

The 2nd Annual Community Engagement Ambassador Institute
Day 1 - Public Health & Leadership Development

Meet the Planners and Speakers

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Planners

Gwendolyn Devins, MPH, CCHW

Jada Jackson, MEd

Kendra Jason, PhD

Charlene Whitaker-Brown, DNP, MSN, FNP-C,
PMHNP-BC, RN

Speakers

Apryl Alexander, PsyD

Courtney Bost, MBA HA, CAPM

Laveina Dash

Orlandus Gilmore

Michelle Patridge-Doerr, MS, MPH, CHES

Edison Platt, MA

Lrlanda Ruiz, JD, MEd

Kimberly Scott, DrPH, MPH, CHES

Irvin Sloan

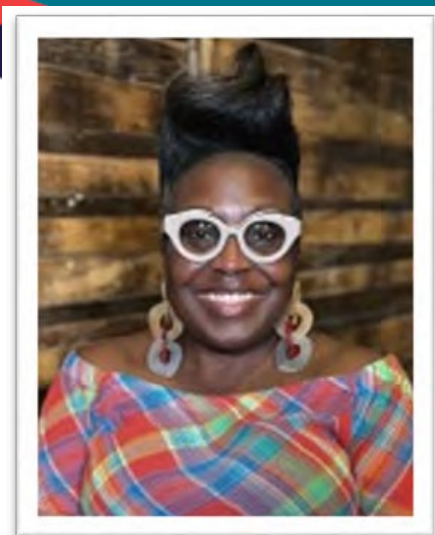
Zakiya Smith, MPP, MBA

Kia Thacker, MPH

Gwendolyn Devins, MPH, CCHW

Community Engagement Manager,
Mecklenburg County Public Health | Institute Creator

Gwendolyn Devins, a native of Silver Spring, Maryland, serves as the Community Engagement Manager in the Office of Health Equity for Mecklenburg County Public Health. She has over two decades of experience in health education and public service. Throughout her career, Gwendolyn has been a champion for equity, supporting community efforts by fostering cross-sector partnerships, engaging and uplifting diverse communities, and implementing strategic and innovative activities that directly address health disparities and the advancement of health equity through the power of authentic, meaningful and impactful community engagement.



Gwendolyn's path to public health leadership was not a straight or easy one. She will be the first to tell you that she was not the smartest student in the room. In fact, she often struggled in school—wrestling with self-doubt, academic challenges, and moments where giving up felt like the easiest option. There were times when the weight of it all made her and family question if she belonged in spaces she aspired to. But what she lacked, she made up for in resilience. Through faith, hard work, and an unshakable desire to serve her community, Gwen pushed forward, step by step. Her journey is proof that perseverance, not perfection, is what creates leaders who truly understand the people they serve.

With heart and hustle, Gwendolyn has a vibrant spark for public health. Whether she is championing faith-based wellness, supporting grassroots organizations, or mentoring the next wave of health leaders, she brings infectious energy and unwavering purpose to every space she enters. Her commitment and gift for connection have made her a trusted voice and advocate both within the department and throughout the greater communities of Charlotte.

She holds a Master of Public Health in Community Health from Indiana University at Bloomington and a Bachelor of Science in Health Education and Community Health from Johnson C. Smith University.

Jada Jackson, MEd

Associate Director of Academic and Community Partnerships

Jada Jackson, M.Ed. (they/them/theirs), is a dedicated leader in higher education and community, serving as the Associate Director of Academic and Community Partnerships at Northeastern University-Charlotte. With a strong background in academic partnerships and social impact, Jada works to build meaningful collaborations between the university and local organizations to expand access, resources, and opportunities for all communities. A Raleigh, NC native and proud HBCU graduate of North Carolina A&T State University, Jada earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology before obtaining a Master of Education in Clinical Mental Health Counseling from NC State University. Currently pursuing a Doctor of Education with a concentration in Workplace Learning, they focus on innovative approaches to strengthening academic and community partnerships.



Since moving to Charlotte in 2019, Jada has led strategic initiatives that elevate community-centered programming and foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. At Northeastern, they develop partnerships with schools, healthcare institutions, and community organizations, advancing initiatives that support all populations. Their expertise spans academia, counseling, and operations management, with a career deeply rooted in holistic wellness and social justice. As a member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Incorporated, Jada has shared insights at conferences on student engagement and multicultural counseling practices. Their current work emphasizes DEI representation, increasing enrollment through community engagement, and cultivating corporate partnerships that provide long-term institutional support. Passionate about fostering inclusive networks and sustainable growth, Jada remains committed to strengthening Charlotte's academic and community ecosystem. Their leadership bridges education and social impact, ensuring that partnerships with Northeastern University-Charlotte drive lasting, positive changes.

Kendra Jason, PhD

Associate Professor, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Founder, Work 4 Change

Dr. Kendra Jason (she/her/hers) is the founder of Work 4 Change, a workplace equity consultancy. She is an Associate Professor of Sociology in the College of Humanities & Earth and Social Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Dr. Jason is an interdisciplinary health disparities scholar who examines the multi-level factors that influence the relationship between race, health, and desired workforce participation. She has a particular interest in how workplace experiences shape the health and well-being of marginalized workers. She is also passionate about home-insecure Black mothers in Charlotte and the latent impacts of COVID-19.

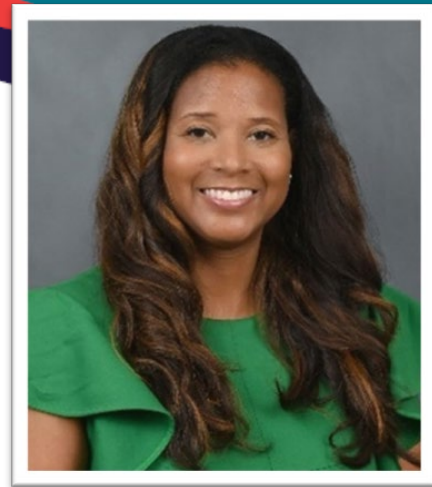


Through her community-based work with the urban CORE Institute at UNC Charlotte, she has been active on the I-85 Corridors of Opportunity project focusing on wellness in the West Sugar Creek Corridor. Dr. Jason's research on these issues is published in *The Gerontologist*, *Journal of Applied Gerontology*, *Journal of Aging and Health*, *Occupational Health Science*, *Social Currents*, *The Journal of Sociology and Social Work*, and *Journal of Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities*; and has been featured on *Forbes.com* and *PBS Next Avenue*. She is the editor of *Race and Social Justice: Building and Inclusive College through Awareness, Advocacy, and Action* (2023).

Charlene Whitaker-Brown, DNP, MSN, FNP-C, PMHNP-BC, RN

CEO & Founder, The Mindheart Institute and Wellness Center

Dr. Charlene Whitaker-Brown is a dual-certified Family and Psychiatric Mental Health Nurse Practitioner and a Clinical Professor in the School of Nursing at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Dr. Whitaker-Brown's contributions to the field of nursing education, her dedication to fostering community partnerships, and her advocacy work for Alzheimer's awareness have made her an invaluable asset to both UNC Charlotte and the Charlotte community.



Notably, Dr. Whitaker-Brown served as the second Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) program coordinator from 2014 to 2018. Under her leadership, the DNP program thrived, leading to a historic moment when she became the first DNP program coordinator to graduate the first post-master's Doctor of Nursing Practice students from the School of Nursing. Beyond her role within the university, Dr. Whitaker-Brown has played a pivotal role in establishing vital community partnerships with local clinical entities. Her clinical tenure of eleven years with the Sanger Heart and Vascular Heart Failure Clinic at Atrium Health was instrumental in forging these connections.

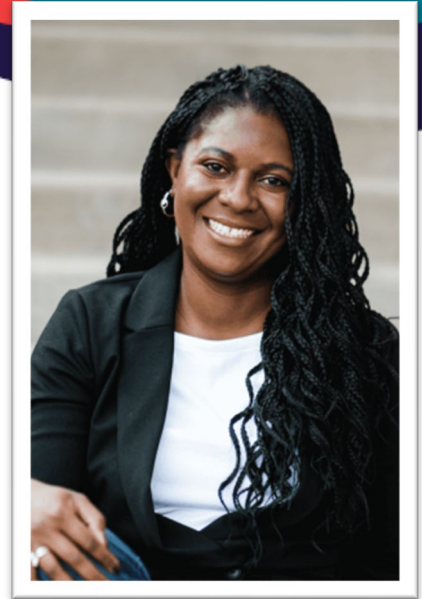
Currently, Dr. Whitaker-Brown continues to be an active and influential member of the community while engaging in scholarship and service. Some of her community service relationships include well known agencies in healthcare in the Charlotte community. She serves as a Community Advisory Board Member for the Care Ring Nurse Family Partnership, Clinical Director for Harmony Health, she is a Community Partner with AmeriHealth Caritas, general body member of Piedmont Black Nurses Association, and a key collaborator with the MindHeart Institute and Wellness Center [a mental health company she founded to answer the need to the mental health provider shortage in the state of North Carolina (www.mindheartiwc.com)].

In addition to these achievements, Dr. Whitaker-Brown has been recognized for her outstanding contributions to Alzheimer's advocacy and nursing leadership. In 2022, she was selected for the Inaugural UsAgainstAlzheimer's Brain Health Equity Nurse Fellowship, and in 2023, she was asked to stay on as a mentor to the new cohort of fellows. In the same year, she was appointed to the National Black Nurses Association's Committee on Brain Health and selected to be a fellow in the Inaugural Association of Black Nursing Faculty's Leadership Public Policy Fellow. Moreover, in 2023, she was chosen to participate in the mentorship program for the National Collaboratory to Address Elder Mistreatment. A trailblazer in her own right, Dr. Whitaker-Brown made history in 2023 by becoming one of 2 Clinical Professors in the school of nursing and the first African American female in the School of Nursing to hold the title of Clinical Professor. In her distinguished role, Dr. Whitaker-Brown has been instrumental in translating research into practice. Her clinical focus has primarily centered on improving the quality of life for heart failure patients and identifying ways to assist these patients in coping with depression and anxiety. However, since 2018, she has expanded her scope to incorporate more brain health initiatives and elder maltreatment into her work with heart failure patients. This expansion of her work was motivated by personal experience, as several of her family members were diagnosed with Alzheimer's dementia. Furthermore, Dr. Whitaker-Brown's dedication to her field was recognized in 2021 when she was selected by the Point of Care Network (POCN) as America's Top NP in Cardiology/Heart Failure, underscoring her expertise and leadership in this critical area of healthcare.

Apryl Alexander, PsyD

Metrolina Distinguished Professor of Health & Policy, Department of Health Management & Policy; Director, UNC Charlotte Violence Prevention Center, UNC Charlotte

Dr. Apryl Alexander is the Metrolina Distinguished Professor of Health & Policy in the Department of Health Management and Policy at UNC Charlotte. She also serves as Director of the UNC Charlotte Violence Prevention Center. She received her doctorate in clinical psychology from the Florida Institute of Technology with concentrations in forensic psychology and child and family therapy. Dr. Alexander's research and clinical work focus on violence, interpersonal trauma, human sexuality, and trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice. Her work has been published in several leading journals, including *Child Maltreatment and Sexual Abuse*. She is also a Fellow of the American Psychological Association (APA) and the Association for the Treatment and Prevention of Sexual Abuse (ATSA).

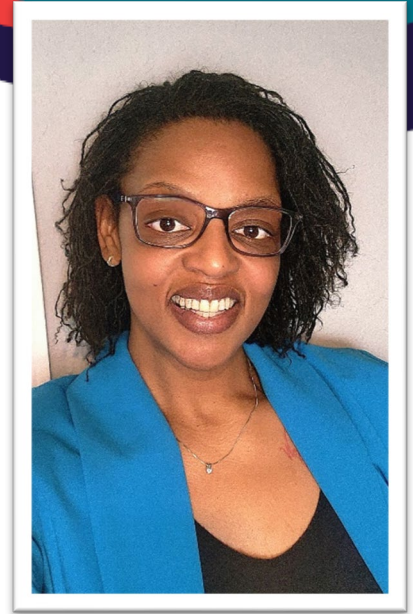


Courtney Bost, MBA HA, CAPM

Courtney Bost, MBA HA, CAPM is a healthcare project manager with over 20 years of experience in the healthcare industry, including more than a decade focused on healthcare quality and performance improvement. She holds an MBA in Healthcare Administration and is a certified project manager, bringing a disciplined, outcomes-driven approach to complex initiatives.

Her work spans clinical operations, quality programs, and large-scale change efforts, where she is known for translating strategy into execution and keeping stakeholders aligned in high-pressure environments.

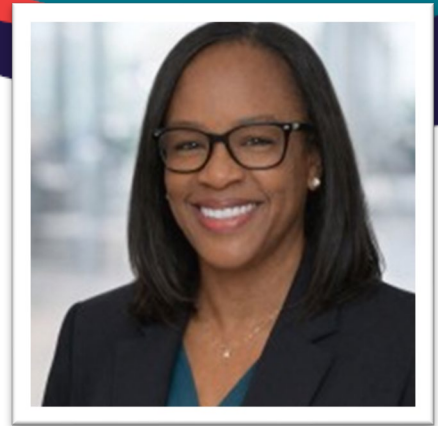
She attended this institute last year and is pleased to return—this time as a speaker—to share practical insights drawn from real-world experience.



Laveina Dash

Board Member, Agape Christian Counseling Center;
Founder, LAD Research Enterprises

Laveina Dash is the Founder of LAD Research Enterprises and a senior leader with more than 27 years of experience in clinical research, public health programs, and community-engaged initiatives. She currently serves as Director of Diversity in Clinical Trials Research at National Medical Fellowships, where she leads national efforts focused on training, partnership development, and community-connected approaches to health improvement.



Laveina has extensive experience supporting community-based and faith-based organizations through program development, facilitation, and implementation support. She is known for helping leaders translate community priorities into practical, sustainable action. She also serves as a Board Member of Agape Christian Counseling Center and regularly facilitates leadership trainings and community learning convenings.

Orlandus Gilmore

CEO, App YOUiversity

Orlandus “Coach O” Gilmore is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of App YOUiversity, an innovation platform dedicated to empowering the next generation of technologists, creators, and problem solvers. As CEO, Gilmore leads the organization’s strategic vision, overseeing the development of technology platforms, educational programs, and partnerships designed to expand access to technology and digital career pathways in underserved communities.



With more than two decades of experience as an IT and technology leader—including leadership roles at Duke Energy—Gilmore has built a reputation for transforming complex technology environments and leading enterprise modernization initiatives. His expertise spans Enterprise Architecture, multi-cloud infrastructure, IoT systems, and product development. Throughout his career, he has led software engineering and innovation practices while championing data-first, digital-first, and cloud-first strategies that drive transparency, scalability, and executive-level decision making.

Gilmore founded App YOUiversity to expand access to technology education and create pathways for underserved youth to participate in the digital economy. Through initiatives focused on design thinking, coding, and real-world technology development, he aims to help train and mentor more than 10,000 young people in high-demand technology skills over the next several years.

A strong advocate for technology inclusion and community empowerment, Gilmore remains actively engaged in the technology and nonprofit ecosystem through organizations such as SIM Charlotte and Apparo. He holds a Bachelor’s degree in Management Information Systems and professional certifications including Certified ScrumMaster (CSM) and Microsoft Certified Professional Developer (MCPD). Through his leadership, App YOUiversity continues to bridge the gap between technology innovation and community impact.

Michelle Partridge-Doerr, MS, MPH, CHES

Health Communications Manager, Mecklenburg County Public Health

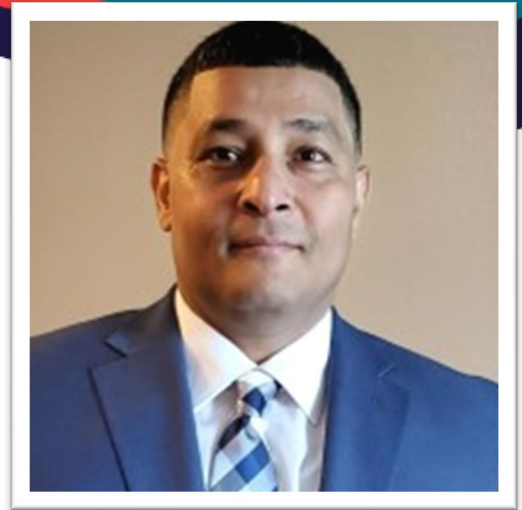
Michelle Partridge-Doerr is the Health Communications Manager for Mecklenburg County Public Health, where she manages internal and external communications for the department, including its website, intranet, newsletters, and outreach materials. She has a BA in English from the University of Maryland (go Terps!), an MS in Technical Communication from NC State (go Pack!), and an MPH in Community Health Practice from UNC Charlotte (go Niners!). She is passionate about service and volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Democratic Party, Lasagna Love, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Storm Water Services, American Red Cross, MS Society, Hearts United for Good, Hearts for the Invisible, and local animal welfare organizations. In her free time, she loves reading, kayaking, hiking, and hanging out with her partner and their pack of poorly trained rescue dogs.



Edison Platt, MA

Veterans Services Manager, CSS | Veterans Services, Mecklenburg County Government

Edison Platt served 21 years in the United States Army from 1998 to 2019 and medically retired at the rank of Sergeant First Class. An Infantryman by military occupational specialty, he was stationed at Fort Benning, Georgia; served three times in Germany; and was assigned to Fort Carson, Colorado, and Fort Jackson, South Carolina. His deployments include the Kosovo Campaign in 1999 and 2002, as well as service in Iraq from 2003 to 2004.



Following his military career, Edison has continued his commitment to service through various leadership roles supporting veterans. He currently serves as Veterans Services Manager with Mecklenburg County's Community Support Services Department, Veterans Services Division, and has previously held positions as Director of State Veterans Services with the North Carolina Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, Veterans Services Representative with York County Government in South Carolina, and Housing Case Manager with One80Place, a nonprofit organization in Columbia, South Carolina. Edison holds a master's degree in International Relations from the University of Oklahoma and a bachelor's degree in History from the University of Maryland University College.

He is married and the father of three children. His professional and civic involvement includes serving as a representative on the North Carolina Governor's Working Group on Veterans Benefits, the North Carolina Department of Adult Corrections Career Readiness and Employer Engagement Committee for incarcerated veterans, and the North Carolina Veterans Council. He is also a member of the National Infantry Association, 2nd Cavalry Regiment Association, American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers.

Irlanda Ruiz, JD, Med

CEO, HabilidadX

Irlanda Ruiz is an attorney, writer, and community advocate originally from Humacao, Puerto Rico. Her work centers on storytelling as a tool for wellness, advocacy, and community transformation, particularly within Latino and disability-impacted communities.

Irlanda previously served as the Hispanic Disability Advocate at the North Carolina Council on Developmental Disabilities (NCCDD), where she worked to advance equitable access to services and elevate community voices within public systems. She continues this work through community-based leadership, education, and creative engagement.

She is the Chair of ENLACE, a Charlotte-based network of nearly 80 organizations dedicated to collaboration, social capital, and inclusive community participation. She is also the Founder and CEO of HABILIDADX, a nonprofit organization that uses bilingual storytelling, creative practice, and capacity-building to support wellness and civic engagement.

Irlanda's work is deeply informed by lived experience—as the mother of a young man with disabilities and a cancer survivor herself—which shapes her approach to storytelling as a public health practice rooted in healing, resilience, and collective voice. She is the author of *Pinceladas Parlantes* and co-editor of *Ecos de Fortaleza*, a community-based anthology developed through storytelling workshops with cancer survivors.

Through her work, Irlanda centers storytelling not only as expression, but as a strategy for connection, wellness, and systems change.



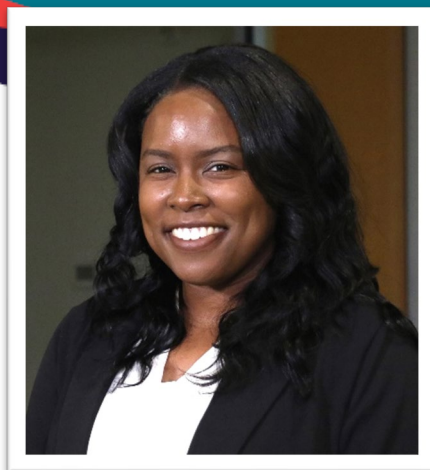
Kimberly Scott, DrPH, MPH, CHES

Interim Director, Mecklenburg County Public Health

Dr. Kimberly Scott serves as the interim director of the Public Health Department, one of four departments that make up the Mecklenburg County Health and Human Services Agency. She is responsible for managing all public health and environmental health activities in Mecklenburg County.

Previously, she served as assistant Health director of the Population Health Division and was responsible for facilitating resources to design, implement, and evaluate public health programs and initiatives, building relationships between County Public Health and community partners, increasing access to local public health priority data, and overseeing the operation of the Public Health Department's Offices of Chronic Disease Policy and Prevention, Violence Prevention, and Health Equity.

Scott has over 15 years of experience as a public health practitioner, working in various settings, including local government, nonprofit organizations, and academia. Scott earned her Bachelor of Science (Biology) degree from Albany State University, her Master of Public Health (Community Health) degree from Georgia Southern University, and her Doctor of Public Health (Public Health Leadership) from the University of South Florida. She is also a Certified Health Education Specialist and a National Diabetes Prevention Program Certified Lifestyle Coach.



Irvin Sloan

CEO, Navigating Grey

Irvine Sloan is a visionary leader, Co-Founder, and Chief Executive Officer of Navigating Grey. With over two decades of experience, he plays a pivotal role in defining the firm's culture, strategy, and vision.

Irvine's practical expertise in leading high-performance teams and finding strategic solutions to complex challenges has been honed through his tenure at multinational corporations like Danaher, ABB, and Duke Energy. Drawing from his diverse background, he comprehensively understands the "big picture" and leverages his insights to drive innovation and success.

Passionate about sustainability and corporate social responsibility, Irvine is a staunch advocate for volunteerism and community service. His unwavering commitment to uplifting others and his strong moral compass shape the firm's approach, ensuring a positive impact on clients and communities. He actively contributes to non-profit boards and organizations focused on technology, entrepreneurship, and community outreach.

Irvine's educational background reflects his multidisciplinary approach. He has completed the Advanced Finance Program at the Wharton School of Business. He holds Master's degrees in Law from Northwestern University, Business Administration from Indiana University, Agricultural Economics from Purdue University, and Engineering from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Additionally, he earned Bachelor's degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Electrical Engineering from Virginia Tech.

Irvine serves on several esteemed boards in recognition of his expertise and leadership, including the American Association of Blacks in Energy.

Irvine Sloan's vast experience, passion for sustainability, and dedication to community upliftment make him an exemplary leader at Navigating Grey. With his guidance, the firm is poised to create meaningful change and drive sustainable growth for clients and society.



Zakiya Smith, MPP, MBA

Project Manager, Veterans Systems Improvement,
Mecklenburg County Community Support Services

Ms. Zakiya Smith is a health equity researcher whose work examines chronic stress as a biological and structural driver of health disparities. She holds a Master of Business Administration from the University of North Carolina Kenan-Flagler Business School and a Master of Public Policy from the Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy. Her work bridges neuroscience and public policy to create sustainable, trauma-informed solutions that turn research into real systems change.



Zakiya's research challenges traditional definitions of brain injury by showing how chronic psychological trauma such as violence exposure, housing instability, and racism can produce neurobiological changes consistent with mild brain injury. She develops care models grounded in both lived experience and scientific evidence. Her scholarship also explores suicidality and chronic stress among Black women in higher education, and highlights how systemic inequities shape mental health and resilience.

In public and community leadership roles, she has led cross-system efforts to expand access to care and integrate equity into policy and programs. Her work is driven by a commitment to ensure that communities most affected by chronic stress are no longer overlooked in research or policy.

Kia Thacker, MPH

Owner & Principal Consultant, Legacy Bloom Consulting

Kia Thacker has a passion for social justice and public health. She is a results-driven public health professional and nonprofit leader with nearly 20 years of experience helping mission-driven organizations move from vision to execution. She is known for turning complex systems and big visions into clear, actionable strategies that drive real impact. Her career spans the full arc of program and organizational development, from frontline health education to executive leadership and consulting.

As Founder and Principal Consultant with LegacyBloom Consulting, Kia partners with nonprofit organizations and public health agencies to build strong foundations that optimize operations, strengthen organizational capacity and infrastructure, design sustainable programs, and develop competitive grant strategies.

Prior to consulting, Kia served as Director of Capacity Building at Health in Partnership (formerly Human Impact Partners), where she led a department to implement a portfolio of national capacity-building initiatives with local and state health departments to advance health equity. In this role, she strengthened funder and partner relationships, designed evaluation and learning frameworks, and departmental operational systems.

Kia spent more than a decade at SHIFT NC, advancing through leadership roles including Director of Programs, Chief Program Officer, and Interim Chief Executive Officer. There, she secured and managed over \$10 million in federal, state, and foundation funding; oversaw various program implementation teams; designed and led statewide adolescent health initiatives; and guided the organization through periods of growth, transition, and systems change. She has also served as a Contract Federal Grant Reviewer reviewing and scoring competitive federal grant applications and providing detailed evaluative feedback.

Early in her career, Kia worked as a Substance Abuse Prevention Specialist and Prevention Coordinator, designing and facilitating school- and community-based prevention programs and providing technical assistance to coalitions implementing environmental prevention strategies.

Kia holds a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a Master of Public Health in Community Health Education from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and certificates in Nonprofit Management and Executive Nonprofit Leadership from Duke University.

Across all her work, Kia is recognized for her strategic insight, collaborative leadership, and engaging, grounded, and practical approach to solutions. She creates learning spaces that are interactive, reflective, and rooted in real-world application, helping organizations move from theory to action. She is deeply committed to supporting organizations serving youth and historically marginalized communities to build equitable, sustainable programs that create lasting change.

