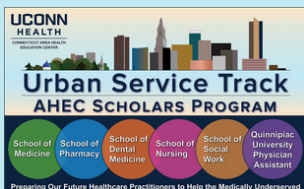


**Urban Service Track/CT AHEC Scholars Presents
6th Annual Interest Group Summit**

**FROM STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITY
TO EQUITABLE CARE:
HARM REDUCTION IN HEALTHCARE
AND COMMUNITY**

**April 11, 2026
9:00 AM-12:00 PM, EDT**



Welcome

Connecticut Area Health Education Center Leadership

Dear esteemed learners, alumni, partners, and faculty,

This year marks a powerful moment of transition—and opportunity. As our communities, systems, and professions evolve, so too must our curriculum: not only as a written document, but as a lived experience and a shared practice. In that spirit, the 2026 Summit theme invites us to pause, reflect, and act with intention.

At its core, this moment asks a simple but vital question: How do we widen the reach of empathy—and how do we show up fully for the commitments we are making to our professions and to one another? For some, those professional oaths are taken this year; for others, they are just ahead. All of them are shaped by what we practice now.

The 2026 Summit is built on the hard work and dedication of every interest group represented here. The more than 900 Urban Health/AHEC Scholars who came before Cohorts 18 and 19 laid a strong foundation of collaboration, mutual respect, and authentic community partnership. You are carrying that legacy forward—and expanding it.

Across rotations, service activities, clinical placements, and community engagement, you have explored harm reduction not just as a framework, but as a way of being: a noun, a verb, and an adjective. This experience has guided how you partner with communities, support one another, and learn alongside faculty, alumni, and community mentors. It has also required you to look honestly at systems that cause harm—and to respond with skill, humility, and compassion.

At the same time, we recognize the urgency of this moment. Public health is under attack in many places, and Connecticut is not immune. Threats to SNAP and Medicaid are not abstract policy debates—they represent real fear and real consequences for the individuals and families we serve. Your presence, your voices, and your advocacy matter now more than ever.

We look forward to your posters and presentations—not only to learn, but to be challenged, inspired, and renewed. We gather at this Summit seeking “one more hope”: a reminder that the Urban Service Track/AHEC Scholars Program is not only an educational experience, but a transformational one that prepares leaders for action.

To our guests, partners, and supporters: welcome. You are an essential part of our curriculum, our values, and our learning community. We are grateful to grow, learn, and serve alongside you.

This year also marks a milestone—our 20th Anniversary. For two decades, UST/AS has prepared students to serve with humility, courage, and integrity. As we look ahead, we do so with pragmatic optimism: expanding through the Rural Health Transformation Program, launching UConn’s first Rural Track, and welcoming new partners into this shared mission.

Thank you for the commitment you bring, the communities you honor, and the advocacy you carry forward. We are deeply grateful—and incredibly proud—to walk this path with you.

With gratitude and pride,



Rev. Cecil Tengtenga, MAR, STM
CT AHEC Associate Director



Petra Clark-Dufner, MA
CT AHEC Director
Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine
Founding Director, Urban Service Track

Welcome

Interest Group Summit Chairs

Welcome to the 2026 Urban Service Track/Connecticut Area Health Education Center 6th Annual Interest Group Summit. Today is a monumental moment for our scholars, representing the culmination of months of student-driven research, collaboration, and growth, now brought together on a national stage. We are Amanda Romero and Aliana Castro, and as the co-chairs of the Summit Advisory Committee, we are truly honored to showcase the work of our scholars who explored this year's theme, *Harm Reduction as a Noun, Verb, and Adjective*. This theme encouraged scholars to consider the far-reaching term of harm reduction not only as a concept, but as an action and guiding approach within the healthcare communities we serve.

Throughout the past academic year, each interest group- composed of interprofessional healthcare students, coaches, and alumni partners- developed initiatives and deliverables centered around harm reduction within our local communities. Spanning pediatrics, adolescent health, geriatrics, women's health, public health, behavioral health, and healthcare advocacy and policy, this summit highlights the diverse harm-reduction needs across populations and the strategies developed to address them. This work reflects the dedication and hard work of UST Scholars in Cohorts 18 and 19.

As Summit co-chairs and members of the Pediatrics and Healthcare Advocacy and Policy Interest Groups, we developed a deeper appreciation for the essential role that interest groups, and the scholars within them, play in shaping the summit experience. To support this year's theme, which is focused on harm reduction, we collaborated with both the Connecticut Opioid Settlement Advisory Committee and McCall Behavioral Health Network. The Connecticut Opioid Settlement Advisory Committee plays a critical role in directing settlement funds toward evidence-based initiatives, including housing support, harm reduction services, and overdose prevention efforts statewide. McCall Behavioral Health Network provides comprehensive treatment and recovery support, including counseling, medication-assisted treatment, education, and community-based services. Together, these organizations represent key resources that support harm reduction and the holistic health of the communities we serve.

This year, we are also proud to introduce a new feature of the annual summit: a panel of leaders who are driving positive change in harm reduction across Connecticut. From the Connecticut Opioid Settlement Fund, Sarah Messier-Smith LCSW, will share about her work implementing opioid abatement strategies across Connecticut. From the McCall Behavioral Health Network, Lauren Pristo, MPH, Kyle Fitzmaurice, and Michele Flowers, LMFT will speak to their work, ranging from increasing access to testing services, syringe service programs, and the Community and Law Enforcement for Addiction Recovery (CLEAR) program.

We hope this summit not only highlights the pressing challenges in harm reduction but also empowers you to take action and foster meaningful, positive change in our local communities.

Sincerely,



Amanda Romero
UConn School of Nursing
Summit Co-Chair

Amanda Romero & Aliana Castro
2026 UST Interest Group Summit Co-Chairs



Aliana Castro
Quinnipiac University
Physician Assistant Program
Summit Co-Chair

Agenda

Opening Remarks

9:00 am-9:05 am

Opening Keynote Panel

9:05 am-9:55 am

Kyle Fitzmaurice
Harm Reduction Coordinator
McCall Behavioral Health Network

Michele Flowers, LMFT
McCall Behavioral Health Network

Sarah Messier-Smith, LCSW, LACD
Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services

Lauren Pristo, MPH
Director of Community Engagement
McCall Behavioral Health Network

Poster Session Block 1

10:00 am-10:20 am

Poster Session Block 2

10:25 am-10:45 am

Break/Main Room Survey

10:45 am-11:00 am

Poster Session Block 3

11:00 am-11:20 am

Poster Session Block 4

11:25 am-11:45 am

Closing Remarks

11:50 am-12:00 pm

Keynote Panelists

Sarah Messier-Smith, LCSW



Sarah Messier-Smith is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Alcohol and Drug Counselor with nearly 20 years of professional experience in various levels of care in direct service and administrative roles. After working primarily in private non-profit organizations, Sarah transitioned to CT Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services in 2024, where she works as the Opioid Settlement Program Manager. In this new role, Sarah helps to identify opioid abatement strategies for implementation across in CT and is honored to be part of the process from idea conception through project data collection and evaluation. Sarah believes deeply in the importance of person-centered care and diverse resource availability to address individuals' holistic and differing wants and needs.

Michele Flowers, LMFT

Michele Flowers, LMFT, joined McCall Behavioral Health Network in June 2025 and serves as the Community and Law Enforcement for Addiction Recovery (CLEAR) Site Coordinator in Litchfield County. She brings 27 years of clinical and supervisory experience working with adults, children, families, and mental health support teams. Michele has developed strong skills in providing a holistic approach to mental health and substance use disorder (SUD) services, team building, program development, and fostering meaningful relationships with clients, families, community providers, and first responders.

Through her extensive clinical career, Michele has built a robust knowledge of various treatment modalities and experience serving diverse populations. She earned a Master's degree in Marriage and Family Therapy from Southern Connecticut State University and a bachelor's degree in Human Development and Family Relations from the University of Connecticut.



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Keynote Panelists

Kyle Fitzmaurice



Kyle Fitzmaurice is the Community Outreach and Partnership Coordinator at McCall Behavioral Health Network. Kyle leads initiatives focused on expanding access to evidence-based services, including the launch of a regional drug checking program, HIV and Hep C opt out testing, and continuing the growth of the syringe service program. Kyle is currently pursuing his masters in public health at Southern Connecticut State University. His work is grounded in the harm reduction philosophy that healthier communities begin with care not conditions.

Lauren Pristo, MPH

Lauren Pristo, MPH, is the Director of Community Engagement at McCall Behavioral Health Network. She serves as the Statewide Project Manager for the Community and Law Enforcement for Addiction Recovery (CLEAR) initiative and the Coordinator for the Litchfield County Opiate Task Force (LCOTF). During her time at McCall, Lauren led the implementation and expansion of the first regional harm reduction program and an overdose spike alert response. She has also spearheaded the creation of multidisciplinary, first-responder and behavioral health deflection teams in western Connecticut. Additionally, she developed a toolkit for building a trauma-informed community, coordinated a grassroots coalition addressing the root causes of addiction, and established a regional multi-agency outreach and recovery coaching network. These efforts have become nationally recognized models.



Lauren earned a Master of Public Health (MPH) degree in Epidemiology of Microbial Diseases from the Yale School of Public Health. For her thesis, she assessed the needs and barriers to care for people living with HIV, using epidemiological research methods to examine synergistic health and social conditions, including injection drug use. She earned her bachelor's degree in Biomedical Science with minors in Chemistry and Anthropology from Northern Arizona University where she co-authored immunology research on the infectious disease melioidosis at the Pathogen and Microbiome Institute.

Lauren has presented at multiple local, state, and national conferences on topics such as integrating harm reduction into treatment settings, police deflection pathways and partnering with harm reductionists, community partnerships and cross-sector addiction response efforts, the root causes of addiction, the impacts of trauma, rural behavioral health, and other subjects related to public and behavioral health surrounding the overdose crisis.



IG Presentations

Block 1

10:00am-10:20am

Behavioral Health Interest Group
Geriatric Interest Group
Healthcare Advocacy & Policy Interest Group
Pediatric Interest Group

Block 2

10:25am-10:45am

Adolescent Interest Group
Public Health Interest Group
Women's Health Interest Group

Block 3

11:00 am-11:20am

Pediatric Interest Group
Public Health Interest Group
Healthcare Advocacy & Policy Interest Group
Women's Health Interest Group



Block 4

11:25 am-11:45 am

Adolescent Interest Group
Behavioral Health Interest Group
Geriatric Interest Group



IG Presentations Poster Summaries

Adolescent Interest Group

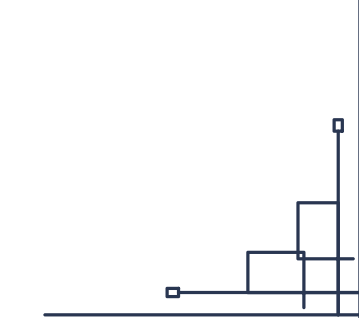
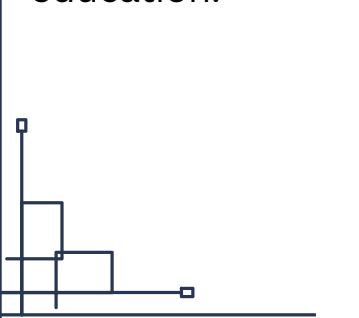
Blocks 2&4

The 2025–2026 Adolescent Interest Group is composed of students from multiple health disciplines who share an interest in promoting public health initiatives for teens and young adults through a harm-reduction lens. Monthly topics included institutional programs at UConn, peer support services, substance use counseling, and collaboration with community partners such as school resource officers. Members of the group participated in naloxone administration, crisis intervention, and overdose response training, and also developed a pocket guide for parents and caregivers on harm-reduction approaches to teen substance use.

Behavioral Health Interest Group

Blocks 1&4

The Behavioral Health Interest Group focused this year on advancing practical, community-centered approaches to suicide prevention through a harm-reduction lens. Our primary initiative was the development of a digital brochure designed to equip trainees and clinicians with accessible tools to recognize suicide risk, initiate supportive conversations, and connect individuals with appropriate resources. Throughout the year, we hosted monthly discussion-based meetings that emphasized skill-building and real-world application. Topics included harm-reduction principles, motivational interviewing techniques, formal QPR training led by Natalie Crino (**Health Education Center, AHEC Director**), and a session on addiction medicine **with Dr. Cara Zimmerman**. By incorporating structured member roles and reflective pre- and post-session surveys, our group fostered meaningful engagement and strengthened interdisciplinary collaboration in behavioral health advocacy and education.



IG Presentations

Geriatric Interest Group Blocks 1&4

The Geriatrics Interest Group developed an educational program for seniors with an emphasis on preventing financial abuse and fraud. We collaborated with local community partners, including Hartford's **South End Wellness Senior Center**, to deliver an interactive in-person presentation that equipped seniors with strategies to protect themselves from financial scams. In addition, we created a pocket guide that was distributed to local healthcare facilities to help clinical staff recognize conversational red flags that may indicate financial abuse in older adult patients.

Healthcare Advocacy & Policy Interest Group Blocks 1&3

The Healthcare Advocacy and Policy Interest Group worked collaboratively to create informative and actionable programming centered on harm reduction. Our events included a documentary screening and discussion with the film's producers, educational sessions on legislative advocacy, and fundraising efforts for the **CT Harm Reduction Alliance**. We raised over \$750 in support of harm-reduction and advocacy initiatives in Connecticut. Our group aimed to empower students to feel confident in their voices and their ability to engage in healthcare advocacy while meaningfully contributing to public health in the state.

Pediatric Interest Group Blocks 1&3

The Pediatrics Interest Group fostered a collaborative environment for interprofessional students to build a strong foundation in essential and effective harm-reduction practices for pediatric populations. This year's programming included discussions of current scholarly and media sources on harm reduction, presentations from health-professional guest speakers, the creation of age-appropriate and accessible health literature for children, and engagement with research on school attendance as a pediatric vital sign. Members also gained hands-on training through simulations focused on bleeding control and overdose prevention, helping prepare them to provide acute care in their future healthcare roles.



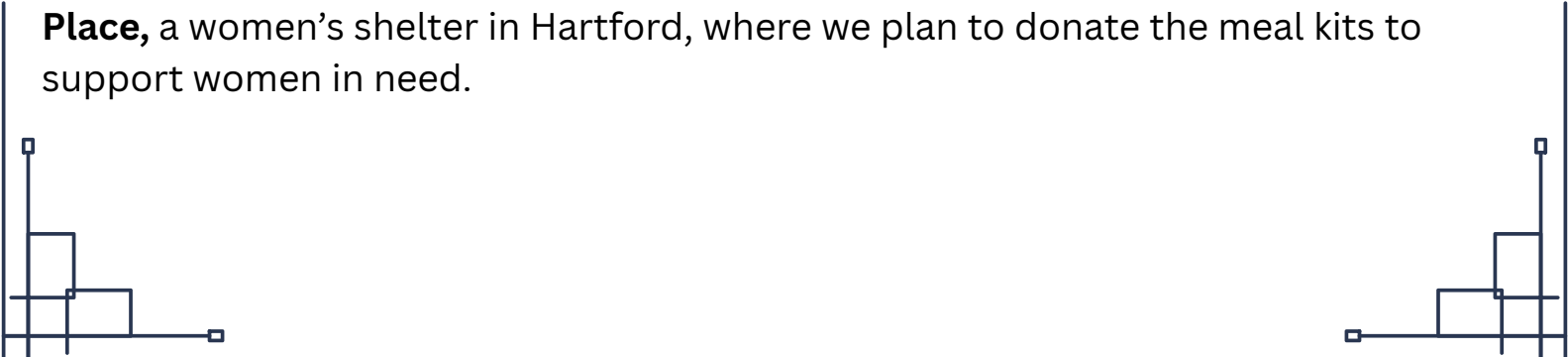
IG Presentations

Public Health Interest Group Blocks 2,3

The Public Health Interest Group implemented a student-led, community-centered initiative focused on harm reduction and improving food security and access to nutrition in the New Haven community. In partnership with the **Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen**, members volunteered at the **Olive Street Pantry**, supporting the weekly distribution of fresh produce and non-perishable food items to increase access to essential groceries. Through this initiative, students served over 100 individuals and helped distribute more than 1,000 food items, promoting greater food security and improved nutrition. The group continues to expand its impact through ongoing service efforts, including upcoming volunteer work at a local soup kitchen, reinforcing its commitment to harm reduction, public health, and community engagement.

Women's Health Interest Group Blocks 2&3

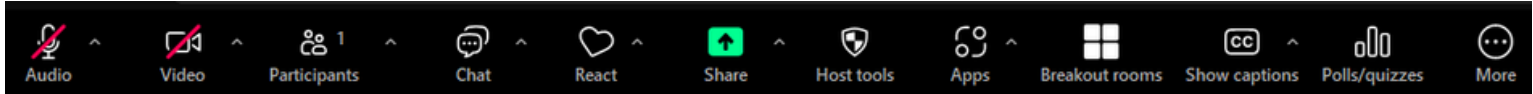
This year, the Women's Health Interest Group focused on expanding community partnerships and creating practical, service-oriented programming to support women's health. We received a \$350 grant to create meal kits, through which we developed four healthy, cost-friendly recipes designed to be accessible and easy to prepare. We also collaborated with the Healthcare Advocacy and Policy Interest Group to host a screening of *Silence on the Streets*, a documentary on harm-reduction strategies in Connecticut's opioid crisis, followed by a discussion with the filmmakers. In addition, we established a partnership with **My Sister's Place**, a women's shelter in Hartford, where we plan to donate the meal kits to support women in need.



Commonly Asked Questions

How do I turn on Closed Captions?

At the bottom of your Zoom screen there is a tool bar.
You may already have show captions on your bar.
If not, click More and you should have the option to add closed captions.

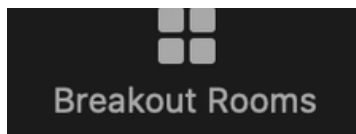


How do I select a breakout session?

Participants can "move" themselves to different breakout rooms. This requires using the Zoom application, not the web client, **having the most current Zoom update** and clicking on the icon at the bottom of the screen that says "breakout room." Most current version is 7.0

To leave the breakout room and return to the main session, maximize your screen, click the **blue button- leave room**

You can also pick your next breakout room by pressing Breakout Room , then click join which will be to the right.



Room 1	Join
Room 2	0
Room 3	0

How much time do I have to travel between Zoom rooms?

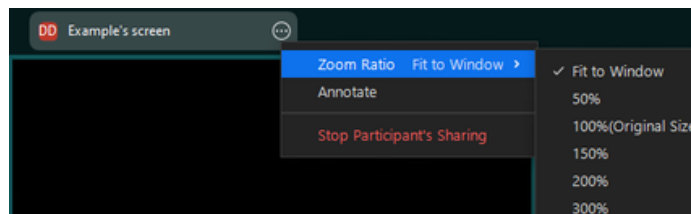
We have set aside 5 minutes between each presentation for attendees to move between the breakout rooms. Should you have any issues, please return to the main room and our technical support staff will help you.

How do I participate in a virtual platform?

Unlike an in-person conference, participants are encouraged to "ask" questions of presenters and share insights on topics through the use of the Zoom "chat" tool. A volunteer moderator has been assigned to each session and they will alert presenters to questions in the chat. We know that all participants will pose questions in a collegial and civil manner. We also encourage you to turn your camera on and remain in the presentation room, till it is time to travel to the next block.

Can I zoom-in on a poster to make it more readable?

Yes! At the top of your screen you should a bar with the user's name and three dots.
Click the dots, then hover over Zoom Ratio.



How do I enter the Watercooler raffle?

During the Watercooler/Break, enter the main room.

A poll will be live and you may participate.

Scan the QR code on the screen or click [here](#) to enter the raffle!

Where can the evaluation form be found after the Summit?

(Another raffle! Entry form is at the end of the evaluation.)

If you missed the evaluation in the chat, please visit this website by Saturday at 8 pm.

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/UST26Summit>

Summit Advisory Committee



Aliana Castro
Quinnipiac PA Program
Summit Co-Chair



Amanda Romero
School of Nursing
Summit Co-Chair



Kayla Rampassard
School of Nursing
Vice Chair: Logistics



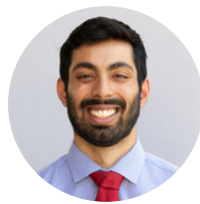
Sen Li
School of Medicine
Vice Chair: Marketing



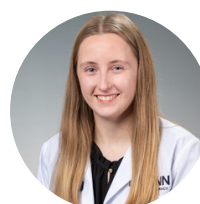
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Omar Afifi
School of Dental Medicine
Speech/Keynote Committee



Ammar Ali
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Logistics Committee



Sarah Caruso
School of Pharmacy
Marketing Committee



Zahkiyah Days
School of Social Work
Marketing Committee



Mikhalia Entsiwah
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Faith Kollie
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Speeches/Keynote
Committee



Kaila Lujambio Rios
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Fabio Saccomanno
School of Medicine
Logistics Committee



Anneliese Troidle
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Marketing Committee



Wendy Zhan
School of Dental Medicine
Speeches/Keynote Committee



Acknowledgments

Interest Group Leadership Teams

Adolescent

Team Co-leads: Michelle Chin MS-2 and Ryan Parker QU PA S-2
UST Alumni Partners: Stacy Lalor, LCSW, Jessica Weeks, MD

Behavioral Health

Team Co-leads: Maya Biblow, SON-Senior, Alyssa Harduby, MS-2
UST Alumni Partners: Roshni Patel, MD, Lisa Vallee, LCSW

Geriatric

Team Co-leads: Heather MacKinnon, DS-2, Alexander Taylor MS-2
UST Alumni Partners: Christian Gronbeck, MD, Zachary Yannes, PA-C

Healthcare Advocacy & Policy

Team Co-leads: Neal Krishna, MS-2, Simone Buck, MS-2
UST Alumni Partner: Gabriela Resto, PharmD, MPH

Pediatric

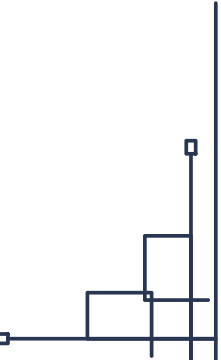
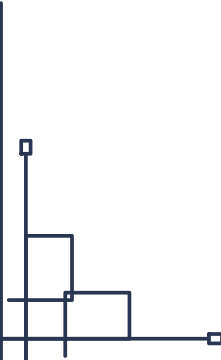
Team Co-leads: Jessica Lam, MS-2, Braydon Cretella, SON-Senior
UST Alumni Partners: Brianna Mangano, LCSW, Lauren Presti, DMD

Public Health

Team Co-leads: Kevin Chudy, MS-2, Maddie Villa, QU PA S-2
UST Alumni Partner: Chinenye Anyanwu, PharmD, MPH

Women's Health

Team Co-leads: Ellen Fuller, MS-2, Azucena Zecua Herrera, SON-Senior
Alumni Partners: Maggie Manning, PsyD



Acknowledgments

Special recognition to:

Individuals who contributed their knowledge and enthusiasm for the topics discussed in the interest group meetings and the patient populations served:

Adolescent



Audrey Jean-Guillaume, MA, UConn Substance Use Prevention Initiative
Woody Tinsley of East Hartford School Resource Division
UConn Health Simulation Center team
All the students and faculty who participated



Behavioral Health

Natalie Crino, MS, Director, Health Education Center
Cara Zimmerman, MD MBA, Primary Care Physician & Medical Director of Primary Care-Based Substance Use Disorder, Thundermist Health Center



Geriatric



Awilda Rodriguez-Murillo, Director of South End Wellness Senior Center in Hartford
Robert Roush, EdD MPH, Professor of Geriatrics, Dept. of Medicine, Baylor College of Medicine



Healthcare Advocacy and Policy

Gabriela Resto, PharmD MPH
The production team behind **Silence on the Streets**
CT-HRA
All the students and faculty in UST



Pediatric



Audrey Jean-Guillaume, MA, UConn Student Health and Wellness
Jim Behme, UConn Health Simulation Center
Smalley Elementary School
University of Vermont - Dept. of Pediatrics Vermont Child Health Improvement Program
Heidi Schumacher, MD FAAP
Lauren Presti, DMD, and **Brianna Mangano, LCSW**



Acknowledgments

continued:

Public Health



David Juros, Operations Manager of Food4Health Clinic at Hartford Hospital
Stefano Mancini & Evan Serio, Downtown Evening Soup Kitchen, Inc.

Women's Health

Leah Reyes, Community Housing Associates, Inc., My Sister's Place
Kimberly Mitchell, Director of Program Service, My Sister's Place
Ronya Lollar, Homelessness Prevention Services Manager, My Sister's Place
Catalina Quesada, MPH, RD, CT AHEC
Sharice Sellem-Hannah, MS, Silence on the Streets
Anna Gasinski, Certified Prevention Specialist @ CDC Foundation
Robert Lawlor, Law Enforcement Leader and Drug Intelligence Officer



Interest Group Consultants

for their support, direction, and dedication:



Shanthi Rao, MSW **Rubby Koomson, APRN** **Anthony Messina, PA-C** **Eileen McMurrer, M.ED**

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Cecil Tengtenga, Associate Director
Dariene DuBois-Plante, Administrative Officer
Ellen Ravens-Seger, Administrative Program Coordinator
Helen Wu, PhD, CT AHEC Evaluator
Julia Levin, MS IV
Joanna Moon, Consultant

**Finally, thank you to the members of the
2025-2026 UST/AS Interest Groups!**

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