Freedom Communities
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Freedom Communities takes a family-centered approach to community transformation. As our Family Case Manager and Program Operations Coordinator, Danny's role is vital to this work.

In the neighborhoods surrounding the Freedom Drive corridor, only 1 in 5 children moves into 4th grade reading proficiently. To transform that statistic and put more children on a path to college and career readiness, Danny will work with the children of the moms involved in our Moms Moving Forward program, providing them with valuable educational support and resources.

Danny has been part of the Charlotte community since 2003 and spent 16 years in early childhood education, working to close the educational gap while building strong relationships with families and caregivers. Her most recent position was with the YMCA of Greater Charlotte, where she worked as preschool coordinator. While in that role, she began contributing her time and efforts to Freedom Communities, helping the team run its remote learning site during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. In that time, we saw children's grades increase 45 percentage points — in part because of her commitment to looking beyond education and considering the whole child. That focus continues to define her work with us each and every day.

Ms. Bonnie Tiernan

Director of Community Engagement
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Bonnie Tiernan is the Director of Community Engagement at Crisis Assistance Ministry. She oversees communications, community relations, and advocacy work for the agency. After graduating from UNC Charlotte with degrees in Sociology and Spanish, Bonnie started her career at Crisis Assistance as an emergency financial assistance caseworker. In the 20 years since then, she has held a number of roles at the agency.

A primary focus in Bonnie's work now is raising awareness of and empathy for the complex issues surrounding poverty. Her goal is for each of us to recognize that poverty is not an individual failing but a systemic one in which we all play a part.

Bonnie lives in Charlotte with her husband, who is originally from Costa Rica, and their two bilingual cats.

Ms. Keisha Lewis

Occupational Therapist/Program Manager
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Keisha Lewis is a dedicated healthcare professional and community advocate with over 23 years of experience as an Occupational Therapist and more than 15 years as a Certified Diabetes Care and Education Specialist. She serves as the Program Manager and Occupational Therapist with For The Struggle, Inc., a Charlotte-based nonprofit whose mission is to zealously fight systemic issues of economic and social injustice by responding to issues identified by impacted communities, advocating with and on behalf of such communities.

Through her work with For The Struggle's Elder Response Initiative, Keisha supports the Older Adult Home Modification Program, helping low-income seniors age safely in place. Through home safety assessments and functional living strategies, the program makes homes safer, more comfortable, and easier to navigate — reducing fall risk, promoting independence, and improving quality of life.

Keisha is passionate about meeting people where they are, bringing practical education, prevention strategies, and wellness resources directly into communities. Her work focuses on person-centered approaches that empower individuals to remain safe, confident, and independent in their homes.

In addition to her nonprofit role, Keisha is the founder of a mobile wellness and education practice that blends occupational therapy and diabetes education. She is also the author of *Type 2 Diabetes for Beginners: Understanding the Basics*, a reader-friendly guide designed to make diabetes education practical and approachable.

A graduate of Winston-Salem State University and holder of a Master's degree in Health Promotion and Wellness Management from Marymount University, Keisha is known for her engaging and down-to-earth speaking style. She is a passionate educator whose work is rooted in access, equity, and meeting people where they are.

Ms. Teresa Cochran

Director of Nursing
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Teresa Cochran is an accomplished healthcare leader serving as Director of Nursing Services, providing strategic and operational oversight for nursing teams with a strong emphasis on quality, safety, and

patient-centered care. She is recognized for building collaborative, high-performing teams and advancing professional nursing practice in alignment with organizational goals.

Teresa holds a Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from Columbia Southern University. She is board certified as a Nurse Executive (NE-BC), reflecting her expertise in nursing leadership, healthcare operations, and evidence-based management. Her educational background uniquely positions her to bridge clinical excellence with sound business and operational decision-making.

Under Teresa's leadership, Anson achieved designation as a Pathway to Excellence® organization, demonstrating a sustained commitment to nursing excellence, shared governance, and a healthy work environment. Teresa's leadership philosophy centers on service, integrity, and advocacy for both patients and caregivers, and she continues to positively impact healthcare delivery through mentorship, accountability, and continuous improvement.

Ms. Brittany Kearney

Director of Community Outreach and Enrollment

Senior TLC

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Brittany Kearney is a committed advocate for older adults, driven by a deep passion for improving quality of life across the aging continuum. With nearly 15 years of experience in aging services, she brings a blend of academic insight, operational leadership, and community-centered innovation to her work in long-term care.

Brittany holds an MBA with a concentration in Health Care Management from Liberty University and an MA in Gerontology from UNC Charlotte, where she now serves as an adjunct lecturer in the Gerontology Department. She teaches courses including Psychology of Aging, Administration of Aging Programs, and Aging and the Criminal Justice System, inspiring future aging-services professionals and strengthening the workforce needed to support North Carolina's rapidly growing older adult population.

For the past seven years, Brittany has served as Director of Outreach and Enrollment at Senior TLC, a Program of All-Inclusive Care for the Elderly (PACE). In this role, she helps ensure that older adults can remain independent in their homes while receiving comprehensive medical care, social engagement, transportation, and home-based support—empowering participants to maintain dignity, choice, and stability.

Brittany is a Certified Dementia Practitioner through the National Council of Certified Dementia Practitioners and a Dementia Friends Champion with Dementia Friendly Charlotte Mecklenburg. Nationally, she serves on the Village to Village Network Board of Directors, supporting scalable, community-driven models that help adults 55+ age safely and meaningfully in place.

Locally, Brittany is the founder and lead convener of The FOCUS Group (Fellowship of Communities Uniting Seniors) of Greater Mecklenburg County—an influential network of more than 1,500 aging-

services professionals dedicated to collaboration, education, and advancing high-quality care for older adults across the region.

Mr. Sanjay Gupta

Executive Vice President and Chief Transformation Officer

Novant Health

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As executive vice president and chief transformation officer at Novant Health, Sanjay Gupta brings the organization's value proposition of delivering a remarkable patient experience, improved outcomes and affordability to the forefront of patient care. He leads strategic operations for integrated care solutions—including digital health, imaging, laboratory and rehabilitation services—developing patient focused initiatives and cultivating innovative partnerships that translate this value into practice.

Gupta oversees the Novant Health Institute for AI & Innovation, digital transformation, marketing and communications, and internal consulting, driving growth, cost reduction and process optimization. He also leads MedVenta Health Solutions, a provider led pharmacy company dedicated to partnering with patients and care teams to advance accessible, value based care.

He most recently served as chief marketing officer and chief digital officer for Guaranteed Rate, where he focused on the company's consumer direct business, expanded its portfolio of financial products and strengthened the company's brand. He has held executive leadership roles at TIAA, Allstate, Ally Financial and Bank of America.

Gupta currently serves on the board of directors for Steelcase. He earned an MBA from the University of Texas at Austin and a bachelor's degree in electronics engineering from the University of Mumbai.

Dr. Luke Smith

Executive Director

El Futuro

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Luke Smith, M.D. is the executive director of El Futuro, a nonprofit behavioral health agency offering outpatient services to the Latino population in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. He is a practicing Spanish-bilingual psychiatrist who is boarded in child/adolescent and general psychiatry. In 2004, he led the creation of El Futuro in order to address the unmet need of bringing accessible behavioral health services to the growing Latino community in North Carolina. With steady growth and innovative funding approaches, El Futuro now serves approximately 1,700 individuals from 20 counties each year. He leads a staff of 44 people, with a comprehensive suite of licensed behavioral health providers trained in culturally-responsive, trauma-informed, and healing-engaged treatment approaches targeted to the

Latino immigrant community. His work with El Futuro has gained attention around the state and been featured nationally in the New York Times and USA Today.

Additionally, Dr. Smith initiated the NC Latino Mental Health Provider Network (La Mesita) in 2017 to facilitate sharing culturally-responsive treatment practices and improving Latino mental health across North Carolina. This Network now has over 600 participating members, hosts monthly webinars, targeted Learning Cohorts, is an ECHO tele-case consultation replication partner site, and is in the process of developing a micro-credential in Culturally-Responsive Mental Health Treatment. Under Dr. Smith's watch, El Futuro has maintained a careful focus on patient engagement and participated in successful multi-year community-based projects funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) and Patient Centered Outcomes Research Institute (PCORI).

Rev. Richard Joyner

Founder, Conetoe Family Life Center
Pastor, Conetoe Chapel Missionary Baptist Church
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Reverend Richard Joyner was born the son of a sharecropper in Bethel, NC. After witnessing the racism and the economic disenfranchisement that his family and members of his community had to endure, Reverend Joyner fought to leave the farm as soon as possible. Although he had a successful career serving in the US Army and the National Guard, Reverend Joyner was called back to the same area that his parents farmed to minister to the community through faith and food.

Over the last two decades, Reverend Joyner has spent his lengthy career dedicated to encouraging interfaith dialogue, spiritual inclusivity, and greater emotional, social, and physical human development. A certified Clinical Pastoral Counselor, he currently serves as the Pastor of Conetoe Missionary Baptist Church and the Founder of the Conetoe Family Life Center, and he recently retired as the Director of Pastoral Care at Nash Health Care Systems.

In every role, Reverend Joyner is passionately committed to addressing chronic public health issues by advocating for healthy food, lifestyles, and relationships among at-risk and low-income populations. His work to establish the Conetoe Family Life Center, a nonprofit effort that encourages gardening, healthy eating habits, stress management, and better sleep for populations suffering from chronic ailments and malnutrition, has garnered attention and acclaim from national and regional media outlets including CNN, the Raleigh News and Observer, Our State magazine, the Rocky Mount Telegram, and others.

Class 33 Health and Human Services Session Planning Committee

The following members of LNC Class 32 make up the planning committee for the Class 33 Blue Cross Blue Shield Health and Human Services session.

Diana Baker Forsyth

Associate Director of MFP
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Diana Baker was raised in Winston-Salem, NC. Diana is the proud mother of two, “GlamMa” to an honorary grand boy, and “Auntie” to many. Diana cherishes family and loves to host, especially during the holidays. Christmas and birthdays are Diana’s favorite! Diana always looks forward to hosting her annual Christmas Party which always includes a community charity initiative! In her free time Diana loves shopping, cooking, and traveling. Her most fulfilling trip has been to Tanzania, where she spent time with teenagers at a secondary girl’s school in Dar es Salaam. These girls live with physical and mental challenges. Diana is afraid of ALL animals; however, she survived 12 years of making home visits for work, rode a camel in Egypt, and loves horseback riding.

Diana’s passion for the elderly influenced her career choice. She obtained an undergraduate degree from Winston-Salem State University and graduate degree from UNC at Chapel Hill, both in social work. Diana considers herself a RAM-TAR. She began her career and held multiple roles over 12 years at Senior Services Inc., a nonprofit serving Forsyth County, until joining Medicaid in March 2023. She finds state government to be a bit challenging but embraces it. Diana is passionate about contributing to systems change and quality of life for vulnerable populations within North Carolina and abroad.

Caroline Collier Durham

Associate Director of Continuing Professional Development
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Caroline Collier is the Associate Director of Continuing Professional Development at North Carolina Area Health Education Centers (NC AHEC), where she is dedicated to enhancing healthcare workforce education and support across North Carolina. Her career has been driven by a passion for improving rural health outcomes through innovative programming and community engagement initiatives. Her professional journey has been deeply rooted in addressing the unique challenges faced by rural communities, striving to bridge gaps in healthcare access and quality. Caroline received her bachelor’s degree in psychology at UNC-CH and her master’s degree in public health at ECU, where she was recently awarded the 40 Under Forty Leadership Award.

Outside of work, Caroline finds joy in playing volleyball, which fuels her competitive spirit, and reading. Caroline values community service and is Secretary of the Board of Directors of Boomerang Youth, an alternative to suspension program, as well as the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors of Horizons of Pitt County, a summer enrichment program for youth at risk of summer learning loss. Caroline is a Tar Heel born and bred, and she enjoys spending time cheering on the Heels. She grew up in Greenville and now resides in Durham with her adorable cat Winslow.

Waqiah Ellis *Durham*

Vice President, Nursing
WakeMed Health and Hospitals
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Dr. Waqiah Ellis is a registered nurse and currently serves as the Vice President for Nursing at WakeMed Health and Hospitals in Raleigh, NC. Prior to her current position, she was the Chief Nursing Officer of Cone Health's COVID hospital and the Executive Director of Heart & Vascular Nursing Services. Her extensive experience in healthcare also includes roles as a clinical nurse, Cardiovascular Clinical Nurse Specialist, and Manager of Professional Development.

She holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Nursing from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, a Master of Science in Nursing from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and a PhD in Leadership Studies from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University. She is dedicated to improving the health of her community through education, advocacy, and advancing science and evidence-based practices for healthcare providers.

Throughout her career, she has published in peer-reviewed journals and presented at local and regional conferences. Her professional accolades include being named one of North Carolina's Great 100 Nurses, Triad Business Journal's Top 40 Under 40, and Triad Business Journal's Outstanding Women in Business. She is also credentialed as a Certified Nurse Executive and a Board-Certified Executive Coach. Additionally, she serves on the board of the North Carolina Future of Nursing Action Coalition and was recently selected as President-Elect for the North Carolina Organization for Nurse Leaders. She is committed to fostering a healthier, more equitable future through her leadership and unwavering dedication to the nursing profession and the health of communities.

Shirnetta Harrell, Co-Chair *Johnston*

Founder and Executive Director
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Shirnetta Harrell is a proud native of one of the smallest towns in North Carolina, Nashville, NC. She discovered her love for the city of Raleigh after graduating from Shaw University. She is a highly experienced social worker turned social entrepreneur who is deeply passionate about all things related to women's health and the social welfare of underserved communities. She is the Founder and Executive Director of The No Woman, No Girl Initiative, which is a local nonprofit located in Raleigh that provides access to hygiene products to thousands of women and girls that are experiencing crises or homelessness. She is a wife, a mom of 2 energetic boys, and a lover of all things related to wellness.

Kerry Grace Heckle *Wake*

Executive Director, Brand Strategy and Engagement
UNC Health
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Kerry Grace Heckle is the executive director of brand strategy and engagement for UNC Health. A collaborative leader with more than 20 years of communications, marketing, and public relations experience, she is passionate about reputation management, community, and connection.

Kerry is committed to communicating with purpose, shaping organizational culture, and building an inclusive workplace. Her most recent focus has been on internal and external engagement, instituting volunteer initiatives, planning events, and leveraging non-profit and sports partnerships to elevate UNC Health's brand awareness. She represents UNC Health in communities and at events across the Triangle.

Also passionate about social determinants of health, Kerry has served as the liaison to Wake County's Live Well Wake initiative focused on community health needs and well-being for more than 15 years. She is highly skilled in cultivating relationships, creative storytelling, forging successful teams and attaining positive results . . . while having some fun along the way!

Kerry received her bachelor's degree in communication with a concentration in public relations and minor in journalism and holds a Master of Science in organizational communication from North Carolina State University.

When not working, it is highly likely she is shuttling around one of her two teenagers or watching a sporting event – preferably a Carolina Hurricanes hockey game or an NC State Wolfpack football game - with her husband Bryan, a Leadership NC graduate.

Zac Long, Co-Chair *Wake*

CEO and General Counsel, Well Care Health
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Zac Long is husband to Jessica and dad to son Grady (5) and daughter Harper (5). He and his family are enjoying this incredible season of family life -- learning new sports, following Tar Heels sports, traveling to new places, and vacationing in NC's beaches and mountains (especially the Blowing Rock/Valle Crucis area).

Zac's friends and family would describe him as curious about a range of topics (e.g., sports, business, leadership, politics, investing), and someone who seeks out and appreciates differing opinions. He gravitates towards responsibility and leadership roles. Zac is passionate about positioning his family's business as a mission-driven and high-performance organization, as well as serving his community.

Zac grew up in Southeastern NC and developed an appreciation for rural NC. After high school in Wilmington, he completed college at Davidson College and graduate programs at UNC-Chapel Hill (JD, Master's in Healthcare Administration). After passing the NC Bar Exam, he spent ~5 years in Atlanta,, GA with career stops in healthcare consulting and dental practice management. In 2016, he returned home to NC and rejoined the family business (Well Care Health) and began building a family office to support his family's business interests. Currently, he serves as CEO and General Counsel for Well Care Health and President of Long Family Ventures.

Hetal Patel *Guilford*

Program Director

MDC

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Hetal Patel is currently a Partnership Manager on the Rural Prosperity and Investment Team at MDC, where she is principal for three counties in the southeast region of the state: Bladen, Columbus, and Robeson counties. In her role, she supports rural community leaders who are working on health equity issues with facilitation, consultation, conflict mediation, and leadership development. Hetal's passion for community-based work, specifically in rural communities, comes from her experience growing up in Yadkin County, a small rural county in North Carolina. Additionally, Hetal is particularly interested in bringing equity into spaces, food insecurity, community development, philanthropy, and amplifying the voices of marginalized communities.

Prior to her position with MDC, Hetal worked in Rockingham County where she started her career off as a nutrition educator. During her time in this role, Hetal saw many systemic barriers that prevented individuals from accessing healthy foods, which prompted her to pivot her career to focus on macro level issues, helping to break down these barriers. She shifted her career by serving in an Americorps VISTA role where she focused on systemic poverty in Rockingham County. After completing her time as an Americorps VISTA, Hetal served as the Executive Director of the Boys and Girls Club of Eden.

Outside of work, Hetal loves to travel and explore different cultures, experiment in the kitchen, and spend time with her family. She also enjoys listening to stories of others and believes that relationships and connections with others can be very transformative.

Chris Rivera *Mecklenburg*

EMD Division Director, Department of Community Resources

Mecklenburg County

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Chris Rivera serves as the Economic Mobility Division Director for Mecklenburg County's Department of Community Resources. In this role, he leads workforce development and upward mobility strategies that align talent, training, and supportive services to expand economic opportunity for residents across the county.

With more than 15 years of experience in workforce development, Chris has built a career centered on aligning education with labor market demand and advancing equitable access to opportunity. Prior to joining Mecklenburg County, he served as Vice President of Business & Workforce Solutions at South Piedmont Community College, where he led industry-aligned training initiatives, expanded apprenticeship partnerships, increased enrollment and completion outcomes, and strengthened cross-sector collaborations with employers, nonprofits, and public agencies. Chris is widely recognized for his systems-thinking approach, data-informed leadership, and ability to convene diverse stakeholders around shared goals. His work focuses on building integrated talent pipelines, removing structural barriers to employment, and designing workforce strategies that drive long-term economic mobility for historically underserved communities.

A proud graduate of Leadership North Carolina and current Program Chair, Chris remains deeply committed to cultivating cross-sector leadership and advancing policies and partnerships that strengthen North Carolina's economic future. He is passionate about ensuring that economic mobility is not aspirational, but attainable, measurable, and sustainable for all residents.

Alicia Stokes *Durham*

Vice President and Head of Core Insurance Group Strategy & Performance Execution
Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina
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Alicia Stokes is an accomplished healthcare executive with over 15 years of experience driving organizational performance, transformation, and innovation in the healthcare industry. With a deep expertise in strategic planning, business development, and performance management, Alicia excels in fostering sustainable growth and delivering measurable value in highly competitive environments.

Alicia currently serves as Vice President and Head of Core Insurance Group Strategy & Performance Execution at Blue Cross Blue Shield of North Carolina (Blue Cross NC). In this role, she is responsible for overseeing full P&L strategy across all lines of business, impacting over 4 million members.

Previously, Alicia served as Vice President of Government Markets Strategy, Planning, & Performance at Blue Cross NC, where she managed long-term strategy, portfolio delivery, and performance management across Medicare, Medicaid, and Federal Employee Programs. Under her leadership, membership and revenue achieved double-digit growth, largely driven by key initiatives such as a Medicare Advantage "age-in" strategy, more focused sales and distribution strategies, and a Federal Employee product implementation specifically designed for United States Postal Workers.

Alicia's career is marked by her ability to design and implement transformative strategies. During her tenure as Director of Innovation & Insights, she spearheaded initiatives that enhanced Blue Cross NC's market intelligence capabilities, securing millions in retained revenue. Her earlier roles at the organization involved advancing value-based care partnerships and leading innovative payer-provider collaborations.

Alicia holds a Master of Health Administration and a Bachelor of Exercise and Sport Science from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Recognized for her leadership and impact, she has received several awards, including the Blue Cross NC CEO Award and the Jacob G. Koomen Public Health Practice Award.

Known for her servant leadership approach, Alicia is passionate about mentoring teams, optimizing business performance, and fostering a culture of innovation to achieve aspirational goals.

April Thornton *Randolph*

Director of Communications
UnitedHealthcare
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April Thornton is the Director of Communications for the North Carolina Market for UnitedHealthcare's Community Plans. UnitedHealthcare proudly serves more than 8.1 million Medicaid members across the U.S. and is a division of UnitedHealth Group (NYSE: UNH), which is a diversified health and well-being company with a mission to help people live healthier lives and help make the health system work better for everyone.

April is an accomplished executive with more than 30 years of experience in a broad range of industry sectors: healthcare, non-profit, government, and media. She has demonstrated success in strategic planning, creative problem solving, go-to-market initiatives, operations enhancement, and fiscal accountability. April is adept at motivating and leading a board of directors, a multi-faceted staff, donors, and departments to achieve overall marketing, public relations, and fundraising objectives. She is a results-producing leader with positive outcomes in expanding charitable donations, market share, revenues, and favorable corporate image awareness. April is an active leader in her community and currently serves on the Board of Directors for Keaton's Place and the Randolph County Community Foundation. She has been recognized as Volunteer of the Year by the Asheboro/Randolph Chamber of Commerce and has been nominated to receive the Athena Leadership Award.

She holds a bachelor's degree in communication from Appalachian State University and she is a Certified Fundraising Executive (CFRE).

Scarlett Tyner Johnston

Director of Communications and Corporate Affairs

Pepsi Bottling Ventures

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Scarlett Tyner is the Director of Communications & Corporate Affairs at Pepsi Bottling Ventures (PBV), the nation's largest independent manufacturer, seller, and distributor of Pepsi-Cola products. She leads enterprise-wide communications, reputation strategy, and stakeholder engagement, guiding corporate messaging and executive visibility across PBV's multi-state footprint.

Prior to joining Pepsi Bottling Ventures, Scarlett served as Manager of Strategic Communications at Novo Nordisk in Clayton, North Carolina, where she led internal communications for a rapidly expanding pharmaceutical manufacturing site and directed the communications strategy for a landmark \$4.1 billion manufacturing expansion—the largest life-science investment in North Carolina history.

Scarlett's career began in military communities at Fort Bragg and Seymour Johnson Air Force Base, where she spent a decade leading national marketing programs for Corvias Military Living, an integrated construction, real estate development, and asset management company known for its public-private partnerships with the US military.

She holds an Executive Master of Science in Communications Management from Syracuse University and a Bachelor of Arts in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

A native of Eastern North Carolina, Scarlett has an unwavering love for vinegar-based barbecue and finds her greatest peace near the coast. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her husband, five-year-old son, and Boykin Spaniel at their home in Clayton.

Ralph Wilson Mecklenburg

Assistant Vice President - Endoscopy Service Line

Atrium Health

ralph.wilson@advocatehealth.org

Ralph Wilson Jr. is the Assistant Vice President - Endoscopy for the Greater Charlotte market, where he oversees strategic operations for five hospital outpatient endoscopy departments and five procedure centers. In this role, Ralph ensures compliance with Joint Commission and state/federal regulations; supports the design, development, and execution of business plans; and reviews key performance indicators to standardize quality, financial, and productivity metrics across the Southeast region. His leadership has been instrumental in achieving operational excellence for over 70,000 annual endoscopy procedures, generating over \$300 million in revenue.

Ralph holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in Management from Strayer University (2009) and a Bachelor of Arts in Computer Science with a Concentration in E-Commerce and a Minor in Mathematics from Winston-Salem State University (2004). He is certified as a Six Sigma Green Belt (2011), which underscores his commitment to quality improvement and operational efficiency. His professional journey includes key roles such as Administrative Director and Technical Analyst at Atrium Health, where he led numerous initiatives to enhance patient care and optimize resource utilization.

Among his professional accomplishments, Ralph graduated from Atrium Health's Elevate Leadership Academy in 2024 and currently serves as the Co-Chair of Atrium Health's Men's Diversity Leadership Network, a position he has held since 2023.

In addition to his professional achievements, Ralph has answered a higher calling. In 2021, he founded The Well House of Worship in Charlotte, NC. Affectionately known as The Well, this ministry aims to draw both the unchurched and weary believers, offering an environment of worship without limits to encounter Jesus Christ and foster deeper fellowship. Ralph's vision for The Well reflects his dedication to spiritual growth and community engagement.