

# Children's Advocates for Change

## Child Poverty Forum

### September 10, 2024



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#### *Event Moderator*



Dr. Tasha Green Cruzat, a US Navy veteran and an advocate for children's rights, is the President of Children's Advocates for Change. She has a noted career in public service, education reform, and community leadership.

Dr. Green Cruzat's broad influence includes legislative victories in Illinois, particularly the Illinois Racial Impact Note Act, passed under her leadership as the President of Voices for Illinois Children. Her career also encompasses pivotal roles in state and local government, including Chief of Staff to the Cook County Board President and Senior Management Advisor in the Governor's Office of Management and Budget in Illinois.

As an education reform advocate, she served as the Executive Director for High Jump, promoting educational access for underserved children, and was a founding member of the National Partnership for Educational Access. Her community service includes participation in various boards and committees and memberships in organizations like the International Women's Forum, the Peggy Notebaert Nature Museum, and Female Strong.

Recognized for her leadership and service in the Navy, Dr. Green Cruzat has received military service medals, awards, and commendations. She is a Bishop Jesse DeWitt Child Advocacy Award recipient and Chicago Defender's Women of Excellence, affirming her commitment to positively impacting her community. Her expertise and contributions have earned her prestigious appointments and affiliations, including Senior Fellow of The Center for Biotechnology and Global Health Policy, Governor Jim Edgar Fellow, and appointment to the Illinois Reform Commission, where she played a crucial role in examining government practices and ethics and making recommendations for the improvement of state governance.

Dr. Green Cruzat's educational credentials include an Ed.D from Vanderbilt University, an MBA from the University of Notre Dame, an MA in Education Administration from the University of Illinois at Chicago, and a BA in Political Science from Brooklyn College.



Rev. Bethany Johnson-Javois, MSW, is a health and racial justice advocate dedicated to the improved health and well-being of the people of the Greater St. Louis region and Southern Illinois. She is President & CEO of Deaconess Foundation, Pastor of Monument of Faith Church, Inc., former CEO of the St. Louis Integrated Health Network (IHN), and former Managing Director for the Ferguson Commission. She returned to the Deaconess Foundation as President and CEO after having formerly served on the Foundation's Board of Trustees.

Rev. Johnson-Javois formerly served as the CEO of the St. Louis Integrated Health Network, a position she held for 12 years. She led the health intermediary nonprofit in serving the region's safety net health care providers and the local community to promote the mission of providing quality, affordable, accessible care to all residents of Metropolitan St. Louis, with an emphasis on the medically underserved. Her leadership in the healthcare sector has garnered notable recognition including being selected by Mental Health America of Eastern Missouri as a Silver Bell Award recipient for her outstanding community service, leadership, vision, and values, and being selected as St. Louis Children's Hospital Community Advocate of the Year.

Rev. Johnson-Javois possesses over 20 years of experience rolling-up-her-sleeves working and volunteering in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors focused on equalizing the quality of life for under-resourced, yet vibrant people. Bethany's expertise lies in creating systems change infrastructure and developing tactical strategies that increase responsiveness and equity for the people for whom our public systems are accountable to serve.

Rev. Johnson-Javois was named the Managing Director for the Ferguson Commission in 2015. The Ferguson Commission, an independent, volunteer group appointed by Missouri Governor Jay Nixon, was charged with addressing the underlying root causes that led to community unrest in the wake of Michael Brown's death. After a comprehensive study that included extensive community engagement, the Commission published an unflinching report of its findings and 189 calls to action that charted a new path toward healing and positive change for the residents of the St. Louis region.

### *Featured Guest*



Rev. Dr. Starsky Wilson is President & CEO of the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) and CDF Action Council. Founded in 1973, CDF builds community so young people grow up with dignity, hope, and joy. Children's Defense Fund envisions a nation where marginalized children flourish, leaders prioritize their well-being, and communities wield the power to ensure they thrive. It pursues this vision through policy advocacy, community organizing, and a network of CDF Freedom Schools in 100 U.S. cities and thirty states.

From 2011 through 2020, Starsky was president and CEO of the Deaconess Foundation. From 2008 through 2018, Dr. Wilson also pastored Saint John's Church (The Beloved Community), a multiracial congregation in the St. Louis.

Upon his arrival at CDF, Rev. Dr. Wilson re-activated the CDF Action Council as a sister organization for grassroots legislative education, lobbying and public accountability. In 2021, Wilson established a dedicated Leadership Development and Organizing department focused on base building with key constituencies.

Rev. Dr. Wilson is a trustee of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and will become the Board Chair in 2025. He also chairs the board for Duke University's Divinity School, is a trustee of the Samuel DeWitt Proctor Conference, and a director for the Forum for Theological Exploration (FTE) and the National Committee for Responsive Philanthropy (NCRP), both of which he previously served as board chair.

Dr. Wilson earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Xavier University of Louisiana, a Master of Divinity degree from Eden Theological Seminary, and a Doctor of Ministry degree from Duke University.

### *Speaker*



Dr. Renee Ryberg is a senior research scientist at Child Trends. Child Trends promotes the well-being of all children and youth through applied research that informs public policies, builds the evidence base for what works, and mines data to identify young people who are overlooked or ill served by public systems.

Trained as a sociologist and demographer, Dr. Ryberg's work aims to create equitable environments to help children and youth thrive throughout their education and into adulthood. In particular, her work focuses on the intersection of poverty and education. Her recent work has focused on child poverty, its drivers and consequences, and policy solutions. Most recently, she has identified the factors behind a historic decline in child poverty over the past quarter-century and explored the drivers of child poverty in the Latino community.

Dr. Ryberg leads mixed-methods teams of researchers of all levels who complement her extensive quantitative skills, which include experimental and quasi-experimental design and advanced statistical.

Dr. Ryberg earned her Bachelor of Arts degree at Johns Hopkins University and her Master's and Doctor of Philosophy degrees in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

## Poverty and Education Panel

Moderator: Dr. Tasha Green Cruzat

### Panelists



Arthur R. Culver is the East St. Louis School District 189 Superintendent and has served in that capacity since 2011. He has established the structures and systems necessary to support teacher and student success in the district. This includes implementing rigorous curriculum standards, increasing teacher and principal accountability and responsibility for student academic growth, as well as increasing social-emotional support for students.

Superintendent Culver's career has centered on improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. Prior to coming to School District 189, he spent more than 30 years as a teacher and administrator, including nine years as superintendent for the Champaign Community Unit School District #4.



Stephanie Herling is the Regional Council Manager for Birth to Five Illinois: Region 50. Birth to Five Illinois organizes 39 Action Councils and 39 Family Councils across the state with the goals of providing a statewide mechanism to engage local stakeholders, gathering family opinion, creating an Action Plan that clearly identifies the need for expansion of quality early learning in every region, and enabling local stakeholders to come together and address the early childhood needs within their own communities.

With more than 20 years of Early Childhood experience, Ms. Herling is dedicated to ensuring families are connected to the resources in their community, earning her multiple awards for her service. Stephanie participates on local boards, including the Executive Committee for the Greater East St. Louis Early Learning Partnership and the Executive Board for Brightpoint.



Dr. Tiffany Gholson is the Founder and Executive Director of Breaking Barriers International (BBI). Founded in 2023, BBI works to uplift children in urban and impoverished areas who have experienced trauma or violence or live amongst it. BBI provides safe spaces and opportunities for children to heal, grow, and be exposed to new and positive experiences while allowing children to reach their untapped potential.

Dr. Gholson is also the Director of Social Emotional Learning and Health Services for School District 189. She is responsible for implementing social-emotional learning and mental health services and supporting physical health services to support the whole child. She also partners with the Illinois State Police (PSEG unit) and provides a 24-hour crisis support team that responds to traumatic incidents that involve youth.



Sheila Burton is a former legal aid lawyer at Land of Lincoln Legal Aid in East St. Louis, the founder of Land of Lincoln's Education Advocacy Project, and the founder and former Executive Director of Join Hands ESL.

Having had the honor to journey closely with children and families of East St. Louis for more than 35 years, in 2024, Ms. Burton stepped down from Join Hands ESL to focus on that which her journey has shown her is at the root of the cycle of poverty - the failure to educate children growing up in the trauma and toxic stress of poverty in the way that the science of trauma now tells us is necessary. As Executive Director of Every Child Education Equity Project she now hopes to advocate for a new system of education so that Every Child can reach their dreams and full potential.

## Poverty and Health Panel

### Moderator



Dara Munson is the President and CEO of Family Focus, serving 20,000 individuals annually through early childhood, youth and family programs and services across northeastern Illinois.

Ms. Munson built the foundations of her career for 20 years in Detroit focusing on the needs of Black and Brown women and children before moving to Chicago in 2016.

This year, Ms. Munson was appointed to Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker's Early Childhood Education and Care Transition Advisory Committee and was awarded the 2024 Donald Stewart Fellowship from the African American Legacy Board at Chicago Community Trust.

### Panelists



Dr. Mariana Souto-Manning is President of the Erikson Institute in Chicago, a graduate school for early childhood development, education, and social work. In the pursuit of justice, she works to envision, develop, and implement innovations that build on the assets of disinvested communities, the brilliance of students who are Black, Indigenous, and of color, those who communicate across named languages, and those growing up in disinvested communities.

Dr. Souto-Manning has served as a Professor at Teachers College, Columbia University and held additional academic appointments at the University of Iceland and King's College London. She has (co-) authored 12 books, dozens of book chapters, and over 100 peer-reviewed articles.



Dr. McNeese-Ruffin, M.D., FAAFP is a Board Certified Family Medicine Physician who trained at Southern Illinois University Center for Family Medicine in Springfield, Illinois, where she specialized in Women's Health and was Chief Resident.

She is an American Academy of Family Physicians Health Equity Fellow Alum, where she developed WOMBSS: Women's Health and Obstetric Care for Moms and Babies in Southern Illinois and Surrounding Communities; an innovation to help dispel and mitigate maternal morbidity and mortality in her region of influence by expanding the perinatal course through several additional interventions and multidisciplinary collaborative support.



Patrice Howard is a native of East Saint Louis and currently serves as the Senior Vice President at SIHF Healthcare, a community-based Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC) network. With 37 health centers and over 600 employees, SIHF Healthcare focuses on serving predominantly low-income or medically underserved populations across 12 counties in Central and Southern Illinois.

Ms. Howard spearheads the development and implementation of critical quality care delivery systems, data management strategies, population health management, and social determinants of health initiatives, along with budget analyses and projections.



Linda Joiner is the Program Manager of Health Education at East Side Health District (ESHD). ESHD is Linda's second career. After retiring with 30 years of service with Ameren, Linda has worked for Illinois American Water and East St. Louis School District #189 as a permanent substitute teacher where she continues to teach when her schedule allows.

Ms. Joiner's work as a public health educator sends her into the classrooms of Lincoln Middle School and Mason Clark Middle School where many opportunities exist for the teaching of life skills, mainly addressing substance and alcohol misuse among youth ages 10 to 17. Emphasis is placed on decision making, media influences, coping with anxiety, conflict resolution, resisting peer pressure, and assertiveness.



## *Elected and Appointed Officials Panel*

*Moderator Jacki Robinson-Ivy*



Jacki Robinson-Ivy is a Senior Vice President at The Northern Trust Company in Chicago. She is a Public Affairs Officer in the Corporate Compliance/Special Programs Group. Previously, she was a Relationship Manager in the Correspondent Trust Services Division of the Institutional Financial Services Group.

Ms. Robinson-Ivy is also the Chair of the Board of Governors for the City Club of Chicago. City Club is a public affairs forum that convenes government, business, philanthropic, academic and community leaders to present programs addressing important issues facing Chicago.

### *Panelists*

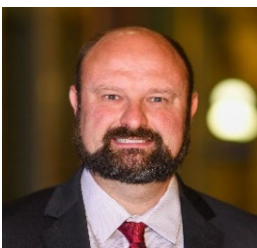


Illinois State Senator Christopher Belt began serving in the State Senate in 2019. His committee assignments include Appropriations-Public Safety & Infrastructure (Chair), Transportation (Vice-Chair), Licensed Activities, Labor, Energy and Public Utilities, Insurance, and Education.

Sen. Belt grew up in Centreville and is a lifelong resident of Illinois' Metro East area. Prior to serving in the Illinois Senate, Sen. Belt enjoyed an 18-year career as a law enforcement officer.

In 2003, Sen. Belt established the Difference Makers Professional Organization, which is dedicated to strengthening the decision-making capabilities of young men between the ages of 9 and 18. He authored an educational children's book, "The Adventures of Nate the Gnat," to teach youth how to be safe, responsible citizens.

Sen. Belt resides in Swansea with his wife, Stephanie, and his children, Christianna and Stephon.



Illinois State Representative Kevin Schmidt is serving his first term in the Illinois legislature. His committee assignments include Appropriations-General Service, Appropriations-Health & Human Services, Ethics and Elections, Health Care Availability and Access, and Public Health.

Rep. Schmidt was born and raised in Belleville. He is a chiropractor and local small business owner. He is the past president of the Millstadt Jaycees and is a past board member of the Millstadt Chamber of Commerce. Rep. Schmidt's father worked for the Illinois Department of Transportation and his mother ran an in-home day care service.

Rep. Schmidt currently lives in Millstadt with his wife and two sons.



Lieutenant Elbert Jennings is a distinguished law enforcement professional with over two decades of service. He began his career as a Community Service Aide with the Cahokia Police Department in 1999 and held various positions before joining the Illinois State Police in 2006.

During his career, Lieutenant Jennings has served as a patrol officer, field training officer, squad leader, and Major Crimes Commander, managing multiple investigative units. In 2024, he was appointed Acting Captain and now serves as Executive Officer, emphasizing community engagement.

Lieutenant Jennings is a certified crisis negotiator, instructor, and chaplain program coordinator, with active involvement in community policing, youth mentorship, and enhancing police community relations. An ordained elder at Power of Change Christian Church, he oversees several ministries.



Ryan Croke is Illinois' First Assistant Deputy Governor for Health and Human Services. Among the agencies Deputy Governor for Health and Human Services Grace Hou oversees are the Departments of Human Service, Healthcare and Family Services, Public Health, Children and Family Services, Veterans Affairs and Aging.

During Governor J.B. Pritzker's first term, First Assistant Deputy Governor Croke was Chief of Staff at the Department of Human Services. He previously was Executive Director of the Illinois Network of Centers for Independent Living, a coalition of not-for-profit run by and for people with disabilities. He also worked in Governor Pat Quinn's administration from 2009 to 2015, concluding as Chief of Staff to the Governor.

First Assistant Deputy Governor Croke lives in Springfield with his wife Brook and their four children.