



IPHA 85TH ANNUAL PUBLIC HEALTH WORKFORCE CONFERENCE

Together We Thrive

FEATURED SPEAKERS GUIDE

Poster Presentations

**Crowne Plaza Springfield - Convention Center
Springfield, Illinois**

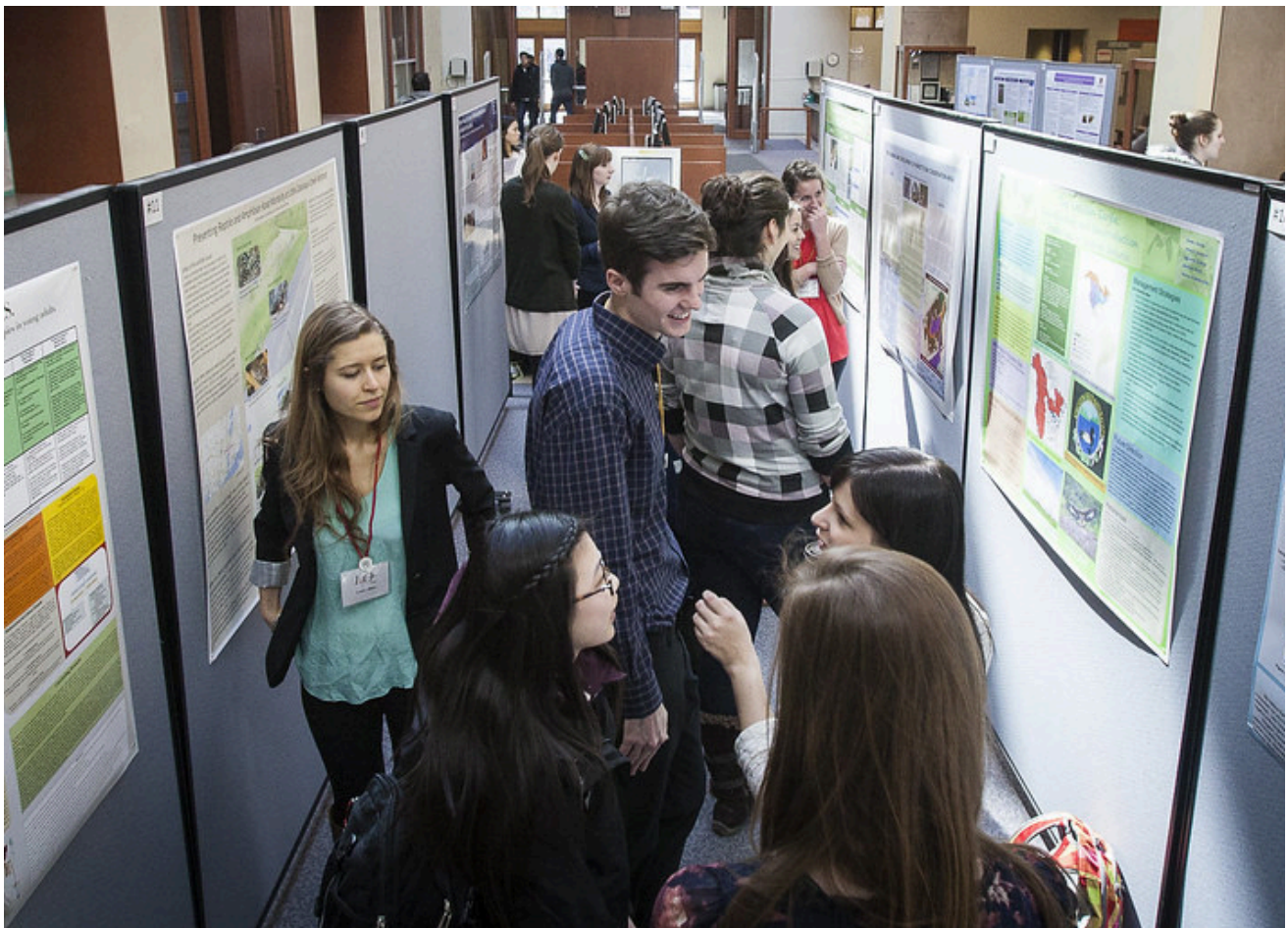


SEPTEMBER 1-3 | 2026



Poster Presentations

We invite you to explore the poster presentations featured throughout this year's conference. These displays represent the innovative work, emerging research, and real-world insights of students and public health professionals from across Illinois. Take a moment to engage with the presenters, ask questions, and spark new conversations. Presentations are listed in alphabetical order by presentation title.





Poster Presentations

Wednesday | September 2, 2026

Thursday | September 3, 2026

Addressing the Loneliness Epidemic: Social Connections as a Cardiovascular Health Strategy in Illinois

Poster Presenters

- Randall Kaw - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

Social isolation and loneliness have reached epidemic levels nationally, as highlighted by the U.S. Surgeon General's 2023 advisory on their health effects. In Illinois, 2.8 million residents are over age 60, making older adults a priority population for social isolation reduction and hypertension prevention. Evidence linking social separation and connection to blood pressure outcomes remains insufficiently synthesized to guide public health practices. This scoping review addresses that gap by examining peer-reviewed literature published from 2021 to 2026 in PubMed and Web of Science, following the PRISMA-ScR guidelines. Ten empirical studies were included, drawn from diverse global settings. Across four dimensions—loneliness, social isolation, living arrangement, and social networks—loneliness and solitary living were most consistently associated with increased hypertension risk, while stronger social networks appeared protective. Rural residence appeared to amplify risk in some studies. These findings provide an evidence-based foundation for cardiovascular health strategies for Illinois older adults.



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Assessing Public Response to Stroke-Like Symptoms: A Questionnaire-Based Survey

Poster Presenters

- Michael Suntrup - University of Illinois College of Medicine

Description

A written, plain-language scenario of a person having stroke-like symptoms was presented to survey participants. Symptoms were based on the NIH Stroke Scale. Participants were then asked questions regarding the perceived severity of the person's condition and how soon medical treatment should be sought. Flyers for a digital survey link were displayed at various businesses and public areas in Winnebago County, IL. A total of 90 survey responses were gathered. 98% of participants answered that the individual from the scenario should seek immediate medical attention. 95% responded that their condition was very serious or life-threatening. In addition, 93% of participants identified stroke as the most likely medical condition. While many prior surveys have studied stroke awareness, this project is unique in that we assessed public response to a scenario depicting stroke. Instead of assessing for awareness of stroke symptoms, we aimed to investigate how a person would respond in a real-world scenario.



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Barriers to Maternal Healthcare in Rural Illinois: A Provider Perspective

Poster Presenters

- Hunter Kienast - The National Center for Rural Health Professions
- Gianna Sagona - The National Center for Rural Health Professions

Description

This cross-sectional study assessed healthcare providers' perspectives on maternal healthcare in rural Illinois using a semi-structured survey. Respondents represented a range of professional roles and healthcare settings, including critical access hospitals, academic-affiliated medical centers, and outpatient clinics. The study examined perceived contributors to maternal outcomes, barriers to maternal healthcare, and availability of essential maternal and neonatal resources. The findings suggest language barriers, transportation limitations, socioeconomic factors, and inconsistent access to 24/7 resources as potential contributors to maternal mortality in rural Illinois. Adolescents and young adults, along with racial/ethnic minority populations, were identified as particularly vulnerable groups. A statistical analysis revealed no significant differences in reported inventory shortages across numerous provider and facility characteristics, suggesting that system-level challenges persist. Overall, these results emphasize the need for targeted, locally informed interventions to address disparities and improve maternal healthcare delivery in rural Illinois.



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Bridging Gaps in Care: Youth Perspectives on Mental Health, Substance Use and Digital Support

Poster Presenters

- Lucia Vidal - Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago
- Amy Johnson - Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children's Hospital of Chicago

Description

This project explores youth perspectives on digital mental health and substance use support. The project used qualitative data from the StartNow pilot study, examining how youth and young adults describe emotional challenges, coping strategies, barriers, and preferences for support. Findings showed the importance of recognizing stigma, fear of judgment, and concerns about privacy in limiting access to traditional care. Participants saw digital tools, particularly chatbot-based interventions, as a potentially accessible and nonjudgmental source of support when designed with user-centered communication in mind. This presentation discusses how youth experiences can inform the development of digital health interventions designed to reduce barriers to care, improve engagement, and provide flexible support options for young people navigating mental health and substance use challenges.



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Developing a Collaborative Care Framework for GLP-1 Management in Geriatric Populations

Poster Presenters

- Gavin Kocher - University of Southern Indiana
- Swateja Nimkar - University of Southern Indiana

Description

Glucagon-like Peptide 1 (GLP-1) receptor agonists are increasingly being used for diabetes management and weight loss. Despite its immense benefits, there appears to be a gap in the safe use of GLP-1s in older adults because of age-related health complexities. A thorough review of the current literature on GLP-1 use was conducted through the lens of geriatric care and key themes were identified. A thematic analysis was conducted that led to the following three themes: a) Nutrition management, b) dementia care, and c) interdisciplinary teamwork. Based on these findings, we aim to develop dietary management and educational resources for patients and caregivers. Overall, this project highlights the need for effective communication between patients and their providers and coordination between various healthcare professionals for long-term monitoring and management necessary to support geriatric patients using GLP-1s. It establishes a collaborative care framework using targeted research into the themes identified above.



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Engaging Youth Across Southern Illinois' 16 Counties in Community Change Through Policy and Civic Action

Poster Presenters

- Ujuonu Kamanu - University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford
- Francis Kazungu - University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford
- Gail Devito - Illinois Department of Public Health
- Scott Hays - The Strategic Collaboration Group, Inc.
- Christine Dannhausen-Brun - University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford
- Manorama Khare - University of Illinois College of Medicine Rockford

Description

Young people are ready to lead; they just need the tools and space to do it. This poster presents findings from an April 2026 youth summit that brought together 175 youth from 9 schools participating in the Engaging Youth for Positive Change (EYPC) program, a civic engagement curriculum for middle and high school youth ages 13–18 that guides youth through the process of passing local policy. The summit evaluated student experiences in addressing community tobacco and nicotine policies using a town hall discussion, Poll Everywhere, and index card responses. Youth reported increased confidence, advocacy and leadership skills, and a clearer understanding of how local change happens, while also identifying challenges, such as being dismissed and limited follow-through by decision-makers after they speak up. Youth perspectives offer grounded insight into the impact of meaningful civic engagement and the practical requirements for strengthening youth voice.



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Get it Together: We Thrive in Building Public Trust Through Cooperative AI Surveillance

Poster Presenters

- John Kirchgesner - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

Public health surveillance in the US remains fragmented across local, state, and federal systems; however, cooperative AI adoption offers a path forward. With only 14% of LHDs having dedicated informatics staff, the central question is how to design effective, efficient, and ethical AI integration. This creative discovery project compares three models for AI-integrated surveillance: local-only adoption, centralized state or federal infrastructure, and cooperative multi-level governance. Using national informatics workforce data, domestic AI surveillance examples, and international centralized data AI models, we evaluate each model through six trust criteria: detection speed, transparency, human oversight, equity, privacy, and accountability. Findings suggest that a cooperative framework in which shared AI infrastructure expands analytic capacity for under-resourced jurisdictions, with local professionals remaining central to validation, interpretation, and community communication. Given concerns about bias, opacity, privacy, and misuse, the framework conditions public trust on de-identified data, role-based access, bias monitoring, transparent methods, and human-centered review.



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High-Fat Diet, Obesity, and Neuroinflammation: Brain Health in Special Populations

Poster Presenters

- Angela McComas - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield
- Shelly Tischkau - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

Obesity affects four in ten U.S. adults and is linked to a 30% to 60% increased risk of Alzheimer's disease. However, the biological pathways connecting high-fat diets to brain inflammation remain unclear. This project examines how high-fat diet exposure contributes to obesity-related inflammatory changes in the brain, focusing on glial responses in the hippocampus, responsible for memory and mood. Using experimental models, the study investigates mechanisms through which diet-induced obesity activates inflammatory pathways relevant to neurodegeneration and mental health. By connecting high-fat diet, obesity, and neuroinflammation, this research highlights how chronic metabolic disease may shape neurologic risk in vulnerable populations, particularly women and single mothers facing elevated obesity rates and chronic stress. The project aligns with public health priorities in chronic disease prevention by emphasizing the brain health consequences of obesity and nutrition-related disease burden. It further informs strategies that integrate metabolic wellness, mental health, and healthy cognitive aging.



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Multilevel Structural Determinants of Childhood Lead Exposure and Prevention Policy Gaps

Poster Presenters

- Mercedes Dick - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

Childhood lead exposure remains a persistent health inequity affecting children under six in disadvantaged communities. Despite the 2021 shift to a 3.5 µg/dL reference value, coordinated prevention research remains underdeveloped. We conducted a PRISMA-guided scoping review of PubMed, Scopus, Academic Search Complete, and Web of Science (2016–2026; n=30), using Boolean search terms related to lead exposure, pediatric populations, structural determinants, and elevated blood lead levels (EBLLs). Thematic analysis and a synthesis matrix guided by the Social-Ecological Model examined multilevel determinants of EBLLs. Intersecting structural factors-poverty, racial segregation, and high renter occupancy-disproportionately amplified risk, spatially concentrated in disinvested communities. Soil and dust emerged as dominant environmental exposure pathways. Although housing remediation effectively reduced exposure, education-only programs showed limited impact. An evidence gap remains regarding coordinated implementation strategies bridging clinical screening and housing enforcement. Reducing disparities will require place-based prevention, enforceable housing codes, expanded screening mandates, and cross-sector policy coordination.



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“No one wants that 1 out of a million death to be their kid”: A Qualitative Analysis of Protective Individualism, Institutional Distrust, and the Shifting Epistemology of Vaccination in Today’s Digital Discourse

Poster Presenters

- Stacey Kim - Rosalind Franklin University of Medicine and Science

Description

Background: The resurgence of vaccine-preventable diseases and declining trust in public health institutions in the United States have coincided with the rise of digital platforms that shape how individuals interpret vaccine-related information.

Methods: A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using a sample of Reddit posts related to vaccine safety, vaccine mandates, and delayed vaccination from January to February 2026. Data was analyzed through a human-in-the-loop AI-assisted workflow with manual validation.

Results: Four themes emerged: declining institutional trust driven by profit narratives, tension between individual autonomy and collective responsibility, prioritization of personal experience over epidemiologic data, and algorithm-driven reshaping of authority. These themes reflected a broader shift toward protective individualism, fragmented epistemic trust, and the replacement of institutional expertise with digitally mediated personal authority.

Conclusion: Vaccine hesitancy in digital spaces reflects structural and cultural shifts, underscoring the urgent need for adaptive, trust-centered public health communication strategies that account for the rapidly evolving social media information landscape.



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Out of Reach: LGBTQ+ Health and Social Needs in a Midwestern Service Desert

Poster Presenters

- Dhara Patel - University of Illinois College of Medicine

Description

While large cities can often offer comprehensive LGBTQ+ services, mid-sized cities, particularly those surrounded by rural communities such as Rockford, Illinois, may function as “resource deserts.” Despite being a regional healthcare hub and the third-largest city in the state, Rockford is serviced by only one small and recently established LGBTQ+ nonprofit meant to serve over 100,000 people. Thus, this study aims to identify the unique barriers and unmet needs that exist within Rockford’s LGBTQ+ community.

We recruited participants from Rockford's only LGBTQ+ nonprofit, the LIAM Foundation, and conducted a community-based needs assessment through an anonymous survey that assessed demographics, access to and quality of healthcare and social services, physical and mental health, and safety. Answers varied between ordinal measurements and text entry. Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and phenomenology to quantitatively and qualitatively examine themes.



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Sex Difference in the Association Between Serious Psychological Distress and Substance Use Among U.S. Young Adults Aged 18-29

Poster Presenters

- Stephanie Avi - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

Substance use and serious psychological distress (SPD) are co-occurring public health concerns among young adults in Illinois and nationally. However, whether SPD-substance associations differ by sex remains understudied, limiting targeted prevention efforts. This study investigated sex differences in SPD associations with cigarette, marijuana, and alcohol use among young adults aged 18-29 using 2021-2024 National Survey on Drug Use and Health data. The weighted sample (n=71,961) represents 51.6 million people in analyses of weighted logistic regression, Rao-Scott chi-square tests, and sex-interaction models using R(version 4.5.2). SPD was reported by 29.2%; past-month smoking by 12.4%; past-year marijuana use by 36.6%; and past-month alcohol use by 53.2%. SPD was associated with higher odds across all outcomes, strongest for marijuana use. Sex interactions were significant for marijuana and alcohol use but not smoking ($p=.266$). Findings may guide Illinois in integrating mental-health screening into sex-responsive substance-use prevention.



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Teach Us What We Need to Know: Student Voices on AI Skills for Public Health Workforce Readiness

Poster Presenters

- Kaitlin Coniglio - Southern Illinois University School of Medicine
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

As AI expands across public health practice, workforce capacity building requires technology-driven training, ethical AI guidance, and sustainable strategies to strengthen workforce readiness across educational pipelines. This Creative Discovery Project centers Illinois public health student voices (N=112) as evidence of workforce preparation gaps and opportunities for development. Using Alexander Astin's Input–Environment–Output framework with a convergent mixed-methods design, this study reveals a critical disconnect: while 84.7% of students report AI tool use, only 31.3% express confidence, awareness of AI-use policy remains low, and 78.3% anticipate ethical or regulatory challenges ahead. Students characterized AI as both a career accelerator and a risk of misconduct, identifying needs for applied training, AI prompt-use guidance, bias recognition, ethical use, and human-centered decision-making. Through evidence-informed infographics and student quote callouts, this project highlights capacity-building strategies, career pathway development, and workforce training recommendations to support recruitment, retention, and preparation of an AI-ready public health workforce.



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The Role of the Pomodoro Technique and Virtual Study Halls: Reducing Stress and Preventing Burnout Among College Students

Poster Presenters

- Adam Ciecierski - Northern Illinois University
- Anna Ciecierski - Northern Illinois University

Description

Academic stress, procrastination, and reduced focus are common challenges for college students. This study examined an intervention combining the Pomodoro Technique (working in focused 25-minute intervals with short breaks) with Virtual Study Halls (online sessions where students study together in real time for accountability and community).

Using a mixed-methods design, researchers measured students' stress and procrastination levels through standardized pre-surveys, then had participants attend structured Virtual Study Hall sessions incorporating Pomodoro intervals throughout the semester. Frequent attendees also completed interviews and focus groups.

Preliminary results show that students who regularly used this combined approach reported improved focus, productivity, and academic performance, along with reduced stress and procrastination. The structured time blocks made studying feel more manageable, while scheduled breaks prevented burnout. The peer accountability of Virtual Study Halls also reduced isolation. Together, these findings suggest this is a practical, low-cost strategy colleges could use to support student success.



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Three Decades of Illinois Data, Two Persistent Health Priorities Across All Regions

Poster Presenters

- Frida Fokum - Illinois Department of Public Health
- Clarissa Harrington - Illinois Department of Public Health

Description

Local Health Departments (LHDs) complete the Illinois Project for Local Assessment of Needs (IPLAN) every five years to maintain certification. Through this process, LHDs conduct a community health needs assessment and identify at least three priority health issues. This project reviews how LHDs have selected priorities across six IPLAN rounds from 1994 to 2023, with a focus on two consistently selected areas: behavioral and mental health, and chronic disease. The findings show a steady increase in behavioral and mental health priorities, while chronic disease peaked in earlier rounds and declined in recent years. Additional categories—such as access to care, maternal and child health, and social determinants of health—help illustrate broader shifts in community needs. These trends offer a clear picture of long-term public health challenges and support data-informed planning at regional and statewide levels.



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Translating County Health Data into Actionable SDOH Insights for Illinois Communities

Poster Presenters

- Ba Tung (Jackey) Tran - University of Illinois Springfield
- Brian Chen - University of Illinois Springfield

Description

BACKGROUND: County-level demographic data can mask place-based inequities that shape whether Illinois communities can thrive.

PROJECT: This Creative Discovery Project introduces SDOH Equity Lens, an interactive physical infographic that transforms county data into actionable equity insights using plain language, data visualization, and photographs. Using Illinois counties and a high-performing western urban county as a benchmark, the display organizes publicly available indicators across the five Healthy People 2030 SDOH domains: economic stability, education access and quality, health care access and quality, social and community context, and neighborhood and built environment.

APPROACH: This approach moves beyond descriptive statistics by presenting pairwise disparity measures, equity gap estimates, and benchmark-distance visuals side by side to show where inequities are deepest and where cross-sector investment may be most urgent.

TAKEAWAY: Attendees will engage with the equity lens to see how different ways of viewing disparity reveal hidden patterns, reshape interpretation, and strengthen planning, partnerships, and prioritization.



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VaxConnect WIU: A Systems-Level Campus-Based Vaccine Navigation Model Addressing Structural Gaps in Immunization Access Among University Students

Poster Presenters

- Douglas Mang'anda - Western Illinois University
- Rachael Adebisi - Western Illinois University

Description

VaxConnect WIU is a student-led public health engagement and vaccine navigation initiative developed at Western Illinois University to improve vaccine awareness, confidence, and access among university students and young families. The project combines peer-led education, community outreach, digital engagement tools, and healthcare navigation support to address barriers related to misinformation, trust, scheduling, and healthcare access. Through campus events, maternal and childhood vaccine learning sessions, educational systems, social media outreach, and partnerships with local health stakeholders, the initiative created a practical model for strengthening immunization engagement in a university setting. VaxConnect integrates principles of health promotion, behavioral communication, and implementation science while emphasizing culturally responsive and community-centered public health approaches. The project demonstrates how student-driven innovation can contribute to preventive health services, vaccine equity, and public health workforce development.



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Why Trust and Friction Matter in Shaping Healthcare Engagement and Access

Poster Presenters

- Allison Morgan-Cook - Meridian Health Plan of Illinois
- Kelo Masisi- Meridian Health Plan of Illinois

Description

Trust in the American healthcare system has reached its lowest point in decades. While Illinois has made quality of care an explicit priority within the Medicaid program, issues with trust affect preventive care and contribute to poorer health outcomes.

For Meridian Health Plan of Illinois (Meridian), a Medicaid Managed Care Organization (MCO), addressing this issue is central to its mission of strengthening relationships with the communities it serves and addressing inequities while delivering care with dignity, respect, and cultural responsiveness. Meridian's latest research reveals that trust alone does not guarantee closing gaps in care.

To better understand the drivers of healthcare engagement, Meridian conducted an extensive study involving nearly 700 Medicaid-eligible adults across the state. The findings identify drivers of healthcare engagement and the operational and systemic hurdles that can erode trust and act as a barrier to seeking care.



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Working Together: A Community Model for ALS Care Coordination

Poster Presenters

- Anne Marie Doyle - LES TURNER ALS Foundation

Description

An ALS diagnosis brings rapidly evolving medical, social-emotional, and financial needs, often without a clear roadmap. The Les Turner ALS Foundation has developed a wraparound, community-based care coordination model to address this gap—one that public health agencies and community organizations can adapt for ALS and other complex chronic diseases.

Foundation staff will present how they conduct virtual consultations, coordinate with multidisciplinary clinical teams, and connect families to support programs including equipment loans, need-based grants, support groups, and educational resources. The presentation highlights key success factors: trust-based relationships, virtual service delivery, financial support for underserved families, and integration with the Lois Insolia ALS Clinic at Northwestern Medicine. Presenters will also address how this model advances health equity by reaching rural and under-resourced communities across Illinois, giving attendees a practical framework for building their own care coordination programs.



Contact Us!

For any questions about the presenters, please contact:

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