

ADvancing States Next Gen HCBS Leaders: 2025



Ashley Baker
Independent Living Quality Specialist
Wisconsin Department of Health Services

Ashley Baker is the Independent Living Quality Specialist within the Wisconsin Department of Health Services (DHS) in the Office for the Promotion of Independent Living (OPIL). She provides leadership, guidance and quality oversight of federal programs, and federal and state grant funds allocated to Wisconsin's eight Independent Living Centers (ILCs). Ashley also focuses on quality improvement initiatives related to home and community based independent living services, assistive technology, and service access throughout Wisconsin. Prior to this position, Ashley spent the first 20 years of her career providing case coordination, advocacy, and leadership through Wisconsin's Independent Living Network and through Wisconsin's self-directed long-term care program: Include, Respect, I Self-Direct (IRIS).

Ashley holds a bachelor's degree from Viterbo University in La Crosse, WI and is a Certified Social Worker (CSW) and a Certified Assistive Technology Professional (ATP) through the Rehabilitation Engineering and Assistive Technology Society of North America (RESNA). Ashley also is a part time instructor for the Human Service Associate Program for Western Technical College in La Crosse, WI. Ashley lives in rural southwestern Wisconsin with her son. She actively volunteers in her local community and enjoys outdoor adventures, gardening, cooking, and live music.



Rylee Barney
Health Program Specialist
Utah Department of Health and Human Services

Rylee Barney is a Health Program Specialist at the Utah Department of Health and Human Services specifically working with waiver programs in LTSS. Rylee has direct care experience in both assisted living as a CNA and a direct care professional for individuals with brain injuries and disabilities. Rylee has been with DHHS LTSS for 5 years and has worked on projects focused on improving person-centered policies and procedures for waivers, HCBS Settings Final Rule compliance and critical incident management.

Rylee hopes to continue state and federal policy work while also collaborating with individuals receiving services and providers for advocacy. Rylee holds a BA in Health Promotion from Weber State University.

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Heather Carter
Dementia Services
Coordinator
North Carolina Division of Aging

Heather Carter received her B.A. in Sociology with a minor in Communications from Goucher College. During her graduate work at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Heather received her certification as a Dementia Care Mapper and trained in the Person-Centered Approach for caring for people living with dementia. She is a Certified Dementia Practitioner. Heather received her M.A. in Gerontology from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Heather has varied experience working with older adults, people living with dementia and mental illness as well as a working knowledge of Medicare, Medicaid, and managed care. Heather has worked at the North Carolina Division of Aging since 2007 in the Service Operations Section as a Program Consultant in the following service areas: Adult Day Care, Group Respite, Institutional Respite and Mental Health Counseling in a regulatory capacity and certified adult day care programs across the state. In this role, Heather also conducted monitoring to ensure that federal and state funds were used appropriately. Additionally, Heather was a member of the State Emergency Response Team and responded during Hurricanes Matthew, Florence and Dorian. Heather also has lived experience as a caregiver to both of her parents who succumbed to dementia.



Matthew Crandall
Policy and Communications Unit
Manager
Wyoming Department of Health

Matthew Crandall graduated from the University of Wyoming in 2016 with a bachelor's degree in criminal justice. While working as a probation officer, he went back to school and got his master's degree in public administration. In 2021, Matthew left probation life and entered the world of Medicaid. Matthew is currently the manager of the Policy and Communications Unit for the HCBS Section at the Wyoming Department of Health. His unit oversees internal and external communications and facilitates training for providers and case managers, public comment for administrative rule and waiver amendments, and rate studies. His unit also handles 372 reporting requirements and has taken the project management role in ARPA expenditures and reporting. Matthew competes in Powerlifting and loves to read. Matthew and his wife have three wild boys and two very fun dogs.

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Nicholas DeCirce
Program Operations
Specialist 3
New York State Office for
People with Developmental
Disabilities

Nicholas DeCirce is the first person in his family to have a career focusing on providing services to the developmentally disabled population. He attended Siena College near Albany, New York and earned a degree in political science. There he developed a great interest in governance, due to it being impactful. He then went on to graduate school at the University of Michigan to obtain his master's degree in public administration and intern at the Michigan Legislature. At this time, he learned about the unique challenges facing the people of that state. This provided him with the perspective that public policy and programming should be tailored to fit citizens so that it may best serve them. In 2016 Nicholas began work as a Budget Analyst in the New York State Assembly and then went on to the New York State Division of the Budget in 2018. In those roles he further developed his understanding and skills related to negotiation, research, and organization. In 2021 Nicholas began his current role as a team leader at the New York State Office for People with Developmental Disabilities. While this was his first time working in a health policy setting, he has found the work to be incredibly meaningful, with outcomes that have real-world benefits for developmentally disabled individuals.



Bethany Draime
Health Program Manager III
Arizona Health Care Cost
Containment System

Bethany Draime was born and raised in an extremely small town in Southern California that did not offer many opportunities. She was in 5th grade when she had her first experience with a Social Worker, who was the first adult to protect her and take an interest in her life. At that time, she decided she would make a career out of protecting and advocating for those who could not do it for themselves. Bethany graduated with a BSW from Arizona State University and began her career. She has been involved in different aspects of social services but her passion rests with individuals who have Developmental Disabilities, and as she explored the managed care field, she also gained an appreciation for the older adult population. After her son was diagnosed with Epilepsy in 2021 at the age of 10, Bethany found herself on the other side of the coin: instead of being a professional managing families' services, they were the family. Because of this experience of navigating the complexity of a care system, Bethany brings a lot of insight into the delicate situations families are faced with, which can only be understood by someone facing these same challenges. Bethany lives a fun family-oriented life with her family made up of 2 wild boys, husband, and 3 dogs. She earned a master's in public administration in May 2025.

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Lana Eggers
Waiver Innovation and
Compliance Section
Manager
Colorado Department of
Health Care Policy and
Financing

Lana Eggers has been with the Colorado Department of Health Care Policy and Financing since 2015 and currently serves as the Waiver Innovation and Compliance Section Manager. In this role, she is responsible for the oversight of Colorado's 1915(c) Home and Community Based Services Waivers, 1915(k) Community First Choice, Electronic Visit Verification, member satisfaction surveys, quality reporting, and the implementation of the Access Rule. Lana grew up in California, receiving a bachelor's degree from the University of California San Diego in political science. She moved to New York for graduate school, obtaining a master's in Public Health from the University at Albany. Her first career job was working for a non-profit that supported Independent Living Centers. This job solidified her desire to support the disability community, in particular access to long-term care. As for her life outside of work, Lana is married with two daughters and in her free time enjoys cooking, gardening, and traveling.



Nicole Mercado-Anazagasty
Money Follows the Person
Project Director
Puerto Rico Department of
Health

Nicole Mercado-Anazagasty serves as the Money Follows the Person (MFP) Project Director for the Puerto Rico Department of Health, Medicaid Division. In this role, she leads efforts to design and implement a program that supports individuals transitioning from institutional settings to community-based living. Her work includes assessing long term services and support needs, non-emergency medical transportation gaps, overseeing policy development, and managing a team of professionals to ensure program success. Nicole earned her Master of Public Health with a concentration in Health Communications and Community Outreach from the University of Southern California (USC). After graduating, she returned to Puerto Rico to contribute her skills and expertise to the island's healthcare system, inspired by her commitment to give back to her community. In the future, Nicole hopes to become a certified yoga instructor, teaching classes for older adults and people with disabilities. Upon retirement, she aspires to establish a non-profit organization dedicated to promoting their community integration in the west-side of the island, her hometown, where there is an increasing number of older adults and people with disabilities with little or no resources compared to the metro area. Her career and personal goals reflect a deep passion for creating sustainable, patient-centered solutions that empower these groups and drive meaningful change in her community.

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Ashley Penhale
Chief of Staff/Chief Legal
Counsel

Alabama Department of Senior
Services

Ashley Penhale is Chief of Staff and Chief Legal Counsel for the Alabama Department of Senior Services where she represents the Department in all legal matters.

Before joining the Department, Ashley worked in the Office of General Counsel at the Alabama State Department of Education and before that as the Director of Programs at the Alabama State Bar.

Ashley studied political science and journalism while attending Troy University before earning her Juris Doctorate from Thomas Goode Jones School of Law.

Outside of work, Ashley serves on the Board of Directors for the Junior League of Montgomery and as the Immediate Past-President of the Montgomery County Volunteer Lawyer Program. Ashley and her husband are the proud parents of a precious baby boy. In their free time they enjoy supporting Troy University athletics.



Caitlin Rogers
LTSS Assistant Deputy Chief
of Quality, Accountability,
and Innovation

Tennessee Division of
TennCare

Caitlin Rogers is a dedicated leader in Medicaid Long-Term Services and Supports (LTSS), currently serving as the Assistant Deputy Chief of Quality Accountability and Innovation at TennCare, the State of Tennessee's Medicaid program. With over a decade of experience, Caitlin specializes in developing and implementing comprehensive person-centered quality improvement strategies across LTSS programs, leveraging value-based purchasing to enhance service delivery. At TennCare, Caitlin leads the LTSS State's System Transformation Initiative, focusing on provider and member outcomes to measure the program's success. Her innovative approach ensures regulatory compliance and fosters a culture of excellence and continuous improvement within the organization.

Before her current role, Caitlin served as a Health Program Manager III for the State of Alaska, where she managed 1915(c) waiver programs, designed new waiver initiatives, and played a pivotal role in the statewide transition to meet CMS Final Rule requirements. Her work significantly contributed to eliminating the waitlist for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) and co-occurring mental health conditions.

Caitlin holds a Bachelor of Arts in Human Services from the University of Alaska Anchorage.

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Gabrielle Szymanski
Special Assistant to the
Secretary/Executive
Director, Long-Term Care
Council
Pennsylvania Department of
Aging

Gabrielle Szymanski is a Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Department of Aging and Executive Director of the Long-Term Care Council. Prior to this role, she served as the Executive Director of the Pennsylvania Council on Aging and Executive Assistant to the Secretary. Gabrielle worked closely with the Pennsylvania Department of Aging team on the creation of Aging Our Way, PA, Pennsylvania's multisector plan on aging. Gabrielle graduated from Georgia Southern University with a BA in International Studies and a BA in Spanish before going on to receive her MSc in Global Health Policy from the London School of Economics.



Susan Taylor
Policy and Research
Consultant
Kentucky Department for
Aging and Independent
Living

Susan Taylor has been with the Kentucky Department for Aging and Independent Living (DAIL) for nearly three years. Prior to this, she was the Director of the Lake Cumberland Area Agency on Aging and Independent Living in Kentucky and has 20+ years' experience in the field of aging.

As Policy and Research Consultant, Susan is tasked with a variety of responsibilities including extensive research and analysis of policy issues and performing a range of public health services and supports. She collaborates with partners such as the University of Kentucky, Kentucky Medical Association, Kentucky Primary Care Association, Kentucky Department for Public Health and the Kentucky Office of Data Analytics. Susan introduced a long-COVID initiative in which DAIL partners with long-COVID direct care providers to offer person-centered supports to individuals with long-COVID and their caregivers. She also coordinated statewide vaccination supports intended to increase vaccination uptake among older adults and individuals with disabilities.

Susan serves as project lead for Kentucky's Multi-Sector Plan on Aging. She holds a B.A. in Human Services and Counseling and is currently pursuing her M.P.A. with a concentration in Public and Community Health. Susan enjoys reading, baking and relaxing oceanside. She resides in southcentral Kentucky with her son.

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Elise Tierney
**Senior Manager, Compliance
& Operational Integrity**
Massachusetts Executive
Office of Aging and
Independence

Elise Tierney is a dedicated health professional with a passion for improving services and systems for vulnerable and underserved populations, particularly older adults and individuals with disabilities. She currently serves as the Senior Manager of Compliance & Operational Integrity at the Massachusetts Executive Office of Aging and Independence (AGE), where she plays a pivotal role in aligning AGE's operations with strategic objectives to enhance service quality, accessibility, and efficacy across the aging services network. Elise holds a Master of Public Health from Boston University, specializing in Health, Policy, & Law with a focus on Human Rights & Social Justice. She has extensive experience in research, policy, and program implementation including prior roles at the Massachusetts State House and Boston University's Long Life Family Study. Her expertise spans data analysis, stakeholder engagement, project and program management, and policy development. With a strong commitment to equity, quality, accessibility, and innovation, Elise strives to drive impactful changes in public health and develop sustainable solutions to address challenges in the HCBS space.



Laah Wallace
**Residential Policy Unit
Manager**
Washington Aging and Long
Term Supports
Administration

Laah Wallace is the Residential Policy Unity Manager with the Washington state Aging and Long Term Supports Administration (AL TSA). While this current role is Laah's first foray into civil service at WA's State Medicaid Agency, Laah has been fortunate to gain extensive and diverse experience in the private and public sectors of LTSS service administration and delivery, including in the areas of case management, regulatory and program compliance, in-home HCB agency administration, supported employment, state-contracted HCBS setting curriculum development, direct supports and services, and training and education. Laah is a tenacious problem solver, is fiercely curious and is a lifelong learner.

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