



Child Fatality Task Force Leadership 2024/2025

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 the needs of 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 is currently serving in her 20th year 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 Second Vice 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 NC Division of Public Health where he is the Principal Investigator (PI) or Co-PI of the NC Violent Death Reporting System (NC-VDRS), NC Overdose Data to Action (NC-OD2A-S), and NC Firearm Injury Surveillance Through Emergency Rooms (NC-FASTER) CDC cooperative agreements. He has worked in the field of injury and violence prevention

for 15 years and in public health surveillance more broadly for more than 25 years. Scott has worked at multiple levels of government (local, state, federal) as well as at university prevention and non-profit research centers. He currently has an Adjunct Faculty appointment with the Department of Epidemiology at UNC Gilling's School of Global Public Health. In 2020, Scott received the national Safe States Alliance Alex Kelter Vision Award for his leadership in injury and violence prevention.

Perinatal Health Committee Co-Chairs

Belinda Pettiford, MPH, is Section Chief for Women, Infant, and Community Wellness in the NC Division of Public Health (DPH) where she provides oversight to the state's maternal health, family planning, preconception health, teen pregnancy prevention, sickle cell, tobacco use, and numerous programs focused on equity in birth outcomes. Her past roles in DPH have included Program Manager for Healthy Beginnings (North Carolina's Minority Infant Mortality Reduction Program), Healthy Start Baby Love Plus (3 federally funded perinatal disparities programs), and Unit Supervisor for Perinatal Health and Family Support. 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, is the Director of the Jordan Institute for Families and a Professor in the UNC School of Social Work and the Executive Director of the Collaborative for Maternal and Infant Health in the UNC School of Medicine. Dr. Verbiest has over 25 years of experience in maternal, child, and family well-being in North Carolina. She supervises programs that serve clinics across North Carolina, serves on policy teams, holds a robust research portfolio, and has convened statewide and national coalitions to address maternal and infant mortality disparities. Dr. Verbiest has led complex, community-engaged, mixed-methods research studies and leveraged the findings into on-the-ground change. She also has written and edited four books and four special journal issues focused on maternal and child health. She is a Co-Principal Director for the national Maternal Health Learning and Innovation Center, a founder and Co-Director of the 4th Trimester Project, and leads the national NC Preconception Health and Health Care Initiative.

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. Ms. Kristiansen is a tri-chair of the Children's Services Committee of the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services and serves on the Unified Leadership Team, a partnership between state and county leaders to transform child welfare. She co-chairs the Chatham County Community Child Protection-Child Fatality Prevention 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 has served on the Child Fatality Task Force since 2018.

Whitney Belich, JD, is currently the Child Abuse Resource Prosecutor with the NC Conference of District Attorneys. In this role, Whitney provides technical assistance and training on issues related to the physical or sexual abuse of children and she also handles conflict prosecutions in child abuse cases upon a request from the District Attorney. Whitney began her legal career as an Assistant District Attorney in North Carolina where she handled cases involving impaired driving and sexual and physical abuse of both children and adults. Whitney also worked at the Attorney General's Office where she focused on the training and regulation of law enforcement officers as well as handling criminal appeals. Whitney graduated from Florida State University with a degree in Criminology and then attended Wake Forest School of Law.