

Conference  
Program



# 2024 Annual Conference

## Building Strong Roots for Success: Cultivating a Continuum of Care for Children, Youth & Families



### *A Message from Paige Pierce, FTNYS CEO:*

Dear Friends:

Thank you for joining us for the 2024 Families Together in New York State Annual Conference, ***Building Strong Roots for Success: Cultivating a Continuum of Care for Children, Youth & Families!***

Just as a sturdy tree requires strong roots to thrive and grow, our efforts in supporting children, youth, and families require a solid foundation of care and support. This year's theme underscores our commitment to nurturing this continuum of care to ensure the health and wellness of our communities for generations to come.

Our conference agenda reflects our ongoing dedication to fostering a community of empowered family peer support providers, family advocates, family members, youth, and professionals in the field of children's behavioral health. The sessions offered during this statewide event will provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of health and behavioral health services, emphasizing the importance of integrated care for our children and families.

We trust that you will find this year's conference enriching and informative. In addition to gaining knowledge, we encourage you to take advantage of networking opportunities and moments of relaxation to return home reinvigorated and inspired!

On behalf of the Board of Directors, Chapters, and Staff, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to each of you for your participation, contributions, and unwavering support. Thank you for sharing your experiences, your dedication, and your voice with us and with others.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paige".

**SUNDAY, MAY 5 &  
MONDAY, MAY 6, 2024** **MARRIOTT  
ALBANY**

# 2024 Annual Conference

## SCHEDULE AT A GLANCE

### SUNDAY, MAY 5, 2024

9:30AM-12:45PM  
**Registration Opens**  
**Visit Exhibitors**  
**50/50 Raffle**

#### *Lunch On Your Own*

12:45-2:00PM  
**Welcoming & Keynote Speaker**  
**Melanie Funchess**

2:15-3:30PM  
**Session I**

3:45-5:00PM  
**Session II**

5:30-7:30PM  
**Award Reception**

#### *Dinner On Your Own*

**FAMILY PARTY**  
8:30-9:30PM  
**Low Music & Activities**

9:45-11:00PM  
**High Energy Dance Party**

### MONDAY, MAY 6, 2024

8:00-9:00AM  
**Breakfast Buffet**

9:00-10:15AM  
**General Session**  
**Panel Discussion**

10:30-11:45AM  
**Session III**

12:00-1:00PM  
**Lunch**

1:00-2:30PM  
**Annual Youth Speak Out**

2:30PM  
**Closing**

## CONFERENCE HIGHLIGHTS

### EXHIBITORS

Visit our exhibitors from across New York State!

### ANNUAL YOUTH SPEAK OUT

The youth voice is strong! On Monday, listen as youth from across the state step up and speak out!



**Families**  
**Together**  
in New York State

# ABOUT THE CONFERENCE

The 2024 Families Together in New York State Annual Conference features interactive and educational workshops, an empowering keynote address, networking opportunities, exhibitors and more. The Annual Conference gives attendees of all ages the chance to meet new people and gain valuable information to bring back to their communities.

## CONFERENCE TRACKS:

**The Family Track (FT)** for families to attend and learn skills together that can be implemented at home within the family, etc.

**The Workforce Development Track (WDT)** is designed for FPAs and YPAs to address specific workforce issues in the Peer Advocacy field.

**The Leadership Track (LDR)** empowering professionals and emerging leaders in youth and family advocacy through workshops focused on leadership, coalition building, policy influence, and fostering inclusive environments for impactful community change.

**The Youth Track (YT)** planned in partnership with the Youth Power network, this track offers workshops that are selected and delivered for and by young people to help build self-help and advocacy skills. The Youth Track is created for young people ages 12-25.

The **Wellness Room** will be accessible throughout the conference, featuring small DIY crafts to refresh your mind and prepare you for our exceptional workshops and presentations. **STATE**

Workshops marked YT are specifically designed for young people ages 12-25 and are intended for educational and empowerment purposes. Young people are invited to choose from the YT workshops or any of the other workshops offered at the conference. The goal of youth participation is to empower young people and provide them with tools for self-advocacy and information to bring back and share with their peers, schools and communities. All youth attending the track must be there by their own choice. Youth under the age of 18 are expected to attend workshops and notify their parent or guardian of their whereabouts at all times including the Youth Track. Youth Power Facilitators and FTNYS staff are not responsible for monitoring the whereabouts of youth and young adults.

\*Please Note: There will be no child care or programming for any children under the age of 12. Youth ages 12 and up who would like to attend the conference must be registered for the conference.



# Keynote Address

# Panel Discussion

SUNDAY, MAY 5 AT 1:00PM

## Melanie Funchess



Melanie Funchess is a dedicated advocate with three decades of experience empowering families and youth. As CEO and Principal of Ubuntu Village Works LLC, she leads efforts to create culturally responsive healing spaces and enhance organizational cultural competence. Melanie also serves as the Director of Mental Health and Wellness at Common Ground Health in the Finger Lakes Region, New York, specializing in family engagement, community building, and addressing disparities in behavioral healthcare and education. As a sought-after speaker and trainer, she focuses on implicit bias, cultural competence, and racial healing, striving to foster inclusive environments and rebuild communities where every child is valued and respected.

### ***Implicit Bias - How it Affects Us and How We Push Through'***

Gain insights into the influence of implicit biases on culturally responsive service delivery. Discover how these biases can hinder care provision and learn about resources for uncovering and addressing them effectively. Increase your understanding of cultural differences and historical trauma to enhance your ability to provide compassionate and inclusive care. Acquire practical strategies and tools to expand your capacity for culturally responsive service delivery.

MONDAY, MAY 6 AT 9:00AM

### **Kerri Neifeld,**

*Commissioner, NYS Office for People With Developmental Disabilities*

### **Gail Geohagen-Pratt,**

*Deputy Commissioner, Division of Child Welfare and Community Services, NYS Office of Children and Family Services*

### **Vanessa Threatte,**

*Executive Director, NY Council on Children and Families*

### **Sarah Kuriakose, PhD, BCBA-D,**

*Associate Commissioner, Division of Integrated Community Services for Children and Families, NYS Office of Mental Health*

### **Patricia Zuber-Wilson,**

*Associate Commissioner, Division of Prevention and Problem Gambling Services, NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports*

### **Bob Moon**

*Deputy Commissioner, Division of Community Program Policy and Management, NYS Office of Mental Health*

### ***Empowering Families, Youth & Peer Support: New York State Initiatives***

Discover the latest initiatives and opportunities in New York State that emphasize the voices of families, youth, and peer support. State officials will highlight recent developments within their systems to prioritize these important perspectives. Engage in an interactive discussion with the panel, providing a platform for sharing experiences, ideas, and suggestions on enhancing partnerships in family, youth, and peer support programs and services.

# Sunday, May 5<sup>TH</sup>

## SESSION 1: 2:15-3:30PM

### LDR: Family Peer Support through the Lens of Youth Experience

*Brian Lombrowski, Family Peer Advocate; Jennifer Fuchs, Interim Director, CFTSS, SCO Family of Services*

Explore how our childhood experiences in the system impact our advocacy for neurodivergent children and families. [Troy](#)

### WDT: It is What it is - Breaking the Barriers of Stigma

*Heather Ann Pitcher, Mental Health Educator, CEO, Brain and Body Coalition; Jenet Ferris*

Learn about cultural intersections in mental health support, addressing disparities, biases, and the importance of community. [Schenectady](#)

### LDR: How The Sausage Gets Made: Policy & Advocacy!

*Zack Kilmer, Youth Public Policy Coordinator; Brad Hansen, Public Policy Director, FTNYS*

Get tips on legislative advocacy, from social media storytelling to meeting elected officials, for impacting youth and family lives. [Empire](#)

### YT: Every Mickle: Exploring the Youth Mental Health Crisis through the Lens of Decolonization and Anti-Oppression

*Nedyah Alexis, LMHC, Founder, The Safe Space Collective*

Examine the youth mental health crisis through trauma-informed, anti-oppressive lenses, exploring data and decolonial perspectives. [Albany](#)

### THE WELLNESS ROOM: STATE

### FT: Embrace & Empower: Navigating Identities & Experiences

*Yaniel Wynter, DEI Youth Engagement Coordinator; Camerin Rivera, Youth Power Program Support Coordinator, FTNYS*

Reflect on how identities shape experiences and power dynamics, promoting cultural humility and inclusive environments. [Salon G](#)

### YT: "Because I Said So": Exercising Self-Advocacy for Transitional Aged Youth

*Kristin Rivera, Youth Engagement Specialist, FTNYS*

The objective of this workshop is to empower transitional aged youth by introducing self-advocacy skills that can be used to address power dynamics from adults. [Salon H](#)

### FT: OPWDD Services for Individuals with Developmental Disabilities

*Maria Garrett, Bilingual OPWDD Care Manager*

A heart-to-heart discussion led by a mother and care manager, offering insights into enrolling in and navigating OPWDD services to better support children with developmental disabilities and mental health concerns. [Salon F](#)

**Families  
Together  
in New York State**

# Sunday, May 5<sup>TH</sup>

## SESSION 2: 3:45-5:00PM

### FT: Grief, Mental Health, and You.

*Zack Kilmer, Youth Public Policy Coordinator, FTNYS*

"What is Grief if not love, persevering?" Zack Kilmer shares his personal story with grief and loss and how it has shaped his mental health journey. Only together can we help heal, and this workshop will try to shed light on a topic that is hard to talk about but so important to discuss. Come laugh, cry, and honor those we've lost. Albany

### LDR: Intersecting Paths: Peer Support, Faith, and Advocacy for Mental Health Equity

*Simcha Weinstein, DEI Family Coordinator, FTNYS*

Engage faith communities to address mental health and substance use challenges effectively. Train Peer-clergy with lived experience in evidence-based interventions to reduce stigma and build community support. Learn from collaborative efforts with BIPOC faith leaders to promote inclusivity and amplify marginalized voices in mental health advocacy. Salon F

### WDT: The Principles of Family Peer Support

*TJ Curtis, Family Peer Training Coordinator, FTNYS*

Embrace the Principles of Family Peer Support for compassionate and effective services. Prioritize family-driven, strength-based, and culturally humble approaches. Collaborate, empower, and advocate for resilience and recovery within families and communities. Family Peer Support Workers use these principles to provide respectful, person-centered support that honors individual dignity and autonomy. Schenectady

### FT: OMH Field Offices - Their Involvement in Services

*Jean M. Sadowy, LMSW; Gladys Smith, LCSW & OMH Family Advocates Maria Cruz and Anne-Marie Scott, NYS Office of Mental Health*

The NYS Office of Mental Health operates in 5 geographic regions for enhanced oversight of licensed, funded, and/or certified programs. Each region has an OMH Field Office that plays a critical role in community operations, ensuring quality services for children, adolescents, families, and adults. This workshop will showcase field office positions, roles, and responsibilities within the community and OMH. Empire

### YT: "Community Circles" Creating Healing Spaces for Community Transformation"

*Precious Lugo, Statewide Youth Engagement Specialist, FTNYS*

A circle is a gathering marked by thoughtful preparation, meaningful questions, and equitable structure. Participants sit comfortably in a circle, with everyone encouraged to engage equally. The format is straightforward, with a defined start, middle, and conclusion. Discussions revolve around specific questions, allowing each participant to speak without interruption. A "talking piece" is used, passed from one person to another, indicating who has the floor and who is listening. Salon H

### LDR: The How To's of Youth Guided Practice

*Kristin Rivera, Youth Systems Engagement Specialist, FTNYS*

Youth friendly environments welcome engagement and empowerment when they are guided by the youth and young adults it's serving. In this training, we will define youth guided practices, overview implementation strategies, and identify evaluation and self-assessments. Overall, this training serves as a guide for individuals who are engaging, supporting, and/or overseeing the work of youth to develop, improve, and sustain youth guided practices. Troy

### WDT: Teaching Youth Healthy Relationship Skills

*Meghann Simpson, Youth Training Coordinator; Yaniel Wynter, DEI Youth Engagement Coordinator, FTNYS*

Equip YPAs to teach youth vital relationship skills! Learn about relationship flags, dynamics, boundaries, and teen dating violence. Gain confidence in promoting healthy relationships among the youth you support. Salon G

# Monday, May 6<sup>TH</sup>

## SESSION 3: 10:30-11:45AM

### FT: Mental Health Systems Literacy

*Sarah Kuriakose, Associate Commissioner with Shannon Fortran, Kim Heffner, Angela Keller, Erin Williams, Kathy Wright (Unit Directors/Supervisors), Division of Integrated Community Services for Children & Families, NYS Office of Mental Health*

Learn about the children's mental health system and how to make connections between and to the variety of services and programs, to best support the needs of your family and other families you may work with.

Salon F

### FT: Being Your Best Self: Self-Care as Self-Advocacy

*Kara Clark, Advocate; Crystal Collins, Coordinator, New York State Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs*

Join our self-care and wellness presentation to learn about the importance of self-care and fostering wellness in various aspects of life. Topics cover addressing vicarious trauma, identifying personal self-care needs, and creating tailored plans with coping strategies. Engage in interactive group discussions, self-assessments, and breakout sessions to brainstorm and exchange self-care ideas, focusing on preventing burnout and compassion fatigue. Troy

### YT: Youth on Social Media

*Vanesty Lozada, Youth Peer Advocate; Steven Reyes, Youth Peer Advocate, Vibrant Emotional Health*

Delve into the complexities of social media in this insightful workshop, exploring its benefits, drawbacks, and the risks of addiction. Gain practical safety tips and discover valuable resources to navigate social media responsibly. This workshop offers a balanced perspective to empower participants with the knowledge needed for a healthy relationship with social media. Albany

### WDT: Supporting Transition Age Youth

*Willie T. Elliott, Project Director; Alysia Vazquez, Transition Facilitator Supervisor; Kahari Benton, Senior Transition Facilitator, Coordinated Care Services, Inc.*

OnCare TAY Healthy Transitions Project members will discuss their experiences engaging and supporting young adults facing homelessness, mental health challenges, and substance use issues. Through unique skills and lived experience, they build trust with those hesitant to seek services. The team connects isolated youth with crucial resources for housing, immigration, medication management, medical care, and mental wellness. Schenectady

### LDR: Understanding School Avoidance

*Jennifer Sibley, Family Support Services Program Director, NRCIL*

Join us for a presentation on the causes, concerns and how everyone can work together to help youth with School Avoidance get back to school while supporting their mental health. Salon G

### WDT: A Workforce That Makes a Difference

*CarrieAnn Rollier, Director of Training & Workforce Development, FTNYS*

If you are interested in working in the field of peer support, if you are new to working in the field, or if you are interested in hiring FPAs or YPAs, you're in the right spot! Participants will learn about the benefits of Youth and Family Peer Support Services, how to become a credentialed YPA or FPA, and the specific trainings and requirements needed to complete the process and learn about recent policy and application changes. We will put it together in 6 simple steps and offer time for an open Q & A discussion. Salon H

### YT: Youth Speak Out Prep

#### Youth Power

The Annual Speak-Out will take place at the closing ceremony of the conference. Youth must attend this workshop to participate in the Speak-Out. Come to this workshop to design a poster, prepare to speak and support your peers. Make sure your voice is heard! Empire



## AWARD WINNERS

**FAMILY PEER ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR**

**ELIZABETH HELBOCK**

For her advocacy and leadership on behalf of families and children

**YOUTH PEER ADVOCATE OF THE YEAR**

**SABRINA ANDERSON**

For her advocacy and leadership on behalf of the peers she serves

**EXCEPTIONAL SERVICE PROVIDER**

**JESSICA LUQUIS**

For her advocacy and leadership on behalf of families and children

**LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD**

**W. BRIAN BARR**

For his leadership, tireless advocacy, unwavering commitment and compassion on behalf of children and families

**25 YEARS OF SERVICE**

**PAIGE PIERCE**

In honor of her Unwavering Dedication and Commitment  
Advocating for Families and Children Across New York State

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**Yasmeen Baxter**, Youth Workforce Development Coordinator

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**Aquealah Sumpter**, Family Peer Engagement Advocate-Erie

**Justice Walcott**, Youth Power Director

**Simcha Weinstein**, D.E.I. Family Engagement Coordinator

**Cheryl Williams**, Public Policy Family Coordinator

**Raleighn Williams**, Family Policy Advisor- Weschester

**Lisa Winters**, Family Peer Engagement Advocate-Erie

**Yaniel Wynter**, DEI Youth Engagement Coordinator

## EXHIBITORS

**Audreys Art**

**Children's Health Home of Upstate NY**

**Citizens' Committee for Children of New York/Campaign for Healthy Minds, Healthy Kids**

**Families First in Essex County**

**Families Together in New York State**

**Fulton County Chapter of NYSARC- Transitions USA**

**NAMI Capital Region New York**

**New York State Justice Center for the Protection of People with Special Needs**

**New York State Council for Community Behavioral Healthcare**

**New York State Office of Mental Health**

**Partners In Community Development**

**The McSilver Institute/CTAC**

**Youth Power of FTNYS**

**A SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR SPONSOR:**



**Office of  
Mental Health**

# GROOVY ALLIES



## NEON DISCO FAMILY & YOUTH PARTY

SUNDAY, MAY 5

8:30-9:30PM

LOW MUSIC & ACTIVITIES

9:45-11:00PM

HIGH ENERGY DANCE PARTY

DJ  
DESSERTS  
GIVEAWAYS  
NETWORKING BINGO



# SAVE *the* DATE



UNIVERSITY OF  
YOUTH POWER  
*It Starts With You: Step Into Your Future*



# JULY 13-15, 2024

**Siena College, Loudonville, NY**



*A Message from*  
**Justice Walcott,  
Director of Youth Power**

In 2012, the YP Advisory Council established an ambitious goal within our Strategic Plan: to host The University of Youth Power as a flagship statewide annual event. This conference, entirely youth-led, offers Youth Peer Advocates (ages 18-30) and change agents a unique platform to hone their skills and expand their professional networks through three specialized tracks: Peer Advocacy, Systems Advocacy, or Recovery Advocacy.

Youth Power, as a youth-led network under Families Together in NYS, takes great pride in planning this event for and by young leaders across our state. Our YP Advisory Council and dedicated staff collaborate closely with a working group, sponsors, professors, and esteemed dignitaries to ensure the success of this empowering gathering.

I am thrilled to announce that the University of Youth Power 2024 will be held from July 13-15 at Siena College, featuring the inspiring theme, "**It Starts With You: Step Into Your Future.**" This event promises overnight accommodations in apartment-style dormitories and on-campus meals for resident students. Renowned professors specializing in Disability Rights, Mental Health, Substance Use, Foster Care, Juvenile Justice, Independent Living, and more will be present to share their expertise.

For registration, scholarship applications, exhibition opportunities, sponsorships, or presentation submissions, please visit [www.ftnys.org/uyp2024](http://www.ftnys.org/uyp2024) or **scan the code below**.

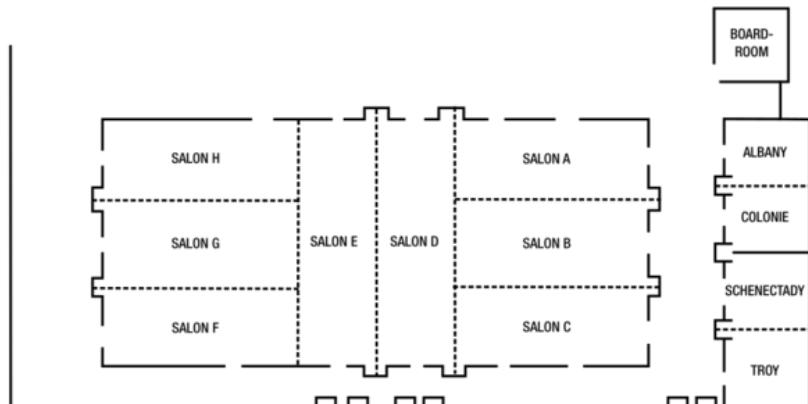
As we engage in the 2024 Conference, I invite you to anticipate the exciting prospects awaiting us at the University of Youth Power 2024. Together, let's forge ahead into a bright future of possibilities!

*Justice Walcott*

# 2024 Annual Conference

**BUILDING STRONG ROOTS FOR SUCCESS:  
CULTIVATING A CONTINUUM OF CARE FOR CHILDREN, YOUTH & FAMILIES**

GRAND BALLROOM



*Scan the QR code to view  
local restaurants, workshop  
PowerPoints, & provide  
feedback on the conference.*



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