



Child Fatality Task Force Leadership 2026

Child Fatality Task Force Co-Chairs



Karen McLeod, MSW, has served as the President/CEO for Benchmarks, a statewide non-profit association, since June 2006. In this role, she provides strategic leadership in the representation of provider agencies that deliver MH/DD/SA, child welfare and juvenile justice programs to children, adults and families across North Carolina. She engages state legislators and state/federal agencies to secure funding and legislation that supports providers in improving behavioral healthcare and quality of life outcomes for the people they serve. Karen moves forward policy/practice issues to proactively promote association positions with key state government decision makers, legislators and community advocacy groups.



Jill K. Cox is the President and CEO of Communities In Schools of North Carolina. In her 20-plus years of experience as a nonprofit leader and public relations/government relations professional, she has managed a wide array of programs and projects in both nonprofit and government organizations to improve organizational efficiency and effectiveness, consistency of message delivery and influence policy in both the NC General Assembly and the Congress. During her professional career, Cox has worked for a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, NC State Government, the United Way, and Communities In Schools. Cox was born in rural Columbus, Texas. She graduated Cum Laude from Texas State University and is the mother of two children.

Child Fatality Task Force Executive Director



Kella Hatcher, JD, has been the Executive Director of the Task Force since 2015. Kella's background is in juvenile law. Her previous roles include authoring juvenile law manuals for the University of North Carolina School of Government and serving as associate counsel for North Carolina's Guardian ad Litem Program where she advised and trained attorneys advocating for children in juvenile court, wrote an attorney practice manual, and led the Juvenile Code Revision Committee for the NC Court Improvement Program. Early in her career she also worked as an assistant district attorney. Kella currently serves on a variety of state-level advisory groups related to child well-being, and she has served in multiple volunteer leadership roles for organizations serving children. She received her law degree from the University of North Carolina and undergraduate degree from Purdue University.

Unintentional Death Prevention Committee Co-Chairs



Martha Sue Hall, MS, is retired from a career in the North Carolina court system where she served in multiple roles such as Family Court Administrator, Guardian ad Litem Program Administrator, NC Juvenile Court Improvement Project Director, and Victim/Witness Assistant. Ms. Hall has served for more than two decades on the Albemarle City Council and is now in the role of Mayor Pro Tem. She also has served in numerous other public service roles such as: Stanly County Commissioner, member of the NC League of Municipalities where she currently serves as Immediate Past President, and President of the North Carolina Women in Municipal Government. Ms. Hall has served on the Child Fatality Task Force since 2008.



Scott Proescholdbell, MPH, leads the Injury Epidemiology, Surveillance, and Informatics Unit at the North Carolina Division of Public Health. He serves as Principal Investigator, Co-Principal Investigator, or Data Lead on several CDC-funded cooperative agreements, including the North Carolina Violent Death Reporting System (NC-VDRS) and the Overdose Data to Action initiative. Scott also holds an Adjunct Faculty appointment in the Department of Epidemiology at the UNC Gillings School of Global Public Health. He directs a high-performing team, providing strategic leadership and building institutional capacity to advance data-driven, evidence-based public health practices. Scott has received multiple national and state honors, including the Alex Kelter Vision Award from Safe States Alliance and the Ron Levine Public Health Award from the North Carolina Division of Public Health.

Perinatal Health Committee Co-Chairs



Belinda Pettiford, MPH, is Section Chief for Women, Infant, and Community Wellness and the Title V MCH Director in the NC Division of Public Health (DPH). As Section Chief she oversees the state's maternal health, family planning, preconception health, teen pregnancy prevention, sickle cell, and numerous programs focused improving birth outcomes. Title V is the federal-state partnership focused on improving the health of mothers, infants, and children. Belinda is the recipient of the Ronald H. Levine Legacy award in North Carolina which recognizes her distinguished history of achievement in improving public health and the recipient of the national Maternal and Child Health Bureau Director's Award, which recognizes her contributions to the health of infants, mothers, children, adolescents and children with special health care needs.



Sarah Verbiest, DrPH, MSW, MPH, has worked for more than 28 years in maternal, child, and family well-being. Dr. Verbiest is the director of the Jordan Institute for Families at UNC School of Social Work and the executive director of the Collaborative for Maternal and Infant Health at UNC School of Medicine. She supervises programs that serve clinics across North Carolina, serves on policy teams, holds a robust research portfolio, and has convened statewide coalitions to address maternal and infant mortality disparities. Dr. Verbiest has led research studies and leveraged the findings into clinical practice. She has co-led a national center providing leadership and coaching to maternal and child health programs across the country. She has edited four books and published over 45 articles. She leads the Show Your Love Today preconception health campaign and is currently focusing on preconception health for people with chronic conditions.

Intentional Death Prevention Committee Co-Chairs



Jennie Kristiansen, MSW, LCSW is the Director of Social Services in Chatham County where she has worked since 2007. She has been actively involved in both state and local child welfare initiatives, serving for over ten years as a chair of the Children's Services Committee of the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services and was an inaugural member of the Child Welfare Unified Leadership Team, a partnership between state and county leaders to transform child welfare. She co-chairs the Chatham County Local Team (child death review team), is a member of the Juvenile Crime Prevention Council, and the Vaya Health Region 4 Board of Directors. In 2022, Ms. Kristiansen was named Director of the Year by the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services. Ms. Kristiansen received her undergraduate and graduate degrees from the University of North Carolina and has served on the Child Fatality Task Force since 2018.



Whitney Belich, JD, has worked with the North Carolina Conference of District Attorneys since 2019, currently as Child Abuse and Juvenile Resource Prosecutor — a role she expanded into after five years as Child Abuse Resource Prosecutor. In this capacity, she provides legal guidance to prosecutors, law enforcement, social workers, physicians, and other allied professionals across North Carolina on issues of child abuse and juvenile justice, while developing and delivering statewide training on emerging legal issues in these areas. She also handles conflict prosecutions at the request of District Attorneys, and represents prosecutors' interests on several statewide committees and task forces, including as co-chair of the NC Child Fatality Task Force's Intentional Death Prevention Committee. Before joining the Conference full-time, Whitney worked as an Assistant District Attorney in Johnston County and within the NC Attorney General's Office. She is a graduate of Florida State University and Wake Forest School of Law.