

2025 ANNUAL CONFERENCE: WORKSHOP DESCRIPTIONS

SESSION I

A. Cultivating Youth Leadership through Dungeons and Dragons

Joseph Trelli, Program Coordinator, Waterford Youth & Family Services

Cooper Bellos, Program Lead, Waterford Youth & Family Services

Youth Panelists from Waterford Youth & Family Services

Dungeons and Dragons (D&D) is not just a game—it is a transformative platform for youth development. In an era of digital isolation, tabletop storytelling offers young people a meaningful way to connect, lead, and grow. At Waterford Youth and Family Services, D&D has evolved from an afterschool program into a thriving leadership pipeline, with over 70 weekly participants and a diverse mix of players. Students who once joined as curious beginners now serve as Dungeon Masters, peer mentors, and program staff. This session features a youth panel highlighting how D&D builds confidence, encourages teamwork, and fosters inclusive leadership. Attendees will leave with actionable strategies to launch similar youth-driven programs in their own communities.

B. Disaster Mental Health: Supporting your community after a disaster

Christine Montgomery, DSW, LCSW; Asst Vice President, Carelon Behavioral Health

The United States is experiencing increased numbers of disasters; extreme weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes and wildfires along with human-made disasters such as mass shootings and bombings. Disasters are becoming more frequent, more intense and are often known simply by name: Katrina, Andrew, Joplin, Oklahoma City, 9/11, Columbine, Pulse Nightclub, Sandy Hook. CT's Youth Service Bureaus are often called to action when the community you serve experiences a community-wide crisis. The workshop will provide an introduction to disaster mental health and an overview of psychological first aid.

C. Fostering leadership through SEL

Robb Armstrong, Managing Director of Dylan's Wings of Change

Heather Wlochowski, Director, Manchester Youth Service Bureau

The more we can empower our youth to lead, the more successful we can all be in our programming. We will demonstrate some methods to create a space where youth can feel safe taking on the challenge of stepping up and into leadership roles.

D. Swipe Smart: Empowering Smart Online Choices for Youth: Modern safety skills for youth and those who support them in a screen-first world

Scott Driscoll, Founder, Internet Safety Concepts, LLC

In today's digital world, young people are just a swipe away from connection—and risk. This breakout session dives into the real online behaviors of youth, the platforms they love, and the hidden dangers they face every day. Through humor, real-world examples, and practical tools, participants will learn how to support smarter, safer digital choices for youth while maintaining healthy boundaries as professionals. Perfect for anyone working in youth services who wants to better understand, relate to, and protect the scroll generation.

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E. The Leadership Launchpad: Fueling Our Future Prevention Trailblazers

Wendy Mill, Program Manager, Communities & Youth, The Governor's Prevention Partnership and GPP Youth Advisory Board Members

Today's youth aren't just the leaders of tomorrow — they're already driving change. This interactive session will spotlight real-world examples of young prevention leaders making a difference across local, state, and federal levels. Participants will hear directly from youth members of the GPP Youth Advisory Board, gaining insight into their leadership journeys, key moments of growth, and the systems that helped them thrive.

Through small group activities and guided discussions, attendees will explore ways to infuse authentic youth leadership into existing prevention programs and identify essential skills young leaders will need to succeed in the years ahead. Whether you're just starting to engage youth or looking to strengthen current efforts, this session will offer fresh ideas, practical takeaways, and the inspiration to cultivate empowered, skilled, and visionary young leaders in your own community.

F. Uncovering the Influence: Trends and Tactics in Cannabis and Vape Retail Environments

Kara Sepulveda-Fonseca, Prevention Specialist, Alliance for Prevention and Wellness

Samantha Murcia, Prevention Specialist, Alliance for Prevention and Wellness

Eve Hein, Prevention Specialist, Alliance for Prevention and Wellness

This training is designed to equip participants with a deeper understanding of the factors driving youth use of cannabis and vape products. Attendees will explore key trends and findings from tobacco retail settings in Connecticut and examine how marketing strategies are used to target younger audiences. The session will also provide practical resources, including examples of completed environmental scan projects, along with guidance on how to implement these strategies in their own communities or professional work.

SESSION II

G. Appreciative Framework Strategies to Empower Adults to Restoratively Engage Youth and Young Adult Communities

Dr. Danielle Cooper, University of New Haven/Tow Youth Justice Institute

This interactive workshop will challenge you to reflect on how you engage youth and young adults. Building communities requires an intentional restorative lens, and the appreciative framework offers strategies to move through the phases of engagement that range from asocial to prosocial, as well as from transactional to transformative. If you are interested in asserting a strengths-based approach to sharing power and control with youth and young adults, this session is for you.

H. Beyond the Bell: A Creative Approach to a Teen Center Program

Arianna Flagg, Prevention Coordinator, Town of Somers

Jennifer Griger, Youth Services Coordinator, Town of Somers

Join us for an inside look at the Somers Teen Center, a daily after-school program designed to engage and empower middle school youth through consistent, creative programming. Hosted at the public library, the Teen Center runs youth-led activities with a focus on life skills and leadership. This session

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will explore how to develop a welcoming space for middle school students, how youth voices shape our offerings, and what's next as the program evolves. Whether you're starting from scratch or looking to refresh your existing after-school model, you'll leave with practical ideas and inspiration to take beyond the bell.

J. Intro to Needs Assessment-where to start to determine where your organization is going **Bonnie Smith, MPH, CPH, CPS, CEO; Kirsten Carew MPH, Public Health Data Analyst; Keri Humphries, MA, Program Manager, from B. Weyland Smith Consulting**

Team members from B. Weyland Smith Consulting will provide a framework for needs assessment in a "real world" community context incorporating ideas for quantitative and qualitative data sources, considerations of community readiness and organizational capacity, and how relationships with key community partners are factored into the process. The presenters will lean into their 20+ years of experience guiding communities, organizations, and coalitions through needs assessment to address youth issues to provide tangible steps for workshop participants to begin needs assessment at whatever scale they are comfortable with in the organizations they serve. Participants will leave with shared and printable resources to help them begin their own needs assessment that is appropriate for their organization and the community they serve.

K. Protecting Youth in a Digital World: The Hidden Risks of AI & Social Media **Marla Dakin, LCSW - Founder & Clinical Director, Farmington Valley Counseling Center** **Mary McPheat - CEO, Grounded Logic**

In a world where algorithms are quietly shaping how kids think, connect, and feel, youth service professionals must be equipped to guide kids and teens through the ever-changing digital landscape with clarity and confidence. This session explores the impact of AI and social media on youth mental health—and offers real-world tools and a simple framework (L.I.F.T.) to help today's youth build resilience, develop healthy tech habits, and thrive both online and off."

L. Seas the Day and Roll with the Waves- Empowerment in Prevention When Tides Get Rough **Kelsey Hust, LMSW, CPS, Substance Use Prevention & Clinical Specialist, Glastonbury Youth & Family Services**

We are dedicated individuals to this work supporting youth and prevention work. We often get lost in the multitude of focuses and responsibilities when suddenly a wave of unexpected turn of events occur- how do we manage this? How do we steer the boat in the right direction? How do we empower our youth to continue taking action steps during turbulent times? This training will take a playful yet tactful approach to answering these questions and more with a focus on supporting wellness for us as providers, as we support the wellness of youth in prevention work.

M. WerkShop 4 Winners **Trey Tucker, Plainville Youth Services**

"WERKSHOP 4 WINNERS is a dynamic music recording initiative that empowers youth to channel their emotions and creativity through songwriting and production. Participants gain hands-on experience

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with recording tools while developing key life skills—confidence, communication, conflict resolution, and social connection—through music-based self-expression.

SESSION III

N. Crisis, Courage, and Culture: Understanding Immigrant Youth Mental Health

Dr. Bianca Shinn-Desras, Director of Family Advocacy, Domus Kids

Carmen Williams, MPH, Family Advocate, Domus Kids,

Vanity Vazquez, LPC, Clinician, Centro Bienestar

How can we support immigrant youth who carry trauma, navigate systemic barriers, and still show up every day in our schools and programs? This session offers a strengths-based lens to understanding immigrant youth mental health—recognizing not only the resilience and cultural wisdom they bring, but also the emotional toll it can take on the professionals who support them. Youth development specialists, educators, and counselors are often the first line of emotional care, working under increasing pressure with limited resources.

This interactive session explores how trauma, fear of deportation, and displacement impact mental health, while also addressing the need for culturally rooted, non-clinical supports. Participants will engage in reflective dialogue and hands-on activities that highlight the importance of community-based organizations as vital partners in creating safe, healing-centered environments. Attendees will leave with trauma-informed, culturally responsive tools they can implement without pathologizing youth, and with renewed strategies to care for themselves and each other in the process.

O. Culture Shift: Crafting Prevention Messaging That Resonates Across Generations

Catherine Barden, Co-Founder- Culture of Change

Eli Barden, student- The Morgan School

Youth substance use is shifting, and it's no accident. Gen Z and Gen Alpha are making different choices, and prevention professionals are helping drive that change. Keeping the momentum going takes more than good programs. It takes a culture shift that reflects what today's youth actually value and respond to.

This dynamic, youth co-led session dives into how generational trends, communication styles, and cultural shifts are reshaping prevention. You'll get a firsthand look at The 11th Nugget, a video created from a youth-created campaign that shows how small, relatable messages can spark big conversations. We'll introduce the NACHO Prevention Model, a bold framework that is: Needs-Based, Affirming, Culture Shifting, Heart First, and Outcome Driven. You'll also explore how practical tools like Canva and ChatGPT can support co-creation of meaningful prevention strategies.

P. Hidden Risks + Tough Conversations

Kristen Sandler - Youth Prevention Coordinator, Town of Southington Youth Services/STEPS

No cap, bruh! It's hard to keep up with quickly changing trends among tweens and teens. This workshop will unveil the latest trends in youth substance use, from new "nic-free" vapes to the return of lean. Participants will have the chance to rifle through a fake teen's backpack to uncover all of the sneaky ways young people conceal what they don't want adults to find. Knowing what to do when you

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discover something "sus" is never easy, so this workshop will equip adults with some practical communication strategies that help build trust and open dialogue with youth.

Q. Lead, Inspire, & Empower - Youth Leadership Development through Shared Adventure Play ***Dan Jaskot, President, Empower Leadership***

This workshop, facilitated by Empower Leadership's Owner, Dan Jaskot, will include a blend of engaging leadership development activities and initiatives, interactive discussions about activity implementation, and workshops designed to introduce simple leadership development models that can be applied to various individual and group settings.

R. Scroll, Click, Bet: Understanding Screen Time, Gaming, and the Digital Priming for Youth Gambling

Brailee Whan, Prevention Specialist, BHcare
Dena Miccinello, Program, Manager, Catalyst CT the Hub
David Ruela, Program Coordinator, Amplify
Katie Wilt, Gambling Prevention Coordinator, SERAC
Jeff McKenna, Prevention Coordinator, WCTC

In this workshop, we will explore how screen time, gaming, and social media use are creating new digital challenges, including those involving youth gambling. Participants will learn how gambling-like content is embedded in apps and games, why it matters for prevention and mental health, and how to respond with strategies that promote digital wellness and informed choices.

S. Seen, Heard, and Valued: Youth Perspectives on Mental Health and Belonging

Dr. Bianca Shinn-Desras, Director of Family Advocacy, Domus
Carmen Williams, Family Advocate, Domus
Mishel Jimenez (student presenter) Domus

For many young people, feeling seen, heard, and valued is not just a wish, it's a lifeline. Youth mental health is deeply connected to whether they feel like they belong and have trusting relationships with adults who advocate for them unconditionally. This workshop centers youth voice and highlights how relationship-based practices—like the Domus Relational Model and its Family Advocacy approach, can serve as protective factors against trauma, instability, and systemic exclusion.

Co-facilitated by a youth presenter, this session explores how family advocates build bridges between youth, families, and institutions. The youth speaker will share the supports that helped—and those that hurt—their mental health journey, and how a consistent, caring adult shifted their path. Through engaging activities and reflection, participants will learn how to embed trauma-informed, culturally grounded, and youth-centered strategies in their own programs and schools.