

Speaker Biographies

Improving Education and Workforce Outcomes for Systems-Involved Youth
An AYPF Discussion Group | July 26, 2018

Kisha Bird
Director of Youth Policy
Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP)



Kisha Bird is CLASP's director of youth policy. Ms. Bird works to expand access to education, employment, and support services for opportunity youth and other vulnerable youth. She is an expert in federal policy for vulnerable youth and helps ensure national legislation is implemented in communities nationwide and has maximum impact for poor and low-income youth and youth of color. Before joining CLASP, Ms. Bird was director of the Pennsylvania Statewide Afterschool/Youth Development Network, working to advance youth policy and make quality education and afterschool programs accessible to young people. Prior to that, she was a program officer at the Philadelphia Foundation, where she helped develop and manage the Fund for Children, Youth Advisory Board, and discretionary grants process. She also has direct service experience, working in various community settings with children, youth and families. Ms. Bird

holds a master of social service and master of law and social policy from Bryn Mawr College Graduate School of Social Work and Social Research. Additionally, she earned a bachelor's in sociology from Spelman College. Lastly, she is a graduate of the Education Policy Fellowship Program, a joint program of the Institute for Educational Leadership and the Pennsylvania Education Policy Leadership Center.

Nigel Bowe
Program Director, The Choice is Yours
JEVS Human Services



Nigel Bowe has been in the Human Services field for 29 years, and has worked with various populations, specifically focusing on at-risk youth and families. In his career, Nigel has operated juvenile residential alternative-to-incarceration programs, as well as community-based programs for youth returning from residential placement. Nigel is currently the Program Director for JEVS Human Services' The Choice is Yours program, which is an innovative diversion program developed by the Philadelphia District Attorney's Office for first time non-violent felony offenders. Nigel holds a BS in Sociology, and is a certified Offender Workforce Development Specialist by the state of PA, which allows him to assist returning citizens in

developing career plans. Nigel is also a motivational speaker, presenter, trainer and facilitator, who has dedicated himself to improving our nation's criminal justice system, specifically the disparities resulting from mass incarceration, and the issues associated with the "School-to-Prison Pipeline" trend. Nigel also has an athletic background, having played college football at VA Tech, as well as having a short stint as a free agent with the 1985 Dallas Cowboys.

Simon Gonsoulin, M.Ed.

Project Director

National Evaluation and Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected, Delinquent, or At-Risk (NDTAC)



Simon Gonsoulin, M.Ed., is a principal researcher for Human Services and Public Health Program for the American Institutes for Research where he serves as the Project Director for the National Technical Assistance Center for the Education of Children and Youth Who Are Neglected or Delinquent (NDTAC/ED). He is the co-lead for the Children of Incarcerated Parents task of the Interagency Working Group on Youth Programs (IWGYP/HHS). Most recently serves as the co-director of the Defending Childhood State Policy Initiative Strategic Planning Process funded by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. (OJJDP). Additionally, Mr. Gonsoulin performed as a juvenile justice specialist providing technical assistance on the Center for Coordinated Assistance to States (CCAS)(OJJDP) to SAGs and state and community juvenile justice agencies and facilities in emergency preparedness for juvenile residential facilities. Mr. Gonsoulin has acted as the juvenile justice resource specialist for System of Care sites for over 45 projects across the country while serving on the Technical Assistance Partnership (TAP) and the Healthy Transitions Initiative (HTI) (SAMHSA).

Prior to joining AIR, Mr. Gonsoulin was appointed to the Governor’s Cabinet in Louisiana as the Deputy Secretary of the Office of Youth Development where he led the state’s juvenile justice reform efforts for four years. Mr. Gonsoulin served as a voting member and policy maker for the Louisiana Children’s Cabinet whose membership was made of heads of all children and youth serving agencies working closely and collaboratively with primarily child welfare, substance abuse, education, public health and mental health. He also served as the State Director of Education for the Office of Youth Development prior to the gubernatorial appointment. As director he oversaw the state-wide educational programs for youth in secure care and community based placements, including IDEA and TIPD serves. Prior to working with the Office of Youth Development, Mr. Gonsoulin was the Director of Special Education Services in the West Baton Rouge Parish School System. Mr. Gonsoulin holds a Master’s of Education in Administration and Supervision and a Bachelor’s Degree in Elementary Grades and Special Education from Louisiana State University.

Isaac Hammond-Paul

Deputy Director

DC ReEngagement Center



Isaac Hammond-Paul is the Deputy Director at the DC ReEngagement Center. He manages new and existing partnerships with community partners and District agencies, carries a caseload of young people, and oversees data collection and evaluation. He grew up in New York and attended the University of Chicago for both his undergraduate degree and Master of Public Policy. While studying criminal justice policy in graduate school, he worked at CeaseFire, a Chicago-based organization that aims to reduce gun violence by mediating street level conflicts. Upon graduation, Isaac worked as a high school teacher at the Cook County Jail’s Day Reporting Center, an intensive supervision program that offers substance abuse treatment services, cognitive behavioral therapy, and education for non-violent offenders. From there, he moved to work at a Chicago based child welfare agency, where he worked on program

development for a violence prevention program. When Isaac relocated to the District in 2013, he worked for the Department of Youth Rehabilitation Services (the deep end juvenile justice system in Washington, DC) in the Office of Education and Workforce Development.

Kat Keenan
Deputy Director
Foster Forward, Works Wonders Program



Kat Keenan is an experienced non-profit administrator and innovative program developer with a policy background. Ms. Keenan began her career in child welfare working at the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children supporting program development and financing. She then transitioned to policy work for five years at Rhode Island KIDS COUNT, a child data and policy organization. There she helped to research, write and guide policy and practice as it related to income support programs and child welfare in Rhode Island. In 2008 Ms. Keenan became the Policy Director at Foster Forward, a dynamic and leading non-profit organization in Rhode Island. In 2009 she became the Deputy Director of Foster Forward, where she is still currently employed. In this capacity, Ms. Keenan authors and

directs state and federal grants that utilize best practice research to transform programs and systems to better serve clients. Ms. Keenan leads efforts to utilize data and practice lessons from youth serving programs to inform and help hardwire evidence-informed practices into the system of care in Rhode Island and to transform Foster Forward into a results-based organization.

Ms. Keenan has facilitated the implementation, scale up and sustainability of a national model that increases foster youth financial capability and was the architect of a \$2 million federal demonstration project – one of only four in the country – titled Works Wonders. Ms. Keenan continues to oversee the scale-up and replication of the Works Wonders Program in Rhode Island and other jurisdictions. Ms. Keenan has also been appointed to and chaired numerous statewide advisory committees and is seen as a leading expert for her work in piloting programs that implement a youth participatory process, including Foster Forward’s new Rapid Rehousing Program for homeless former foster youth – the first of its kind in Rhode Island. Ms. Keenan serves as subject matter expert for the Capacity Building Center for the States and assists on projects that advance youth development, as well as serves as an Adjunct Faculty member at the Rhode Island College School of Social Work. In 2017, Ms. Keenan was invited to present at a Joint Congressional Caucus on Foster Youth in Washington, DC. Ms. Keenan holds a Masters in Policy and Planning from Tufts University and a Bachelor’s Degree in History from the College of the Holy Cross.

Susan Punnett
Executive Director
DC Family & Youth Initiative



Susan Punnett is Executive Director of Family & Youth Initiative, a DC area non-profit that helps teens in foster care make lasting connections with caring adults. Prior to founding Family and Youth Initiative, she served for five years as Director of the Kidsave Weekend Miracles DC program, piloting a new approach to helping older children in foster care find adoptive families with funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Susan has twenty years’ experience in child welfare. She previously worked as an independent consultant, assisting public and private social service agencies with projects in program design, development, and contracting. She has worked for DC Child and Family Services Agency, last serving as Administrator for Resource Development, where her responsibilities included foster and adoptive parent recruitment and support, contract monitoring, foster home licensing, and new program development. Susan is a graduate of Yale University and holds a Master of Public Management degree from the University of Maryland.

John Sciamanna
Vice President of Policy
Child Welfare League of America



John Sciamanna, Vice President of Public Policy for the Child Welfare League of America, began working for CWLA in 2001. In his role, he oversees federal legislative policy as it affects child welfare and children's programs. This includes federal legislative and administrative action as well as the annual federal budget. As the leader of CWLA's Public Policy Department he also assures that CWLA continues its longtime partnership and coalitions including such vital advocacy efforts as the National Child Care Coalition, the Home Visiting Coalition and the Coalition on Human Needs. For a brief period between 2010 through 2014 he worked for the American Humane Association, led the National Foster Care Coalition, and served as Executive Director of the National Child Abuse Coalition.

Mr. Sciamanna has worked on children's issues for more than thirty years working for a state legislature, the U.S. Senate, and several non-profit organizations. During his time in Washington, Mr Sciamanna has focused on a range of critical children's programs and policies that include the prevention of child abuse and neglect, child welfare financing, making improvements and changes to policies that effect children in out of home care, development of the nation's child care block grant, the 1996 implementation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, the preservation of the Social Services Block Grant, and many other policies and federal programs that impact on the nation's most vulnerable children and families. Mr. Sciamanna came to Washington in 1993 to work in the United States Senate as a Legislative Assistant for Michigan Senator Donald Riegle and later for Senator Barbara Mikulski of Maryland. After leaving the Senate he worked with the American Public Human Services Association (APHSA) followed by nearly a decade at the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and the American Humane Association.

Thomas Showalter
Executive Director
National Youth Employment Coalition



Thomas Showalter is an expert on education and workforce policy and related areas (disability policy, juvenile justice, antipoverty programs), as well as Congressional politics and processes. He's a talented strategic planner and thinker, project manager, and policy analyst who enjoys getting to know new policy landscapes. He is the director of the National Youth Employment Coalition, a leading advocate for opportunity youth (young people who are out of school and out of work). With NYEC he sets the organization's direction and strategy, working with the board of directors, and lifts up promising strategies and practices of NYEC members. Prior to NYEC, he advised advocacy organizations and foundations on communications and strategic

planning at The Hatcher Group, a Bethesda-based communications firm. He also spent over four years on the majority staff of the U.S. Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, working for chairmen Edward M. Kennedy (D-MA) and Tom Harkin (D-IA). With the committee, he contributed to the passage of several pieces of legislation, including the Serve America Act of 2009 and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010, and was a negotiator on proposed reauthorizations of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and Workforce Investment Act. He organized hearings on topics such as special education and workforce development and developed coalitions in support of bills.