

SPEAKERS & BIOS - 2022 CONVENTION



New York StateWide Senior Action Council, Inc
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María Alvarez, Executive Director, StateWide

María Alvarez has worked with senior citizens groups as an organizer, advocate, and director of housing and caregivers programs for over 30 years. She has designed and implemented educational, social service, and leadership programs for older adults. She holds a Bachelor's Degree from Marquette University and a Master's Degree in Non-Profit Management from the New School for Social Research where she was a Sloan Fellow.



Sarah Askew, Outreach Counselor, StateWide

Sarah Askew grew up in Oswego County and currently resides in Tompkins County. She graduated from SUNY Oswego with a degree in English literature and did graduate work in social issues. Sarah has worked in the health care and human services fields for over 10 years. She is passionate about helping people and being a force for positive change in the world.



Michael Burgess

For more than 46 years, Michael Burgess has worked in the field of aging and human services and played a role in the development of key legislation and programs to enhance the quality of life for older New Yorkers. Michael is currently a consultant with Community Caregivers in Albany which helps older persons remain living independently in the community; Michael also was Executive Director of StateWide for 14 years, (1982-1987, 1995-2004), Executive of the New York State Alliance for Retired Americans (2004-2007) and Director of the NYS Office for the Aging (2007-2010).

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Mary Bassett

Mary T. Bassett, M.D., M.P.H., was appointed Acting Commissioner of Health on December 1, 2021 and confirmed by the New York State Senate on January 20, 2022. She previously served as Director of the François-Xavier Bagnoud (FXB) Center for Health and Human Rights at Harvard University and FXB Professor of the Practice of Health and Human Rights in the department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. Prior to that, she served as Commissioner of the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, Director for the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation's African Health Initiative and Child Well-Being Prevention Program; and as Deputy Commissioner of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene. Early in her career, Dr. Bassett served on the medical faculty at the University of Zimbabwe and went on to serve as Associate Director of Health Equity at the Rockefeller Foundation's Southern Africa Office. After returning to the United States, she served on the faculty of Columbia University, including as Associate Professor of Clinical Epidemiology in the Mailman School of Public Health. Dr. Bassett received a B.A. in History and Science from Harvard University, an M.D. from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, and an M.P.H. from the University of Washington.



Gene Dumlao, Outreach Counselor, StateWide

Gene Dumlao joined the staff in February, 2011 and is one of the staff experts that responds to the Patients Rights Hotline calls. He provides counseling on Medicare benefits and the EPIC program to help enrollees make informed choices. He is a certified HIICAP (Health Insurance Information Counseling and Assistance Program) counselor. Prior to that, Gene assisted seniors for five years at EPIC, the Elderly Pharmaceutical Insurance Coverage plan for NYS.

He honed his skills and knowledge on their Helpline then served his last four years there as an EPIC Outreach Field Representative. Previously, he was with IBM in Dallas, TX serving as a Customer Fulfillment Professional. Gene also was the Distribution Warehouse Manager for Diamond Distribution out of Laredo, TX. Gene has been solving issues and doing what is right and fair for organizations and members for over thirty years.

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Michelle Crentsil

Michelle Crentsil is the Statewide Political Director of NYSNA. She is deeply committed to the labor movement and the overall fight for social justice. Prior to joining NYSNA's political department, Michelle organized healthcare workers at the Committee of Interns & Residents (CIR/SEIU) and property services workers at SEIU Local 32BJ, working on their airports campaign in New York and New Jersey. She also funded and advised political and advocacy campaigns nationwide to end mass incarceration at Open Philanthropy.

While most of her work has been with institutions and organizations, Michelle is no stranger to movement work and activism. She actively participated in the Occupy Wall Street movement and continues to support the Movement for Black Lives. She comes from a family of healthcare workers and advocates, including her mother who retired as an RN after nearly 40 years in the field.

She started at NYSNA - the largest union for registered nurses in NY - in March 2020 just as the pandemic started to make NY the epicenter of the epicenter. She immediately went to work and built a strong team to engage union members, elected officials, and community allies to advocate for patient and healthcare worker safety during a major healthcare crisis. In her first year, Michelle continued to strengthen NYSNA's political and legislative work. She directed NYSNA's electoral work, engaging members in state and federal GOTV program in 2020. NYSNA nurses teamed up with their union partners to get out the vote around NYS winning a historic Democratic supermajority in the State Senate. Through Michelle's leadership and relationships, NYSNA partnered with National Nurses United to support Nurses for Biden. NYSNA members worked with nurses around the country to reach out to other healthcare workers and healthcare voters in battleground states to ensure they voted in the presidential election. Through this program, NYSNA member volunteers contacted over 200k voters in battleground states to get out the vote.

Michelle also played a leading role in NYSNA's lobbying and legislative campaign efforts to pass the first staff staffing law for hospitals which was signed in June 2021 - a major achievement and movement in the right direction in a decades long fight to ensure enforceable staffing nurse-to-patient ratios. Safe staffing has been a top priority for NYSNA and healthcare unions for years. Michelle also led NYSNA's legislative advocacy during this year's budget cycle amplifying the voices of rank-and-file nurses on the frontlines. Nurses raised the alarm demanding a budget that invests in care. Through their tireless advocacy, this budget cites record investment in healthcare including expanded access to care, safety net hospital funding, increased Medicaid funding, and healthcare workforce recruitment and retention initiatives including healthcare worker bonuses, nurse loan repayment, and tier 6 pension reforms.

Advocacy for healthcare workers and registered nurses has never been more important, particularly since we are still going through the pandemic. Michelle took over the political department of the largest nurses union in NY right before we entered our biggest health crisis in generations, and her leadership has delivered results that improve the working conditions of the members and their patients.

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Ron Deutsch

Ron Deutsch is the Executive Director for New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness, a non-profit organization, started in 1996, dedicated to promoting state investments that improve the lives of low-income families and workers across the state and advance a fair and equitable tax system. NYFF is dedicated to protecting and uplifting all citizens which requires passing a budget that preserves the promise of New York and shares resources equitably between all of its residents.

He has been a tireless advocate for working families for the past 25 years in Albany and led the Statewide Emergency Network for Social and Economic Security (SENSES, a statewide anti-poverty advocacy organization) for 13 years and the Director New Yorkers for Fiscal Fairness for past 8 years.

At FPI, Ron Deutsch's budget work will focus on building broad coalitions around the renewal of the millionaires tax, ending the States austerity budgeting and reinvesting in our schools and cities, boosting the wages of working families, addressing deficiencies in our economic development system and promoting a progressive state and local tax structure that works for all of us. He also leads an all volunteer non-profit (www.thegivingcircle.org) that works to help improve the lives of families in the Capital District, nationally and internationally.



Lara Kassal

Lara Kassal is the Coordinator of Medicaid Matters New York, a statewide coalition of over 140 organizations representing the interests of New Yorkers served by the Medicaid program. In this role, Lara organizes all of the activities of this diverse coalition, which works to ensure that Medicaid consumer interests are included, understood and met in any and all discussions on Medicaid in New York. She was a member of the original Medicaid Redesign Team, as well as the DSRIP Project Approval and Oversight Panel.

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Assemblymember Richard N. Gottfried

Assemblymember Gottfried represents the 75th Assembly District, covering Chelsea, Hell's Kitchen, Murray Hill, Midtown and part of the Lincoln Center area in Manhattan. He is chair of the Assembly Health Committee since 1987. He is a leading state health policy-maker not only in New York but also nationally. He was a major architect of New York's landmark managed care reforms, and is continuing to fight for stronger protections for consumers and health care providers, & public support for universal access to quality, affordable health care.

Highlights of his legislative work include the passage of: the Prenatal Care Assistance Program for low income women; the Child Health Plus Program, which allows low-and moderate-income parents to get free or low-cost health insurance for their children; the law that gives patients access to information about a doctor's background and malpractice record; Family Health Plus, which provides free health coverage for low-income adults; the Health Care Proxy Law, which allows people to designate someone to make health care decisions for them if they lose decision-making capacity and the Family Health Care Decision Act, which allows family members to make health care decisions when an incapacitated person has not filled out a health care proxy; simplification of enrollment in publicly-financed programs (such as Medicaid); the HIV Testing and Confidentiality Law; laws that promote stronger primary and preventive care and formation of accountable care organizations (ACOs); and the law to legalize medical marijuana. In the Legislature, he has been the leading proponent of patient autonomy, especially in end-of-life care, and reproductive freedom. He also sponsors the N.Y. Health bill to create a universal publicly funded single-payer health coverage plan for New York State. Each year, he fights to protect and increase funding for Medicaid, school health clinics, HIV/AIDS services, and other health concerns. Dick Gottfried is a member of the Assembly Majority Steering Committee and the committees on Rules and Higher Education, as well as Health. He is the head of the Manhattan Assembly Delegation. He previously served as Deputy Majority Leader; Assistant Majority Leader; chair of the Assembly committees on Codes (covering the criminal justice system), and Children and Families; and chair of the Assembly task forces on the Homeless, Campaign Finance Reform, and Crime Victims.

Mr. Gottfried was first elected to the Assembly in 1970, at the age of 23, while a student at Columbia Law School. He was born in New York City in 1947. He is a graduate of Stuyvesant High School, Cornell University (BA, 1968), and Columbia Law School (JD, 1973). He is a lawyer, but does not maintain a private practice. He works full time as a legislator. He is a fellow of the New York Academy of Medicine, and a member of the American Public Health Association, the New York Civil Liberties Union, the Association of the Bar of the City of New York, the Art Students League, and the China Institute. He lives in Manhattan with his wife, Louise, a nursery school teacher. Their son Michael and his wife have a daughter.

Assemblyman Gottfried plans to retire from office at the end of 2022.

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Blair Horner

Blair Horner is the Executive Director of the New York Public Interest Research Group (NYPIRG), appointed in September of 2015. Horner joined the staff of NYPIRG in 1979, and was employed there almost exclusively since; for decades he served as NYPIRG’s legislative director. In his over 30 years of work with NYPIRG, he has lobbied on a wide range of issues, including energy policy, political reform, government openness and accountability, tobacco control, health care and financial services. He has written scores of reports

examining issues including redistricting, campaign finance, political ethics, bank fees, auto insurance, health care, tobacco use, lead poisoning and higher education funding.

From 2007 through early 2008, Horner was a Special Advisor on Policy and Public Integrity to the New York State Attorney General. Among his responsibilities was the creation of the “Project Sunlight” website, which allows New Yorkers to simultaneously search governmental databases – campaign contributions, lobbying, contracts, legislation, among others. From 2011 until late 2013, Horner was the Vice President for Advocacy for the American Cancer Society, where he oversaw the lobbying, community organizing and statewide issue campaigns in New Jersey and New York, as well as its federal advocacy efforts.

Horner’s comments have been widely reported by the media. He has been interviewed on the Today Show, World News Tonight, Al Jazeera America, on A&E’s Investigative Reports, and profiled in the New York Times. Horner’s opinion pieces have been published in the Albany Times Union, Buffalo News, Rochester Democrat & Chronicle, New York Daily News, Newsday and other New York dailies. He is a regular commentator on WAMC public radio and its affiliates.

Horner has received numerous awards, including awards from the AARP, Common Cause, the League of Women Voters, the New York Attorney General, and the New York City Asthma Partnership. In Fall of 1999, Empire State Reports magazine named me as one of the 25 most influential New Yorkers in the previous 25 years. In Spring of 2014, he was named one of The Albany Power 100 by City & State Magazine. In January of 2017, he received a “50 over 50” award by the same magazine.

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Senator Rachel May

Senator Rachel May represents Central New York's 53rd District, which includes most of the City of Syracuse, parts of Onondaga and Oneida counties, and all of Madison County. She chairs the Senate Committee on Aging and the Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, and is a member of the committees on Agriculture, Banks, Cities 2, Elections, Environmental Conservation, Health, Joint Senate Task Force on Opioids, Addiction & Overdose Prevention, Legislative Women's Caucus, and State-Native American Relations.

As a freshman legislator in the 2019 session, Senator May was instrumental in passing transformative legislation, including comprehensive election reforms, tenant-centered housing reforms, unprecedented criminal justice reform, and the nation's most ambitious climate legislation. She has worked hard to bring the people of Central New York into the process of decision-making in Albany by holding a record number of legislative hearings in the region on issues including the Climate Leadership and Community Preservation Act, rural broadband, farm labor rights, health care for all, and Upstate nursing home issues during the COVID-19 crisis. In addition, she has brought her Downstate colleagues to Central New York for roundtables on opioid addiction treatment and prevention, minority and women-owned businesses, and childcare and child welfare. She sponsored and passed into law a bill to create the first regional STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and mathematics) school for Central New York, which is currently under construction in the City of Syracuse.

As chair of the Senate Committee on Aging, she has been a vigorous supporter of home care workforce initiatives, expanded funding for in-home care programs, the Long-term Care Ombudsman Program, and nursing home accountability. She has sponsored bills to create a Reimagining Long Term Care Task Force, authorize a family caregiver tax credit, and create a home care jobs innovation fund to support workforce growth.

A resident of Syracuse, Senator May had a successful career in higher education prior to running for public office. She started out as a professor of Russian language and literature at Stony Brook University, where she was a proud member of UUP, before earning tenure at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota. She moved to Syracuse in 2001 and retrained in ecology and sustainability, becoming director of sustainability education at Syracuse University. Senator May earned a master's degree from Oxford University on a Marshall Scholarship and a Ph.D. in Russian language and literature from Stanford University. She also earned a master's degree from SUNY-ESF. She has one daughter who recently graduated from Cornell University.

Senator May is now serving in her second term.

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Gail Myers

Gail Myers joined the staff of New York StateWide Senior Action Council in April 2011. In 2013 she was named Deputy Director. She is a certified HIICAP (Health Insurance Information Counseling and Assistance Program) counselor, a certified Long Term Care Ombudsman, and has served on the NYS Dept. of Health DSRIP CBO/Cultural Competency Workgroup. Gail has more than three decades experience working to improve health and human service programs and as a public relations specialist.

Prior to joining the staff of StateWide, Gail was appointed by Governor Spitzer to serve as the Special Assistant for Community Affairs and Public Participation at the New York State Office for the Aging. In prior years, she was the political director for the Medical Society of the State of New York, the principal lobbyist for the New York State Nurses Association, and legislative assistant to the Chairman of the NYS Assembly Ways & Means Committee. She is currently serving as President of Bethlehem Neighbors, a neighbor helping neighbor “village” in Albany County.



Kathleen Otte

Kathleen Otte is the Regional Administrator for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS), within the Office of Program Operations and Local Engagement (OPOLE). In this capacity, Kathleen is responsible for outreach, stakeholder engagement and environmental scanning related to all of CMS’ programs. Stakeholder engagement informs CMS of ‘on the ground’ impact of its policies, programs and initiatives.

Prior to joining CMS, Kathleen served as the Regional Administrator for the Administration for Community Living and as the New Hampshire State Director for the Bureau of Elderly and Adult Services, NH Department of Health and Human Services. Kathleen and the New Hampshire team, received the Malcom Baldrige Award for Innovation from the American Healthcare Association for the implementation of a Single Dose Administration Program and two innovation awards from the Council of State Governments for implementing a Consumer Directed Caregiving Program and Adult Protection Protocols, statewide. In 2015, Kathleen received the Jane Adam award from ‘Be the Evidence International’ for her work in Social Justice. Kathleen holds a Masters Degree in Organizational Development and a Bachelors Degree in Social Work (gerontology) from the University of Oklahoma.

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Cynthia Rudder, PhD

Cynthia has been a longtime advocate for nursing home residents in New York State. Dr. Rudder was a Founder and Director of LTCCC (fka) Nursing Home Community Coalition of New York State from 1982 to 2012, and is continuing her advocacy work with a number of organizations fighting for a good quality of life and care for our most vulnerable citizens. Dr. Rudder has received a number of awards for her research and advocacy, including a Lifetime Achievement Award from CMS in April, 2013 and the

Director's Distinguished Achievement in Aging Award for Advocacy and Protecting the Rights of the Elderly from the NYS Office for the Aging in 2010. She has been or is a member of many state and federal advisory groups and with grants from numerous foundations and governments, she has published a number of reports and articles on nursing home and assisted living. She works as a consultant to StateWide on our work to uphold nursing home residents rights.



Rhonda Schwartz

Rhonda Schwartz has served as a Regional Administrator for the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), since 2019 and currently acts as Bi-Regional Administrator for Regions II (NY, NJ, PR, and USVI) and III (DC, DE, MD, PA, VA, and WV). Rhonda joined ACL in July 2016 as an Aging Services Program Specialist in ACL's Region I office located in Boston, MA. In that capacity, she worked with federal, state, and tribal organizations, with particular

attention to oversight of the Older Americans Act state and tribal grant programs. Prior to joining ACL, she spent several years managing OAA and other ACL programs at the Rhode Island Division of Elderly Affairs (DEA). Rhonda earned a B.S. in Business Administration from Georgetown University in 1985 and a J.D. from Columbia University in the City of New York in 1988. Following award of her J.D., she joined a leading commercial real estate practice in Manhattan, NY, where she developed an expertise in office and retail leasing. Rhonda left her law practice in 2004 to pursue a Master of Social Work degree, which she received from Rhode Island College in 2006.

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Denise Soffel, PhD

Denise Soffel, a member of StateWide, has been confirmed by the NYS Senate for her nomination by Governor Hochul to the newly formed consumer seat. Denise earned her PhD and master's degree in public administration from New York University's Wagner Graduate School of Public Service. She recently retired from her position as a Principal at Health Management Associates, a national research and consulting firm. During her eight years at HMA, Soffel helped clients understand New York's dynamic and changing health care landscape.

Previously, she served for two years as the executive director for the New York State Senate Committee on Health. StateWide first met Denise when she worked at the Community Service Society of New York (CSSNY) and helped found Medicaid Matters New York, a statewide coalition dedicated to bringing the voices and experiences of Medicaid consumers into the policy process.



Carrie Tracy, JD

Carrie Tracy is Senior Director of the Health Initiatives Department at the Community Service Society, where she conducts health policy analysis. Previously, Ms. Tracy conducted policy analysis on health care, immigration, and other issues at the Northwest Federation of Community Organizations. Ms. Tracy has a BSFS from Georgetown University School of Foreign Service and a JD from the University of Washington School of Law.

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LOIS UTTLEY, MPP

Lois Uttley is the Director of the Women’s Health Program for Community Catalyst, a national consumer health advocacy organization. In that role, she is building on more than 25 years of research, policy analysis and advocacy to advance access to timely, affordable and culturally-competent health care for women, LGBTQ people and families. Ms. Uttley, who is based in Manhattan, is active in New York consumer health advocacy, serving on the steering committee of the statewide Health Care for All NY coalition. She founded & is coordinator of a statewide consumer alliance, Community Voices for Health System Accountability (CVHSA), that is raising consumer voices as health systems propose mergers, acquisitions, new construction, downsizing and closings of hospitals. In August of 2020, she testified before a joint hearing of the NYS Assembly & Senate Health Committees, proposing the use of Health Equity Assessments to evaluate Certificate of Need applications to determine whether CONs will improve or worsen access to health services for underserved communities.

Ms. Uttley was founder and Director of the MergerWatch Project & previously served as Vice President of Family Planning Advocates of NYS, Director of Public Affairs for the NYS Department of Health and as a journalist covering New York State government for the Albany Times Union. She has served as President of the Public Health Association of NYC and Chair of the national Action Board and Joint Policy Committee of the American Public Health Association. In New York, she has served on numerous city and state health policy advisory boards and councils. Most recently, she was a member of the NYS DOH Hospital Quality Rating Stakeholder Workgroup and the NYS DOH Workgroup on Freestanding Emergency Departments.

Ms. Uttley has deep knowledge of health systems transformation and the ways in which consumers can be affected when their local delivery systems consolidate, downsize or close. Her most recent publication, “Giving New Yorkers a Voice in Oversight of Hospital Consolidation,” appeared in the Spring 2019 issue of the New York State Bar Association’s Health Law Journal. She was lead author of “Empowering New York Consumers in an Era of Hospital Consolidation” (May 2018), which reported findings from a year-long study of New York’s Certificate of Need (CON) program, funded by the New York State Health Foundation. The report recommended that state oversight of hospital consolidation should be more transparent and engaging of affected consumers and require hospitals to predict the impact of proposed mergers on the price of health care. A 2016 national study she co-authored, “When Hospitals Merge: Updating State Oversight to Protect Access to Care, identified best practices from among the 36 CON programs still in operation.

She has been active in national women’s health advocacy as co-founder of Raising Women’s Voices for the Health Care We Need, which has regional coordinators in 27 states. She earned a Master’s in Public Affairs and Policy from the Nelson A. Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy at the University at Albany and teaches in the Master’s in Health Advocacy Program at Sarah Lawrence College. She was honored by the Ms. Foundation for Women with its Gloria Award, and has received awards for her women’s health advocacy leadership from APHA’s Maternal Health section and its Sexual and Reproductive Health section.